



GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

The oligarchy of food

In a world where mega-corporations buy and sell genetic material and control what we consume, author and activist Raj Patel says we can shake the yoke of corpocracies, reclaim our food supply and bring collective solutions to the table

BY MARCO FILARDI
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Summer is here, replete with sunny days, sandy beaches, cool water and, of course, food – lots of glorious food for celebrating with friends and family, and anchoring a deep conversation on the complex political and economic implications of eating a meal.

Well, maybe that last part only comes up if you've invited Raj Patel to your barbecue.

Raj Patel is an award-winning economist and sociologist who is an activist for agroecology – the application of ecological philosophies to agriculture. Patel is a research professor in the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas, Austin.

He is the author of "Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System," and "The Value of Nothing: How to Reshape Market Society and Redefine Democracy." The latter's title is a reference to Oscar Wilde's statement, "Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing."

Patel weaves together the big picture of so-called corpocracies, market manipulation and corrupt governments vs. people power, which he sees rebalancing societies and re-calculating "worth."

In a capitalist society like ours, the entire construct of food value and costs is perverted.

"If you have money, you'll eat," Patel said, in a recent interview in Austin, Texas. "If you have a lot of money, you'll eat well: organically, locally and sustainably. We speak about the need for better nutrition but, in this system, only a minority eat well. The majority remain entrapped by harmful foods with intergenerational effects, which can lead to obesity. The majority are stuck in a cycle of cheap, ultra-processed foods which exploit workers and the environment. It is for this reason that you can find an obese person and a malnourished person within the same family."

Marco Filardi: *In your book, "Stuffed and Starved," you describe the food system as an hourglass and you put the focus on those at the narrowest part of this hourglass. Why?*

Raj Patel: To understand how food circulates from the farm to fork. We believe that this is a short chain: the farmer sells to the dispatcher, they sell to the local market, and the market sells to you. But no. The myth of the free market is exactly that: a myth. There are millions of farmers and billions of consumers and, in between, there's only a handful of corporations who control the markets in an oligarchical manner and decide what and how we eat. The food industry, food giants and supermarkets intertwine to make up the food system.

M.F.: *How are recent fusions between Bayer and Monsanto, Syngenta and ChemChina, and Dow and Dupont involved?*

R.P.: Viewing the food system as an hourglass allows you to understand how the system works and how to predict its future. These mega-fusions are a sign of how these organizations generate profit by finding their way into the government to achieve changes to regulations and concentrate market power that prevents, for example, access to certain seed types or different methods of producing foods. They monopolize what you buy and sell as well, as what you are able to buy and sell. The concentration of power in these chemical businesses and pesticide giants takes place thanks to the penetration of governments, big NGOs and the UN. This destroys the traditional knowledge of small-scale farmers as, by assuming that farmers are idiots, these organizations rob them of the possibility of experimenting and further understanding due to seed legislation and of the application of agrottoxins.

M.F.: *Do you believe that we are living in a "corpocracy"?*

See FOOD, page 5