

## *Book Review*

### **Seeds of Democracy**

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**Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*, Zed Books, 2005.**

Perhaps the most central—and certainly most potent—image in Vandana Shiva’s latest book, *Earth Democracy*, is that of the seed. This humble, tiny, and wholly miraculous marvel of nature contains within it entire worlds. Stirring within its germ lies the future of a plant, a village, a nation, and the project we call civilization. In many ways, the way we treat and perceive this tiny seed says as much about our culture as does a volume of books. Shiva reminds us that “in the seed, ecological issues combine with social justice.” [p. 91.] Like much of her other work, she tries to weave together a story that considers the small and large simultaneously, accounting for the history and trajectory of a global system of politics, economy, and ecology that is increasingly delinked from natural and sustenance economies, and which largely benefits a small group of elites and the profit motives of transnational corporations. Shiva hopes that the seed, like Ghandi’s spinning wheel, will become a symbol for a new movement of Earth Democracy that will usher in a more ecologically sustainable, just, and diverse world.

For Shiva, “Earth Democracy connects the particular to the universal, the diverse to the common, and the local to the global.” [p. 1.] It is a way of understanding the “earth family” and humanity’s relationship to a sacred and interconnected whole, and theorizing the rights and responsibilities that come with this awareness. Earth Democracy is about reconciling the contradictions between market, subsistence, and natural economies in just and sustainable ways.

The book is filled with the usual suspects of global inequity and social injustice: that unholy cabal of the World Trade Organization (WTO), World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the almighty transnational corporation armed with patents, lawyers, mobile capital, and easily swayed, corrupt governments. Once again, the seed is the star here, with much attention being devoted to the ways in which seed commons are being enclosed by corporations like Monsanto that claim ownership over the increasingly shrinking genetic diversity of corporate monocultures. The growth of anti-seedsaving laws, terminator technologies, and structural adjustment programs that favor export of monoculture cash crops, along with the promises of higher yields to already cash-strapped farmers has created a system that hedges against the future by externalizing all ecological and social costs.

At the heart of Shiva’s argument is the notion that corporate globalization is an enclosure of the commons. One result of that is that farming is being delinked from the generosity of the earth, and instead, linked to the greed of corporations. [p. 121.] The viability of small farms is being systematically eroded, and our collective future is left in the hands of increasingly smaller circles of unaccountable people and institutions. Both the rising costs of production and the falling price of farm commodities are responsible for this

turn of events, and both of these things are “rooted in the policies of trade liberalization and corporate globalization.” [p. 121.]

The book is both an indictment of corporate globalization and a celebration of the small and the local. Shiva celebrates various countermovements to corporate globalization that are resisting from below and reclaiming the commons through small actions that can take the world back from the corporate thugs currently in power.

Like all of her books, *Earth Democracy* rejects the path of modernization, empire, and globalization in favor of a more humane, local, and directly democratic engagement with community and nature. “Earth Democracy movements are struggles of the disadvantaged and excluded, aimed at conserving nature’s balance to preserve their survival.” [p. 61]. Building upon the traditions of ancient cultures, Shiva’s concept of Earth Democracy tries to bridge the gap between the universal and the particular, nature and culture, and economy and ecology by seeking appropriate and local solutions to global issues like climate change, environmental degradation, social injustice, and hunger.

Although the book does a good job of elaborating the concept of Earth Democracy, living economies, living democracies, and living cultures, at times, it seems rather repetitive, especially if you have read other works by Shiva. In essence, the book takes ideas developed in *Biopiracy*, *Water Wars*, and *Stolen Harvest* and combines them into the notion of Earth Democracy. For a new reader unfamiliar with Shiva’s work, *Earth Democracy* is a good introduction to the interlocking issues of globalization, neoliberalism, biopiracy, and various agricultural and environmental justice issues. For those familiar with her work, the book is treads old ground and would probably be more useful as a monograph or article that develops the concept of Earth Democracy without all the background.

However, it would make a good text for a course seeking to introduce students to a variety of concepts. The section on “Earth Democracy in Action,” in particular, would provide students with a number of examples of how people are resisting unjust laws, such as those conferring international property rights and others outlawing farmers’ time-honored practice of saving seeds [p.150], all of which are designed to prevent farmers’ biological, ecological, and economic sovereignty. Once again, the seed comes to the forefront, and hope emerges in the stirrings of its tiny radicle, that somehow, we can lay down the roots of a more just and sustainable society. By showing how the seed embodies so many of the competing interests of global political economy, Shiva’s argument mirrors the power of small actions and the hope that “through everyday actions, we [can] reweave the web of life.” [p. 145.] Although small, the seed represents a battleground over the future of life on the planet: who will own and control it, for whose benefit, and under what ecological, economic, and political conditions it will flourish or die.