

*Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle
for the World Food System*

An Interview with Raj Patel

[Raj Patel](#) is currently a researcher at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa and a visiting scholar at the Center for African Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. He has degrees from Oxford, the London School of Economics & Cornell University and has worked for the World Bank, interned at the World Trade Organization, consulted for the UN and been involved in international campaigns against his former employers. His new book, *Stuffed and Starved* tells the story of the global food system that has created one billion overweight people and left 850 million going hungry and about the millions of people who are fighting back to create a different food system. In June 2008, *Corporations and Health Watch* staffer Alex Lewin interviewed Raj Patel. An edited transcript follows.



CHW: I enjoyed reading your book, *Stuffed and Starved*, and listening to you on NPR. Some themes emerged from your book that I'd like to ask you about today and I hope we might discuss some of the challenges and potential hopes for our food system.

One of the over-arching themes in your book is corporate control, whether it's companies consolidating, control of knowledge, or bio-piracy issues. In your view, what might be some of the negative consequences for consumers with having such a small number of companies controlling such a large part of our food system?

PATEL: Well as a consumer your range of choice is restricted; the kinds of things that are put before you are things that were designed to be profitable rather than good for the environment or for farmers or anyone else other than food system executives. And I think that the surrendering of our knowledge and control of the food system to these corporations is anti-democratic as well. There's something profoundly wrong when we are reduced to mere consumers as opposed to richer kinds of people and induced only to change the world through shopping habits.



CHW: In that same vein, around company consolidation there were a lot of examples that you gave in your book about umbrella companies buying out seemingly contradictory companies. So for example, Nestle owns Jenny Craig, Unilever, the owner of Ben and Jerry's, is also the owner of Slim Fast. How do you wrestle with this contradiction?

Patel: There's no contradiction there. These are companies that are in the market not to make us better people or in any way improve our lives other than insofar as their ventures are profitable. So there's absolutely no contradiction. You know if they're in the business of smashing something and then they're in the business of selling you something that will fix it, that's just good sense. Monsanto does it with its biotech crops, to engineer something to withstand a broad-spectrum herbicide and sell you the herbicide too. And here a company is doing exactly the same thing, where at the end of the day the bottom line is profit.

CHW: And do you think there's any way for them to incorporate more of a public health model into their financial bottom line, or do you think that changes that they've made are merely rhetoric and don't really even tackle any part of the food system that needs improvement?

Patel: The only way that a public health model or any other model gets integrated into a corporation's bottom line is if it helps that bottom line. So for example Diet Coke Plus helps Coke's bottom line because it offers a product range that allows them to cater to people who are mad enough to think that the way to achieve some nutritional goals is to buy Diet Coke Plus and therefore drink their vitamins at the same time as they drink their Diet Coke. That looks like complete compliance with the idea of public health goals together with a company making money. But of course that's an example of the insanity that such pining for corporate generosity and charity in a food system reaches. The idea of Diet Coke Plus with added vitamins is insane. I saw Snickers Charged the other day, which is a regular Snickers bar with caffeine and taurine and a few other ingredients.

The only way that systemic change has ever happened is from outside. The history of social change is about conflict. One needs to be very suspicious of corporations that are seeking to transform the food system by rebranding and remarketing, because at the end of the day any CEO of any corporation who does anything to weaken their bottom line



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will be out of a job. And that's not anything other than an inherent feature of the way that capitalism is structured. Now the problem here is that actually the way that we get our food today is entirely implicated in capitalism. In my view, capitalism is the problem here.

Tempting though it is to say “well we must be in partnership with corporations,” I think that’s entirely wrong-headed. If you’re in partnership with corporations, you’re in partnership with the people who are profiting from the current situation.

CHW: That makes me think of your distinction between choice and instinct in the book. How do we as consumers learn how to navigate a food environment that’s full of health claims, full of what seems like choice to the average consumer, to help create a more healthful food environment? Or are we just in the dark?

Patel: Well I think mistrusting labels is a good idea. Packaging is already a sign that you’re staring at unhealthy food in some way. If it comes in a packet the chances are its not going to be as healthy for you as something that doesn’t come in a packet. That’s not something that’s terribly complicated and yet I think it is a nice way of educating oneself and reconnecting with certain kinds of food. I do see education as having a role here. I don’t want to suggest something as simple as saying “Don’t eat anything that comes in a packet or don’t go into a supermarket.” That’s a fairly straightforward thing, but I don’t want to underestimate how hard that is.

