**Author:** Marko Dimač

**Interests:** Foreign languages, cultures, sociology, critical thinking, activism, poetry

**E-mail address:** dimac.marko@gmail.com

**Title:**

**Food democracy:**

**Transcending submission, empowering communities, democratising life**

**Summary:**

Times full of disproportions, contradictions and challenges call for radical responses. The democratisation of a profoundly authoritative system starts with the essence of life – food. The essay exposes the contradictions and the absurdities of the current food distribution calling for the creation of new platforms for active social involvement. By elaborating an innovative concept of food democracy it demands an all pervasive democratisation of society starting from food. Various historical parallels are drawn in the attempt to put forward a vision of a new society that transcends food dictatorship and empowers communities.

 **Tags:** social change, new platforms, people empowerment, urban gardens, transcending authoritarianism, real democracy

Three seconds - one dead child. Twenty four hours - 25 000 deaths caused by famine. **870 million people living in conditions of food shortage**[[1]](#footnote-1)**. More** than 1.4 billion adults overweight out of which 500 million obese[[2]](#footnote-2). We live in a world of macabre disproportion and inequality. On one hand the Western society faces growing obesity; on the other hand people on Haiti are constrained to make cookies out of dried mud to alleviate hunger pains. Certain states pay small farmers who cannot compete with food corporations to dump the produced food and thus artificially retain the high prices of commodities on the market, while there are communities that cannot produce food because of droughts and other extreme weather conditions. What we are facing is neither insufficient food production nor delivery problems as one could claim a few hundred years ago. If Coca Cola is distributed all over the world, in every country except Cuba and North Korea, then why should distributing sufficient amounts of food to every community be problematic? If we produce enough food why is famine still present in the third millennium? Is the system we live in a food dictatorship and how can it be transformed into a food democracy?

 The roots of famine in developing countries can be traced back into the colonial era when the Western colonial powers subjugated those territories and forced the communities to turn to monocultures for export instead of producing the wide variety of autochthonous crops that prevented shortages of food supply. After the formal withdrawal of the colonial empires the multinational food corporations took control over the food market. This market is one of the crucial and most targeted markets guaranteeing the ones who control it to essentially decide about life and death of millions of people. Multinational corporations do not target only the developing countries, they desire to expand their influence to the whole world. They are increasing control over almost every part of our everyday life, especially over nourishment, depriving us of the right of self-determination and application of democratic decision-making to a full extent in society as a whole. As Henry Kissinger, one of the most influential US secretaries of state ever, declared in 1974: "Control oil and you control nations. Control food and you control the people!’’

 What is frequently forgotten is that the right to access food is directly connected to the right to life and dignified existence enshrined in the 3rd article and the 25th article of the Universal declaration of Human Rights according to which every human being has ‘*’the right to life, liberty and security of person’’ a*nd *‘’the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.’’* [[3]](#footnote-3)Denying access to food by patenting seeds, impeding people to cultivate their own food and manipulating food prices through speculation to maximise profit at the cost of horrible famines fundamentally signifies the denial of the right to a dignified life. Taking in consideration the facts mentioned above and in the first paragraph we can affirm that we live in a genocidal food dictatorship that has sequestered democracy by limiting decision-making to autocratic institutions that supposedly decide in the name of the people. Such institutions comprise governments, corporations and especially financial institutions as the stock exchange and banks. Instead of seeing democracy pervade every aspect of our lives we witness the opposite. Collective co-decision making has been reduced to a routine where the majority chooses the political representatives of capital every four years.

We have to question ourselves what the real concept of democracy is and expand co-decision making to every aspect of our lives starting from what is common and essential to all humans – food. No real democracy can exist if this essential element of life is controlled by small elites interested only in profit margins. It is necessary to define what food democracy means and what its principles are to be able to implement it later on. The core idea of food democracy is the ability to freely decide about everything concerning the existential need for nourishment. It includes the right to produce food self-sufficiently without any restrictions. A society based on food democracy should be a society in which food access is an unalienable right and famine a crime against humanity. In such system all the seeds, water supplies and fertile soil should be considered common heritage not to be subjected to the influence of corporations and the perverted principles of neoliberal ideology.

If every city has a park, a healthcare facility, a post office and a culture centre so should it have publicly accessible areas where the members of the community could cooperatively produce food. In urban centres squares and streets are the platforms for the expression and practice of political democracy. But where do people put in practice food democracy nowadays? At the dinner table? In supermarkets? The reality is that there is no platform where people could voice their rights concerning food and put the principles of food democracy into practice. The grocery stores are flooded with GMO’s and the vast majority of products on the shelves are produced by multinational corporations that exploit workers in developing countries and destroy the local environment. The democratic choice is purely fictional. Squares and streets stand for political democracy as gardens stand for food democracy. Providing people access to areas where they could directly get involved in democratic food production would represent the basis for further development of a fully democratic society.

