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# Expanding food democracy: a perspective from the United States

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Food democracy can be a tool to combat capitalist hegemony in the food system and increase citizen's knowledge about alternatives to obtaining food from concentrated food businesses. But for food democracy to further democratic goals, it needs to help create these alternatives as transformational spaces, seek genuine inclusion of underprivileged people in food system governance, and ensure that public forums for deliberation about the food system are active and respected by public institutions.

## KEYWORDS

deliberative democracy, corporate power, food sovereignty, markets, right to participate

## Introduction

Democracy is threatened around the globe by authoritarian governments, lack of respect for the rule of law, polarization of public opinion, disinformation and criminalization of dissent. In the food system, corporate power continues to grow with mergers and acquisitions in every sector and the intrusion of corporations into domestic and international governance forums. Against this backdrop, food democracy seems on one hand to be unattainable, but on the other hand an opening into restoring more democratic processes in domains that directly affect every person every day. This paper considers diverse understandings of food democracy and what it requires, threats to achieving it, and its connections with food sovereignty. I argue that food democracy lacks a comprehensive theory of change at present; but when combined with genuine alternatives for obtaining or producing food, egalitarian spaces for public deliberation, and a rights-based approach to inclusion, it is a strike against one of the more egregious consequences of neoliberalism, a path to citizen empowerment and an opening to begin envisioning a better way of living on our planet.

## The meanings of food democracy

In a 2004 essay, "Food democracy and the future of American values," Neil Hamilton plumbed the connections between food and democracy in the United States. Only 18 years later, his confidence in shared American values and democracy seems to be steeped in the innocence of an era before Trumpism when many people in the US took democracy for granted, not realizing how fragile it is nor how easily it can be destroyed by disinformation and the erosion of belief in the public good. Yet Hamilton described clearly how corporate interests, which he called "Big Food," threatened the ability of many people to access high-quality food. That threat has only grown since 2004 with rising inequality within and between countries and the concentration of food and agricultural corporations into a handful of companies in nearly every sector of the food system (Howard, 2021). With their increased market power from mergers and acquisitions, corporations have flexed their

political muscles too. They have encroached on domestic and international policy forums, most notably the UN Food Systems Summit of 2021 (Canfield et al., 2021; McKeon, 2021).

Hassanein (2008) suggested key dimensions of food democracy, which have largely been upheld in subsequent literature (see for example Cifuentes and Gugerell, 2021; Resler and Hagolani-Albov, 2021):

- Collaborating toward food system sustainability through collective action and meaningful participation
- Becoming knowledgeable about food and the food system
- Sharing ideas about the food system with others
- Developing efficacy with respect to food and the food system
- Acquiring an orientation toward the community good

The final dimension is worth emphasizing, given dimmed public understanding of the “common good” (Reich, 2018) and adulation of billionaires and celebrities who do very little for others unless they can take a tax write-off. Hassanein’s dimensions are aligned with many other statements in the literature about the meaning of food democracy and rest on a recognition that food and food system governance are public goods, so the public should be able to exercise control. In one of the earliest academic pieces on food democracy, (Lang 1999:218) wrote:

I use the term food democracy to refer to the demand for greater access and collective benefits from the food system... From the political perspective, it makes sense to see the dynamics of the food system as a titanic struggle between the forces of control and the pressure to democratize.

Specifically, the “forces of control” to which food democracy advocates object are corporations that manage food and agricultural distribution, trade and sales (Norwood, 2015; PANNA, 2015). But who is “the public” who should control food systems and who is demanding greater access and collective benefits? This vagueness is an example of the under-theorization of food democracy. In this paper, I seek to identify a few added dimensions which seem necessary.

I agree with (Tilzey 2019:203) that food democracy needs to “widen its remit to address ‘economic’ unfreedom, in other words to subvert capitalist social-property relations” to become a reality and to “[abrogate] the three supporting pillars of capitalism (primitive accumulation, absolute property rights, market dependence).” Tilzey is referring to what he calls ‘substantive’ food democracy, which he contrasts with ‘formal’ food democracy that simply focuses on political freedoms. I think that most proponents of food democracy in the US do not see it as radically opposed to capitalism, but believe it can exist within a capitalist economic system. Yet (Tilzey 2019:206) argues that,

...[most initiatives in food democracy] merely subsist in the interstices of capitalism and may, indeed, conform to the process of neoliberal ‘de-statization,’ whereby the state-capital nexus encourages the devolution and divestment of former state responsibilities to community-led schemes.

That is, food democracy efforts initiated by community organizations may relieve state governments of their responsibilities

to govern in the interests of their citizens. Some food democracy schemes, such as local food policy councils, are a collaboration between state or municipal government and citizens’ projects (Bassarab et al., 2019), and many of these have been effective in making government more responsive to citizens’ wishes. But most other initiatives that allow greater public control over food are independent of government.