CHW: As consumers are starting to demand healthier food items and becoming more aware of the food system, companies are clearly realizing this and the buzzwords are flying. So you walk into a store and all you see is “environmentally friendly” “green” “fair trade” “healthy” etc, etc. How in the world does one know what’s legitimate?



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Patel: We don’t. We’re in an era where there’s a battle over the epistemology of food, you know a way of knowing if something is legit or not is the main domain of the certification business. Different kinds of certification are battling over whether they can gain your trust. And that’s why there was such a big fight over the USDA organic standards, which at the end of the day turned out not to be very stringent and quite watered down as opposed to the other private labeling standards. So labels are a window, but the problem is that they are always a very small window—a window the size of a postage stamp. And that restricts your line of sight quite considerably.

CHW: Is it then about restoring the balance between corporate power and government oversight? Where does corporate accountability come into the picture? Do we need local food, organic and sustainable standards set by the federal government? Is the answer in restoring power to the government?

Patel: Yes, but that means there does need to be a more active model than you see right now. But yes, more governmental control and regulatory authority over our food system can't be a bad thing because the government has for a very long time been involved in regulating food. It is only now, since the rollback of government involvement in the regulation of food, that we've seen the outbreak of all kinds of disease, the obesity epidemic. I'm not saying that the obesity epidemic is directly because the government isn't regulating food but I'm certainly saying that it's a symptom of the fact that corporations are far more powerful than they should be.

CHW: Your book also touches upon the need for a more collective responsibility for the public's health. I would ask you how we can start to move away from this notion of individual choice, individual responsibility, and freedom into one where the government is responsible for the public's health and isn't called the "food police" or a "nanny state."

Patel: We are held responsible for our food choices because there's been a rollback of the government and a rollback of the idea that we can collectively do something. It is important for government as an impartial and not corporate owned body to weigh in with the best available science; the best science money can buy, and go with the best kind of public science. I feel that the government does have a role in taking care of our food system, but that only goes together with a role in taking care of our government.

CHW: And what would you suggest we do as consumers or as citizens?

Patel: That's the distinction, right? Because I think that we are more than consumers, we are citizens. As consumers, all we can do is shop. But as citizens we can do a lot more and I think we should be at the very least writing to our elected representatives, organizing within our school districts to change the purchasing policies of our schools, organizing local food policy councils at the municipal level so that can we again institute certain kinds of food policies that are not amenable to being bought by corporations.

CHW: Do you know of national examples where there was enough political leverage to shift away from personal responsibility?

Patel: Not yet, no. In Britain, however, the model of personal responsibility was important but the Achilles heel was around school dinners. Jamie Oliver's work around [school dinners](#) was a very interesting example of how public policy and the idea of individual choice was rolled back a bit. Not a perfect example, but it is one of the examples that shows that things can be done even at a national level. But it's like climate change, where there isn't really a country on earth that's doing a good job on climate change but you'll see more and more cities, more and more local and regional

organizations and government bodies taking a very aggressive stance on climate change. We have to make that happen from below because the government has been so completely bought by corporate interests.

CHW: Do you think it's worth engaging industry in this debate?

Patel: I think it's a waste of time. If you're serious about effecting change, talking to Nestle or Monsanto or whoever is an entire waste of time. They've got an infinite amount of money; they can soak up as much time as you care to give them with committees and protests and other stuff like that. The proper way to engage with them is democratically through democratic organizations in which their voices should count for nothing because they are not human. These are corporations, they're not real people, they're legal people. And they shouldn't belong and they don't belong in a government process that's about people, about real people.

CHW: Is there a way in your mind to make their practices more transparent to everyday citizens who might be unaware of corporate practices?

Patel: I was reading a very good article that was explaining the idea of [transparency and the need for it](#). It's a strange delusion that there are crazy things going on behind the scenes and they're very dark and nasty, whereas most of the crazy things are happening completely in the open. As one critic put it, the Bush Administration, "wasn't elected to commit crimes so much as to make the crimes that were being committed legal." And I think that that is a nice way of thinking about how the food system is operating. It's not like there are dark people sort of spiking our food. Rather, through legal and open government processes we're being utterly kept in the dark about how the food system works. The answer has to come through taking back our government.