Cities are expanding increasingly covering fertile soil with asphalt and concrete. Degrading living conditions in air polluted urban centres and stressful working hours cause both physical and psychological problems. The answer to such problems are urban gardens which are an old concept that has been part of urban architecture from the civilisations of the Mesopotamian valley in 3,500 BCE and ancient Egypt to Machu Picchu and 19th century Germany. Through history many different approaches and practices developed; from roof gardens to aquaponics. Space was rationally used to obtain areas for food production. One example of space rationalisation are roof gardens that could, according to the research carried out by the University of Cardiff, also act as cooling agents that reduce the temperatures by between 3.6°C and 11.3°C.[[4]](#footnote-4) Such ‘’green roofs’’ would thus have a double effect; they would provide fresh locally produced food and simultaneously save energy that would be used for air conditioning. Other advantages of urban gardens are the increase of city’s self sufficiency and decrease the impact that transport of food from distant locations implies.

 During times of crisis and war the idea of urban gardens was embraced even by the mainstream political parties since it had a positive effect on the community in terms of human relations and provided enough food for people. Both during the First and during the Second World War the US government propagated the idea that private and public spaces such as parks should be transformed into urban gardens to reduce the pressure on the public food supply caused by the war effort. They were called the Victory gardens since the contribution to the victory in the war was so prominent. By setting up such urban collectively managed type of food production the people were able to produce 41% of the needed vegetables. In 1943, 20 million urban gardens have produced 8 million tons of food. [[5]](#footnote-5) In times of crisis such practice boosted the morale and fostered cooperation among people.

The global system is facing an economic crisis that is a symptom of failed socioeconomic policies since the autumn of 2008. The capitalist economy is spiralling down into a depression of unseen proportions and no solutions within the current system that has lost the connection with Earth’s resources and the community are possible. There are no world scale military conflicts comparable to the two World Wars during which the people joined their forces to overcome difficulties but there is a war that is fought between the exploited poor and the extremely rich corporate elite– a class war. If the so called Victory gardens contributed to the victory of the US in the Second World War then why not apply the same concepts and ideas to our cities and communities to establish a food democracy that will set the cornerstone for a real democratisation of our lives? When a community manages to gain food independence the path to social change becomes a lot easier. Self-produced food means that there is no need to go buy at supermarkets and consequently a decrease of living costs. If people can afford to survive by producing food by themselves they will not adhere to the conventional exploitative working conditions anymore. At first this will call for a shortening of the working hours and will finally lead to the redefinition of the concept of work that can be no longer defined just as what is shown in balance sheets and GDP indicators.

Dealing with the issue of famine in the world starting from the ‘’society of excess’’ we live in may seem ethnocentric but it is exactly how it should be done. The western world tends to externalise the problems that the global community is facing and this is evident also for what concerns famine. The standard approach when dealing with famine is sympathising with dying children and sending financial aid to critical areas while continuing to exploit their labour force and fertile soil for food that ends on our plates. We have to deal with the problem reversely starting from our communities. Solving our food self-sufficiency problems will dismantle the corporate food monopolies that force developing countries to produce only monocultures for export. Such countries should then be aided in the pursuit for food democracy and the restoration of an agriculture based on various autochthonous crops that was destroyed in the years of Western imperial and corporate dominance. In exceptional circumstances when extreme weather conditions destroy harvests and impede food cultivation unconditional food solidarity should be practiced. Communities should achieve food self-sufficiency that guarantees autonomy but by keeping in mind mutual the codependence of humans as such. Today a drought can impede food production in the neighbouring community; tomorrow a disastrous hail may destroy the whole harvest in our own environment. Weather conditions are sometimes hardly predictable and cannot be avoided, that is why solidarity and mutual aid should be one of the core values of food democracy.

A future food democratic community will grow strawberry fields instead of lawns and plant blackberry bushes and fruit trees that will benefit the community instead of merely decorative plants. Food democratization will also imply space democratization, opening the doors to new possibilities and innovative types of community organization, including the creation of roof gardens and public gardens in city parks. Instead of building a supermarket in every street more space will be available for green areas. The implementation of food democracy will transcend current authoritative power structures and will empower the people enabling free and democratic decision-making about any aspect concerning community life. The new social practices will radically change the appearance of cities and interaction within and between communities. Grey concrete jungles will become hospitable green paradises that will blend the urban with the rural.

1. Hunger statistics: United Nations World food programme <http://www.wfp.org/hunger/stats> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. #  World Health Organisation: Obesity and overweight: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs311/en/>

 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Universal Declaration of Human Rights: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. #  New Scientist: 'Green roofs' could cool warming cities: <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn12710-green-roofs-could-cool-warming-cities.html>

 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Victory gardens 2007+: History: <http://www.futurefarmers.com/victorygardens/history.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)