

**Scarcity Myths:
The Power of Ideas to Remake Our World
By Frances Moore Lappé**

When the Me'en people of Ethiopia were shown photos of themselves, it is said that they stared at them; they licked them, crumpled them. They did not see themselves. After all, the Me'en know human beings are not flat, shiny and a few inches tall.

Chuckle we might, but we're all like the Me'en. We see what we expect to see. We carry within us, mostly beneath our conscious minds, mental maps, pictures that define and explain our world. They tell us who we are and fix the boundaries of possibility. What's not on our maps we simply do not see. In fact, what's not on our maps is scary. Early cartographers drew lines around the explored terrain; beyond that, they painted dragons.

We today are living on this small planet during an extraordinary era. The dominant mental map, one now going global, is literally killing us: Causing rampant species extinction, global climate disruption, life-stunting hunger, and an ozone hole the size of a continent, it's placed us on a planetary death march.

But, because we can't perceive this map – it's simply the invisible ether we breathe – we stumble ahead, knowing our trodden paths are not taking us where we want to go.

We feel lost and disoriented, unable to see that all around us this inherited map *is* cracking; its bedrock assumptions are eroding, and new, more life-serving maps are emerging – sometimes in the most unlikely places.

What a frightening time to be alive; what a hopeful time to be alive. As we become more and more conscious of the potential historic transitions underway, something changes: We discover that we can choose. As perhaps no generation before us, we can choose to continue spiraling downward...or we can choose life, not only personally but for our communities and this small planet itself.

Let me share a glimpse of how my own mental maps have changed along my own life quest.

Blaming nature...

It's the spring of 1975. I'm sitting in a rural conference center somewhere in Iowa surrounded by earnest Lutherans concerned about "world hunger." The last event of the evening is a film about the famine killing tens of thousands of Ethiopians. I see images of skeletal women holding babies trying in vain to suck milk from their mothers' shriveled breasts. The explanation is drought.

My hosts at this church gathering, like most U.S. religious activists at the time, were calling for more American food aid to Africa. The tragedy they saw was scarcity over there. So our duty was to ship our abundance abroad.

Even by then I had learned that there is nothing natural about famine in today's world -- that "underdeveloped" is not an adjective but a verb, as Walter Rodney explained in his 1974 book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.

Fast forward to 2003. A buried *New York Times* story announces 38 million people at risk of starvation in Africa. The U.N. World Food Program reports that demand for its aid is unprecedented. To blame are government corruption, AIDs, but, mainly, drought.

Over almost three decades, the message seems eerily familiar: Scarcity is the culprit, caused by nature's vagaries and specific human frailties. On the surface, nothing appears to have changed.

But appearances deceive. Much is changing. While the inertial force of the old mental map still has us in its vice, an emergent map is bursting through in surprising places with remarkable rapidity.

Scarcity-making...

The dominant mental map tells us we're in a perpetual battle to overcome scarcity; without capitalism's relentless drive, we'd probably all be going hungry by now.

In actuality, however, it is this "map" that is propelling us to create the very scarcity we say we so fear. I wrote *Diet for a Small Planet* 32 years ago precisely to ring this alarm: To tell the world that we humans were doing

precisely this in so many different ways, including turning livestock – ruminants whose genius is manufacturing protein – into massive protein disposals.

For eons ruminants like cattle had served humans by converting grass and other non-edibles into high-grade protein. Then, in just a blink of time, we'd come up with concentrated grain feeding – industrial-style feedlots – that in the U.S. take 16 pounds of grain and soy and reduce it to one pound of food, in this case a cancer and heart-disease-promoting food -- steak.

Today, while hunger stunts the lives of hundreds of millions – too poor to make a “market demand” for the food they need – from one-third to nearly one-half of all the world's grain goes to livestock. In the last three decades meat consumption even in low-income countries has doubled. In China or Thailand, for example, the better-off are creating the demand so that, while almost no grain went to livestock in these countries thirty years ago, now more than one-quarter goes to produce meat.¹

With feedlot-fed cattle, we invented a superb system for squandering water as well: To produce just one steer U.S.-style uses enough water to float a destroyer. This, in a world where millions go without clean water and groundwater tables are sinking on every continent.

