This past winter, I was fortunate enough to expand my fields of study through an internship with Food First, a non-profit research institute located in Oakland, California. It was through the generosity of the Latin American, Caribbean, and Iberian Studies Department that I was able to take advantage of this invaluable, enlightening, and empowering experience. My work at Food First actively engaged my studies in agricultural economics and Latin American studies and ultimately gave me a stronger sense of professional, political, and personal direction.

Recognized by New York Times as one of the United State’s “most established food think tanks,” Food First aims to end the injustices that give rise to hunger, poverty, and environmental degradation. Based on the tangled interplay between food and social justice, Food First helps third world farmers and communities to regain control of their food systems. On a day-to-day basis, the NGO carries out research, analysis, advocacy and education to bring global justice to food production, distribution, and access.

The specific initiative with which I worked, Food Sovereignty Tours, leads 1-2 week delegations around the world to engage participants in the organizations, movements and communities working towards food sovereignty. In 1996, Via Campesina first defined food sovereignty, a concept that was foreign to me prior to my arrival in Oakland –

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self reliant; to restrict the dumping of products in their markets, and; to provide local fisheries-based communities the priority in managing the use of and the rights to aquatic resources. Food sovereignty does not negate trade, but rather, it promotes the formulation
of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production.

Food Sovereignty is a key issue in today’s global agricultural industry. An undeniable economic force, the agricultural sector is largely constructed on oppressive matrices of sexism, racism, and classism. The disparities within the food system are painfully present; oftentimes, the most hard-pressed for food are the very individuals that devote their days to planting, growing, and harvesting it. In prominent agricultural regions like the Bolivian Altiplano and Oaxaca, Mexico, for example, the poor spend 50-80% of their income on food. This paradox that stems from a undeniable lack of food sovereignty.

In working with activists, policymakers, farmers and local consumers, Food Sovereignty Tours makes notable strides toward food justice in Latin American regions and worldwide. As an intern at Food First, my main objective was to help grow a community for the initiative. I expanded its network through marketing, social media, advocacy, and research. My work at the national office in Oakland had a significant influence on the organization’s March 2013 Bolivia tour.

Food Sovereignty Tours and Food First provide a beacon of political and intellectual wealth. I quickly learned that food is much more than a mere isle in the grocery store – it is an element of culture, politics, and identity. My internship with Food Sovereignty Tours contributed to my global perspective of the food system and strengthened my future work with food policy. As discover my place in establishing food justice, I am certain that my experience with Food First and Food Sovereignty Tours, as made possible by the LACIS department at UW Madison, will pave the way for future opportunities and social change.