In the US, most people shop at supermarkets, supercenters, and other large grocers; these accounted for 92% of sales in 2019 (ERS, 2022a). These stores offer an illusion of choice with a mind-boggling array of products, but 80% of the foods bought regularly are produced by Kraft Heinz, General Mills, Conagra, Unilever and Delmonte (Lakhani et al., 2021). Products from large corporations that are distributed around the world tend to have high environmental footprints; this is why many consumers are willing to pay more for local or certified sustainable products, or products from independent companies guaranteeing that they adhere to strict environmental or labor standards. Furthermore, retailers are concentrating rapidly, independent grocers have a very small proportion of total food sales, and Walmart alone takes 30% of the market share of the top 10 retailers (ETC Group, 2022). In the US, farmers only retain 14.5 cents of every food dollar (ERS, 2022b), with the rest going to a ‘marketing share’. What this means is that money generated from the sale of food does not stay with producers nor in the communities where food is produced, but instead pads the salaries of numerous intermediaries between the producer and final purchaser and the managers of transnational companies. These consequences would hardly be expected from real democratic decision-making about the food system; yet they are the logical result of capitalism, which rewards those who accumulate monetary power and resources of all kinds with even more financial power and resources.

I argue that food democracy requires the existence of alternative ways of producing and obtaining food beyond the outlets owned by the largest corporations, and must try to establish and maintain alternative social innovations (Fernandez-Wulff, 2019). Alternatives to corporate food include hunting and gathering, food commons where food is produced collectively and profits are shared among producers, food sharing, community-supported agriculture schemes, farmers’ markets, food cooperatives that adhere to the cooperative principles espoused by the International Cooperative Alliance, and widely accessible means of producing one’s own food (e.g., land, seeds, and water). People participate in social innovations for multiple reasons, however: they may simply want fresher and higher quality food and have little interest in food democracy or other purported benefits (see for example Pole and Gray, 2013).

In addition to alternative formal and informal markets, food democracy needs the existence of egalitarian, inclusive public forums for deliberation about food policies; an engaged public; institutions that respect public voice; and widespread knowledge about the current status of the dominant food system (e.g., how food is produced, the environmental and sociocultural consequences, who pockets the profits, who makes the policies). Given this stringent list of requirements, it is probably safe to say that food democracy does not exist anywhere at present except in small localized contexts. Opportunities to deliberate about food system alternatives are excellent for informing the public about the consequences of the dominant system and may be sufficient to motivate change in a small

area, but they are not sufficient to change the system. Yet as an ideal or aspiration, food democracy can be powerful and provide an opening wedge to work on democratization of other realms of life.

Food democracy is linked with food citizenship, agroecology, commons, and the right to food in that all oppose the commodification of food. According to some proponents, it rests on awareness of how human rights in the food system have been compromised by corporate control.

Food democracy emphasizes fulfillment of the human right to safe, nutritious food that has been justly produced. It means ordinary people getting together to establish rules that encourage safeguarding the soil, water, and wildlife on which we all depend. It is also pragmatic politics built around the difficult lesson that food is too important to leave to market forces—that we all have a right and responsibility to participate in decisions that determine our access to safe, nutritious food (PANNA, 2015).

## Barriers to food democracy

The most fundamental barrier obstructing food democracy is the hegemony of capitalism, particularly neoliberalism with its excessive emphasis on “business-friendly” practices, and the concentration of market and political power in agribusiness that it facilitates. Corporations have disincentives to democratize their decision-making, as this would reduce profits to shareholders. Capital accumulation processes result in environmental degradation, poverty, social exclusion and inequality, thus defeating many of the aims of food democracy to be inclusive and work toward greater food system sustainability. For example,

Food democracy ideally means that all members of an agro-food system have equal and effective opportunities for participation in shaping that system, as well as knowledge about the relevant alternative ways of designing and operating the system (Hassanein, 2003:83).

But corporations have tried mightily to prevent citizens from having relevant knowledge about their practices (e.g., laws to prevent journalists’ access to confined-animal feeding operations or mandatory labeling of genetically-engineered food), and have resisted efforts to find alternative ways to design and operate the food system. Corporate concentration of markets and intrusion of corporations into food system governance are transnational phenomena, with growing corporate influence in the United Nations as well as in domestic policy (Seitz and Martens, 2017). While specific corporate practices have sparked widespread resistance, the pervasive and growing corporate control of the food system has not.

A second barrier to food democracy internationally and in most countries is lack of public access to land and other resources needed for food production. Producing one’s own food is the most direct way to eschew capitalist markets. International land grabs (large-scale land acquisitions) have effectively stolen land from communities lacking secure tenure and governments that were looking out for their interests (Müller et al., 2021). But even in purportedly democratic countries, land for beginning and socially disadvantaged

farmers is in short supply. Given the centrality of private property to capitalism, this barrier is very difficult to overcome, although many people are experimenting with forms of collective ownership and farming.