CHW: Where would you draw the distinction between, say a retailer like Whole Foods who has a good reputation on the surface at least and, say McDonald's or Coke? Are they all part of the same system?

Patel: Yes, they are. Whole Foods is most successful in portraying itself as a friend to the farmer. But they use exactly the same practices as Wal-Mart. I mean if you look at the geography of your local Whole Foods, just as with Wal-Mart, the milk is always at the back.

CHW: It makes you go through the entire supermarket.

Patel: And that's Whole Foods, right? That's the people-friendly chain. Yet there's

nothing that demonstrates so much as that Whole Foods really is in the same business as Wal-Mart. And they are in the business to ship as much stuff as they reasonably can into your car.



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Sustainability involves communities making the decisions themselves, and not about some guy deciding what is or isn't good. And I think that the real comparison is between Whole Foods and a regular farmers' market. Because at a regular farmers' market farmers get a much bigger share of the profit, it is a more open place, it is more public, and certainly in most farmers' markets food is cheaper than at Whole Foods. That's the kind of production and consumption system that I'm more tilted towards than Whole Foods.

CHW: It seems like a great idea but at the same time it may be difficult for people who, especially in poorer areas, lack the ability to shop elsewhere or who have the time to go to the farmers' market. Are they just at the whim of other people changing their practices?

Patel: No, I think historically the things that people in working communities have always done is banded together and organized. We have to be in that business of organizing and mobilizing. If we're serious about shifting away from this ethical, this personal responsibility paradigm into a sort of social, governmental responsibility paradigm then that does mean getting organized. It's not like there's going to be some saint elected to the White House, for example, who will suddenly bring good things. It's all about communities everywhere getting involved. And that's why I like the Italian Communists, for example, a party of socialist origins involving unionism and organizing around the length of the working day and these sorts of things. These aggressive working class militant approaches.

CHW: As we've seen with other social issues and social problems over time. Obesity is one of those issues where as local governments, states and communities do more and as the policies and programs become increasingly fragmented, there's a chance that policy change can trickle up to the federal level.

Patel: Yes. There's also an interesting example that I've been reading recently in a book by Mark Shapiro called "[Exposed](#)." He makes a very interesting argument about toxic chemicals, but it also works for obesity. He notes that the levels of permitted chemicals in the European Union is far, far lower than in the U.S. and that many more products are banned in the European Union than in the United States. He wonders why, for example,

cosmetics that are sold in the United States and contain things that are known to cause cancer are banned in Europe. Why is that allowed to happen? And the conclusion that he comes to is that in Europe, because there is universal health care, the government has a financial interest in reducing the incidence of cancer; otherwise they'd have to pay the bills for treating people with these kinds of exposure related diseases.

A government in Britain can announce a ban on advertising to children, a ban on advertising of food to children, for example. Now in the U.S. you would have corporations howling about First Amendment rights, whereas in Britain there's none of that. I mean you still have corporations howling, but you also have, the government standing up for itself. "We're very clear that we don't want to be paying the bills for an obesity rate of 50% among children. So just deal with it."

I think that is another dynamic that is absent in the United States which makes things a little harder. The government doesn't have to bear the cost of unhealthy practices because healthcare is privatized here too.

CHW: We've been talking a lot about corporate behavior and corporate decisions, and their contribution to these negative health consequences that we've seen, be it hunger or obesity. To what extent do you think that the rise in childhood obesity rates or the rise in food insecurity is actually due to corporate behavior?

Patel: Quite a lot. There's no other natural explanation for why Americans have so much corn or high fructose corn syrup in their diet. That has everything to do with government policy and with a few corporations begging for support for their particular pet project. You can certainly trace the obesity epidemic to changes in diet and you can trace those changes in diet to a shift towards food that is more profitable for a few corporations. And while I understand that there's an impulse to say "well of course people will have the choice not to eat these things," when you have billions of dollars spent on advertising, all of a sudden those choices kind of recede. That again is something that is a result of corporations, so I think that there's a lot of responsibility on the corporations.

CHW: Is there one final success story that comes to mind?

Patel: Los Angeles has some interesting stuff going on there. They banned Coke in the schools and they're working on a comprehensive program with the Los Angeles Unified School District and they're doing some [very exciting stuff](#).

CHW: Thanks so much for your time.