In many ways, scarcity-creation has sped up. During World War II U.S. government posters advised: “Eat fish they feed themselves.” Now, four pounds of what are deemed junk fish like sardines -- long a staple food of the poor — are turned into feed to produce just one pound of salmon, which is then priced out of the reach of the poor.²

Plus, modern fishing practices themselves create scarcity: In shrimp harvesting using bottom-scraping dragnets, ten pounds of sea life are captured (and mostly destroyed) for every one pound going to nourish humans. Typically, worldwide, nearly one-quarter of the total marine harvest is thrown back, dead or dying. This, in world in world where overfishing has led to declining catches of virtually every type of commercially sold fish.³

Every species but ours has figured out how to feed itself and its offspring without destroying its life support. So what's up with *homo sapiens*? How could it be that we've created a system that destroys more than it creates?

A system, furthermore, that takes perfectly nutritious food and transforms it into a health hazard?

Right alongside undernutrition, a global epidemic of obesity and overweight – afflicting as many people as go hungry – is sweeping the planet. Food corporations, the world’s biggest advertisers, have discovered the highest profits are in marketing “food products” stripped of nutrients but laden with fat and sugar. So it’s now food – too little, too few nutrients, or too much – that’s become the culprit in more than half of all disease-related lost years of healthy life on our planet.⁴

What could be so powerful?

...the real scarcity

To answer, we must peel away another layer, for the scarcity-creating machine, it turns out, follows directly from a deeper scarcity: Food isn’t scarce. Democracy is.

What? How can this be? We’re told that throughout the world democracy is more and more abundant. In the last two decades, 33 military regimes have given way to civilian government. One-hundred and forty of the world’s almost 200 countries now hold multi-party elections, more than at any point in history.⁵

True. To grasp, however, why we are generating the very scarcity we say we fear, we have to question our inherited notions. We grow up learning that democracy is a government structure, one with certain trappings – constitutional protections, multiple parties, secret ballots. If we’ve got those, hey, we’ve got democracy.

Focusing my early adulthood on food and hunger forced me to question this easy equation. Having learned there was more than enough food in the world to make us all chubby, it took no great insight also to realize that no one *chooses* to go hungry. So, I asked, doesn’t the every existence of hunger demonstrate incontestably that people have been deprived of voice—a real say over the direction of their lives and communities? That they have been silenced, that they have no choice?

That most people don’t see democracy denied in the very fact of hunger is a testament to the continuing grip of the dominant mental map. It tells us that hunger is nature’s problem or an economic malfunction; whereas democracy -- well, that’s about politics and government.

Democracy's missing heart...

As long as we perceive democracy as simply a form of government – something done *to* us or *for* us – hunger and the devastation of nature's richness will continue unabated. For democracy's heart and soul – the presumption that members of a community have the capacity and the right to participate in ensuring life's essentials – has been missing.

But this shriveled view of democracy and community is hardly a given. More accurately, it's an aberration.

In Karl Polanyi's 1944 classic, *The Great Transformation*, we learn how suddenly – in a blink of historic time -- economic life was ripped out of community; how market exchange, over thousands of years embedded in family, culture and nature came to be seen as a distinct realm over and above all others. But even the insightful Polanyi probably couldn't have foreseen the degree to which market fundamentalism would triumph by the 21st century. What Ronald Reagan called the “magic of the market” has become the world's dominant religion.

Once a primitive marketism seizes our common consciousness it's hard to take a fresh look: to see that we've actually swallowed the illogical notion that a system of production and exchange built on the single driver of highest return to existing wealth will produce benign outcomes, will produce societies we want to live in.

There have always been doubters, of course. But they've been long forgotten, well buried. Our own Thomas Jefferson, for one, didn't buy this primitive idea. He advocated twelve, not the existing ten, amendments to our constitution which comprise our Bill of Rights. He grasped that economic life is an aspect of democracy, not apart from it, as Thom Hartmann reminds us in *Unequal Protection* (Rodale Press, 2002). One of Jefferson's additions, notes Hartmann, would have banned “commercial monopolies” and made it illegal for corporations to own other corporations or do business in more than one market.

Another layer exposed...

Pulling away another layer of the dominant map, we can see what lies beneath the illogical premise that return to existing wealth should tower above all other considerations – above community well-being, above clean water and

healthy soil, above life itself. We must dig down to our very assumptions about what it means to be human.