A third barrier to food democracy is the lack of public forums for deliberating food issues. Food policy councils are often held up as a way to achieve food democracy; but their existence depends on champions in local or state legislatures, and the extent to which they are representative of people in their regions depends on how they are formulated. There is a consistent problem in food policy councils of under-representation of minorities and low-income people (Bassarab et al., 2019). But these are the people whose right to food is most likely to be violated; and a rights-based approach mandates that they should be at the center of decision-making about the food system, not tokenized or on the periphery. Even where a representative food policy council exists, it may not have authority or funds to implement its decisions. Along with the lack of public deliberative forums is public apathy, time constraints that disallow participation in deliberation [perhaps due to the “overworked American” phenomenon described by Schor, 2008], and a marked preference for convenience in how people get their food. Food democracy requires an engaged public, willing to invest extra time into learning about and finding solutions to problems. Few people in the US are willing to allocate that time, preferring to go with “easier” alternatives rather than learn about and participate in social innovations.

Threats to food democracy have arisen in the context of the erosion of democracy in government, and food democracy cannot thrive in an undemocratic society. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) documents a frightening rise in authoritarianism between 2011 and 2021, with increased use of polarization and disinformation (Alizada et al., 2022). While the US prides itself on being a democracy and has often justified interventions abroad as “bringing democracy,” other countries are critical of the health of US democracy (e.g., King, 2022; Tharoor, 2022) and it has been designated as a “backsliding democracy” by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (Berger, 2021). People in the US are not accustomed to working for democracy; we have been told that we already have the best democracy in the world and—at least well-to-do white people—have taken it for granted until recently.

## Connections between food democracy and food sovereignty

Food democracy and food sovereignty both emerged in the 1990s in response to increasing corporate control of the food system, but they have distinctly different foci:

Food sovereignty mainly focuses on producers by advocating for sustainable production methods and the right of small producers (e.g., peasants, family farmers, etc.) to control their production; while the focus of food democracy lies on the reinforcement of the role of citizens to democratize the food system (Cifuentes and Gugerell, 2021:1,062).

Inclusive deliberation about food system issues should include the whole range of people who are affected by policies. This includes

producers, citizens, small businesses, and marginalized groups such as Indigenous people (Anderson, 2008).

Food sovereignty has a wider scope than food democracy, moving well beyond participation to encompass production, what kinds of food are consumed, and human rights:

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations (Nyéléni.org, 2007 Declaration of Nyéléni).

A right to participation in food systems and policies is suggested by food sovereignty's principle to localize control. But does "local" control in fact result in healthy and culturally appropriate food, produced through ecologically sound and sustainable food? It may simply allow whomever has most power in the local food system to continue ensuring that their own interests are met. The right to participation in public affairs is in the 1945 UN Declaration of Human Rights, and its application to small-scale farmers and other rural people was spelled out explicitly in the UN Declaration of the Rights of Peasants and Others Living in Rural Areas (Alabrese et al., 2022).

Food sovereignty has its strongest proponents in the Global South where many people have felt the ruthless grip of corporate power over seeds, land, water, food and prices. Formerly colonized peoples are much more likely to see "sovereignty" as worth fighting for; others may be confused about what food sovereignty means and who would become sovereign (Edelman et al., 2014). Food sovereignty that re-imagines the capitalist relations of production, distribution and consumption that impede food democracy is equally needed in the Global North. However, corporate power wears a velvet glove for dealing with the most privileged populations, disguising control as offering greater choice. Lack of control over the food supply is an early warning sign of lack of control over other essentials.

What can food democracy add to food sovereignty? For people living under conditions of privilege, recognizing its absence and fighting for it is a warm-up to struggling for other freedoms which are under threat but not yet widely recognized as endangered. And, given confusion over the meaning of food sovereignty among wealthy and privileged people, food democracy may be a more comprehensible and palatable goal which can be achieved, at least in an emerging way, through social innovations such as food policy councils, cooperatives, and community-supported agriculture. Participating in these initiatives allows people to take an active role in their food system and (in many cases) enjoy healthier food with purchases that help to build stronger local food systems. Given that these initiatives embody many of the goals of food democracy, it is puzzling that more people do not participate in them.

Food democracy might also enhance food sovereignty by adding a stronger demand for inclusive participation, especially of marginalized and otherwise disadvantaged people who do not reap the benefits of the current food system. This is more important than localizing control, given that privileged people within a locality can

thwart any significant re-orientation of the food system to meet the full human rights of people without privilege and voice. Finally, food democracy emphasizes the need for better education and consciousness-raising about the food system (Hamilton, 2004) to overcome the barriers to a just and sustainable system.

## Conclusion

Food democracy is more important than ever now, with increasing corporate control of the food system and the hollowing-out of civic democracy. But food democracy is shallow unless people have options for obtaining food outside the concentrated capitalist markets where most buy food now and spaces, respected by public institutions, for public deliberation about their food system. I propose that the next stage of food democracy is the intentional centering of the people whose right to food and right to the resources necessary for growing and marketing food are not respected, protected and fulfilled. This will enable food democracy to contribute to civic democracy that recognizes the rights of all people.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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