

“We live in a world where eight hundred and fifty million people go hungry every year and a billion people are overweight” (Patel). I’d like to think that my reaction is similar to most people who are confronted with this statistic. A momentary pause of disbelief, some awkward face of disgust and thinking to myself: How and why is this possible?

In Raj Patel’s *Stuffed and Starved* he addresses this statistic by unveiling the many issues with the global food system. From my understanding the biggest issue with the United State’s food system is the extreme prevalence of global markets in our society. These markets are controlled by just a handful of “corporate giants” who finance large-scale agricultural production of crops. Contrary to what we U.S. consumers may think, it is not *we* who dictate which crops shall be grown but which these corporate funders find most profitable. I imagine these decisions of crop production are based on which ones will yield the highest return rates. This realization is quite a contradiction to my high school econ teacher. Who lead me to believe it is we the consumers who demand a supply. Having only a few corporations in control of a niche market creates this oligopoly seen in our Democracy. Giving them the sole power to select what crops will be yielded as well as set the price on these goods.

Raja’s focus on Soy is a great example of taking a natural resource and exploiting its uses and its association with being healthy. Using every bit of a product seems like a good idea, lets go “green” because being wasteful is bad of course. When buying natural products we are bettering the environment and potentially bettering our bodies, Right? This sounds great but what about when we examine the bigger picture. Looking outside the individual and examining society as a whole. Is buying anything from these corporations- weather natural or processed really a good investment? It is easy to look to the media surrounding our daily lives and answer the questions with a “yes, going green is good for everyone!”

It is this ideology that is fueling the problem of our global food system. We consumers want what we are told is good and what is healthy but because we are not directly correlated to the production process we don’t realize how many environmental and social problems we are perpetuating. The media telling us what to buy are unfortunately owned and operated by the same corporations producing our food. They additionally have a means of turning something naturally wonderful and resourceful into something entirely negative for those involved in the production process.

A prime example of this is Brazil and the countries mass production of soy. I have found that the soy plant is extremely versatile once it has been processed and can be used in an abundance of ways. To name a few: its use as a dairy and meat substitute, biofuel, plastic, and cosmetics. It can be beneficial for ones health or even used in house hold items. The American icon Henry Ford was a huge advocate of soy and its production on an industrial scale. Ford motors tried incorporating soy into the production of their cars as much as possible from the paint to the interior. Henry Ford was even said to have an extremely luxurious suit entirely made out of soy. These fun facts about soy left me thinking “wow this is an organic resource we can use in so many beneficial ways.” Thus, further proving the point of author Raj Patel.

In the case of soy, who really benefits from its production? Are we consumers really reaping the rewards of buying organic? Are we supporting the interests of the farmers or just putting more money in corporate pockets? Since we consumers aren’t the ones working the fields then who is? Upon taking a closer examination at how food gets from the fields to our kitchens these questions are answered and expose the problems with our global food system.

In the case of soy, the production begins in the fields of Brazil. The labor can be compared to that of slave labor, being paid next to nothing to work the fields. The land needed to plant the soy is vastly cutting into the Amazon forest. One might assume it is the farmers who are benefiting from the low labor costs and expansion of their fields, but that’s not the case. Small farmers too are struggling and failing to compete with the industrial size farms that buy them out or run them out of business.

Soy can be grown in the United States but those financing growth seek out the cheapest means of production. Places where regulations on labor laws are loose or nonexistent and the companies are not held responsible for their employee’s quality of life. These people working the field’s work for next to nothing, cant afford to buy food to feed themselves. While, ironically working for that money so that people around the word can get their processed lecithin. This extreme economic gap between people is the same gap that exists between the people who are starving and how people can suffer and even die from food consumption diseases. Food now has a price tag and those who can afford it indulge in it while those who cannot are struggling to survive.

*Stuffed and Starved* asks the question: Why should only the wealthy enjoy the sensual experience that comes with savoring and enjoying food? Because instead of working the fields they have time and money to dedicate to such luxuries. We are all constructed by the society in which we live and are all products of our environment. In the United States we work in an industrial world and commute to that work more than any other country. We work hard to be successful and need food to be a convenience in our lives rather than a chore. We are lead to believe by corporations that because we are choosing between different brand names and labels that we have a choice in the foods we eat. We do not have a choice, it’s like being told to pick a number any number BUT… it has to be between one and five. That greatly narrows the never-ending spectrum of number options to choose from! So, were forced to settle with number three because, it sounds the best.

The solution Raj says is the have a democratic discussion about food and I think he is entirely right. Talking about what we want and pushing for a free market would correct this fixed cost that has been placed on food. With out food being such a money market maybe things can somewhat go back to days of the surfs! If independent farmers are allowed to compete and be sustainable rather than being bought up or forced out by industrial farms, they may be able to help the people who work for them. If there’s extra food to be spared rather than selling all off to make ends meet then those who the labor may be reap the rewards of some extra food in their tummies. By having a democratic discussion about food we people who lack any selection in our diets can have a say and make a push for better food quality to better our health and cut out some of the obesity and heart disease correlated to our poor eating habits. Our sedentary and commuter lifestyle is not going to change, so it would seem logical that the food needs to. The push for local foods would limit the control the corporate giants have on the market and the poor working environments and life quality of their employees they contribute to around the world.

I try and make health conscious decisions when selecting the food I purchase. I do try and buy locally or make a trip to the local market when I can but most of my shopping is done in a supermarket. The reality of my consumer spending is that I do it with my best interest in mind. I had not thought about how eating my chocolate bar was linked to soy and corporate farming- that I am perpetuating the repercussions of a fixed market. Raj Patel tells us not to feel guilty but get angry and enforce changes. I feel more aware and able to do that after reading *Stuffed and Starved.*

I decided to trace the journey of my breakfast smoothie to my kitchen. It is a “Mango Tango” Odwalla fruit drink. I’m sure I purchased it because it has a “Haiti Hope” sticker and is uses “100% renewable plastic.” Odwalla is manufactured in Half Moon, CA and made its way to West Lafayette’s Einstein Bagel where I picked it up. Their website is extensive in marketing its freshness, green energy, charitable giving, and locally supported grown ingredients. However, the website claims that it must get several fruits internationally due to availability and do not discuss at all where or what these working conditions are like. After doing further research outside their website I found that 100% of the proceeds for my Mango Tango go to Haitian farmers producing the mangos. Odwalla published a press release about their Help Build A Fruitful Future For Haiti “The mission of the Haiti Hope Project is to create opportunity for 25,000 Haitian mango farmers and their families by helping to develop a sustainable mango juice industry. The Haiti Hope Project seeks to double the income of these farmers and raise their standard of living” (Williams). Odwalla is also part of Technoserve who “empowers people in the developing world to build businesses that break the cycle of poverty. Growing enterprises generate jobs and other income opportunities for poor people, enabling them to improve their lives and secure a better future for their families. Since its founding in 1968, the U.S.-based nonprofit has helped to create or expand thousands of businesses, benefiting millions of people in more than 30 countries” (Williams) The plastic is also said to be made in California and support the local economy. I would like to think that this was a good purchase although it was made without the labor force that produced it in mind. I know that this is also a rare find to make but now that I have been made aware of how my decisions impact my health but the health of others, I will be more conscience with purchasing my food.

Works Cited

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