Today in much of the North the view – now taking hold around the globe – is that Thomas Hobbes was right in concluding: *Homo homini lupus* – we are to each other as wolves. Since Hobbes knew nothing of the social nature of wolves, he was insisting, really, that our nature is to be at each other's throats. His 17th century insights jibed perfectly with the mechanistic worldview then emerging, one in which human beings were nothing but “social atoms,” each pursuing our own inertial trajectories, all in splendid isolation of one another.

With this view of ourselves it makes perfect sense that we have sought overarching, impersonal “laws” to mediate human affairs. And “the market” looked like a good one. After all, we self-seeking social atoms would inevitably muck up any attempt to come together to deliberate over common ends; best turn over our fate to the unfettered market and insist on slapping any human hand that wants to tamper with it. Isn't this the melody of today's Neo-Liberals?

With this skewed view of ourselves, it's understandable that we don't stop to examine the nature of this market, our salvation. We don't stop to think that there may be many ways to build market economies, not just one. No where is it pre-ordained that a market economy can only work when premised on highest return to existing wealth.⁶

The map is cracking . . .

In some way, the grip of primitive marketism – and the dominant mental map, more generally -- seems never to have been tighter. It appears everything is being propertized – from drinking water to human genes – as we're told that deliberative devices for sharing the commons for common benefit have all flopped.

At the very same time, unseen by most of us a new mental map is emerging. It is cracking through the thought traps that have put our species on a death march.

If you look, you can see it. But you have to really look. That's what my daughter Anna and I did to write *Hope's Edge*. We traveled on five continents to nine countries.

One was Kenya, where we talked with village women, members of the Green Belt Movement, founded by Wangari Maathai. These unschooled women, we learned, are accomplishing what few would have considered possible. Confounding the skepticism of government foresters, they have created 6,000 cooperative tree nurseries throughout the country and planted 20 million trees. That's right *million*.

Emboldened with new confidence, Green Belters also began to question the impoverishing dependence on single exports like coffee, where producer prices have now hit an historic bottom. They began relearning the best of traditional farming practices and reclaiming lost crops. The results are stronger community bonds, problem-solving groups and skills, along with enhanced food security.

Not surprisingly, this new consciousness was threatening to the government of strongman Daniel arap Moi. In fact, under his reign, Maathai had been jailed and beaten more than once for her pro-democracy, pro-environment movement building.

If Anna and I had predicted while there two years ago that Maathai could break through the deadlock of old-thinking and gain a powerful voice within the Kenya government, we would have been dismissed as utterly naïve. Yet in recent parliamentary elections, she outpolled her closest opponent 50 to one and was appointed deputy minister for the environment and natural resources. And celebrating women danced in Nairobi streets!

Before we set out on our journey, we'd crammed in quite a bit of background reading, including Thomas Friedman's 1999 *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. Here, this four-time Pulitzer prize-winner argues that there is no alternative to corporate globalization. "...[T]here is no more mint chocolate chip, there is no more strawberry swirl, there is no more lemon-lime. Today there is only [free-market] vanilla and North Korea."⁷ (And, of course, no one is about to choose North Korea!)

Friedman uses Brazil to bring his point home, describing the only opposition to the global corporate march as disorganized street life, bereft of ideology or even a manifesto.

Arriving in Brazil ourselves, we were astonished to see what Friedman's mental map had blinded him to: the largest social movement in the Hemisphere, and one that embodies not only a sophisticated critique of

corporate globalization but an alternative coming to life in thousands of communities across Brazil.

That blind spot of Friedman's is the Landless Workers' Movement -- called by its Portuguese acronym, the MST -- a roughly 20-year old undertaking that has settled a quarter of a million families on 15 million acres of land throughout almost every state of Brazil.

Taking advantage of a constitutional provision mandating the government to redistribute unused land, the MST has used civil disobedience to press its case.

Talking to newly settled MST families, they told us that once getting land they discovered that it is only the beginning. They have to consider all aspects of community-building, including the role of economic profit relative to other values. ("Capitalism doesn't care about the individual," one young member told us. We chuckled at how discordant his comment would sound to an American ear.)

And what they are coming up with is hardly "anti-market." Some MST farms, coops, and small businesses even sell internationally. But market exchange is embedded in other values, putting community solidarity, for example, and the health of the environment in pride of place. MSTers told us they were rejecting chemical agriculture not only because of the hazard to their own health (many had suffered pesticide poisoning as farm workers) but out of concern that chemical residues might end up hurting the consumer.

In a sense, these gutsy Brazilians may be reversing Polanyi's "great transformation" as they re-embed market relations in a wider circle of values.

A Brazilian research center recently totaled the cost to the government of land reform -- including compensating landowners, legal expenses, and credit for the new farmers -- and compared that to the price tag of the same number of people migrating into an urban shantytown, which entails government services and infrastructure. It turned out that the cost to the government of the latter -- the market's solution -- exceeds in just one month the cost to the government of an entire year of settling new farmers.⁸

Food becomes a right of citizenship...

Anna and I also visited the 4th largest city in Brazil, Belo Horizonte, because in 1993, its government had declared food a right of citizenship. This shift of mental map triggered dozens of innovations that have begun to end hunger in this city. A whole range of things:

Little patches of city-owned land were made available at low rent to local organic farmers as long as they would keep produce prices within the reach of poor, inner-city dwellers; the city redirected the 13 cents provided by the federal government for each school child's lunch and instead of buying corporate processed foods began buying local organic food. The result is enhanced children's nutritional intake.

To keep the market honest, the city teamed up with university researchers who each week post the lowest prices of 45 basic food commodities at bus stops and broadcast them over radio. This way, inner city dwellers had sound information to fight against price gouging by unscrupulous grocers.

With the new food-as-a-right of citizenship lens, people also began to see abundance where they had never seen it before: Manioc leaves and egg shells, always tossed out as waste, were processed into a nutritious additive for bread for school kids. These were only a few of the initiatives that flowed as the city reached out to form alliances with citizen, religious and labor groups.

All of these efforts consume, we were told, only one percent of the municipal budget.

No doubt Brazil's new president, former union leader Luis Inazio "Lula" da Silva will look to Belo's innovating government and citizens for clues as to how to implement his "zero hunger" pledge for Brazil where at least 25 million now go without.

At the end of our stay in Belo, Anna and I sit with the Adriana Aranha, whose job in city government is to coordinate all these efforts. I ask, "When you began, did you realize how much difference your efforts might make? Did you know how out of step you were with the neo-Liberal approach that says government can do no good and the market can do no harm?"

Adriana goes on and on, animated and intense, in Portuguese. And we can't understand a word. We sit patiently, but then I see her eyes start to tear up. I can't wait any longer, so I nudge our interpreter. "Please, what is she saying?"

"I knew we were out of step," Adriana said. "I we had so much hunger in the world, but what is so upsetting, what I didn't know when I started this, is it's so easy. It's so easy to end it."

I've thought about this conversation many, many times since. Why was Adriana able to say "it's easy"? I realize now that she is right if, only if, we can see with new eyes, if we can free ourselves from the choking momentum of the inherited mental map. Then...it is easy, for we're suddenly able to perceive new, more life-serving forms emerging.

These breakthroughs may be hard to detect not only because the prevailing media doesn't cover them but also because they do not constitute a new "ism." They don't add up to a new, packaged formula. They are – like the Green Belt Movement in Kenya and the triumphs of the Brazilian landless – about ordinary people trusting their deepest values and well as their commonsense. In the process, they are giving birth to new mental maps. Only in these, human beings are more than narrow consumers and democracy is more than pre-paid elections.

¹ Brian Halweil, "The United States Leads World Meat Stampede," WorldWatch Issues Paper, July 2, 1998.

² Naylor, R.L., J. Goldberg, J.H. Primavera, N. Kautsky, M.C.M. Beveridge, J. Clay, C. Folke, J. Lubchenco, H. Mooney, and M. Troell. 2000, "Effect of aquaculture on world fish supplies," *Nature* 405:1017-1024. See also: Pauly, D., Christensen, V., Dalsgaard, J., Froese, R. and Torres Jr., F.C. 1998a. Fishing down marine food webs. *Science* 279: 860-863.

³ William Fulbright Foote, "Swimming Against the Tide of Overfishing," *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 2002.

⁴ Gary Gardner and Brian Halweil, "Overfed and Underfed: the Global Epidemic of Malnutrition," WorldWatch Institute, WorldWatch Paper 150, March 2000.

⁵ *Human Development Report 2002*, Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World, U.N. Development Program, 2002, 10.

⁶ Marjorie Kelly, *The Divine Right of Capital*, Berrett-Koehler, 2001.

⁷ Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1999) 86.

⁸ Peter Rosset, *Access to Land: Land Reform and Security of Tenure*, World Food Summit/Five Years Later, Civil Society Input/Case Studies June, 2002.