

Stuffed and Starved

The Hidden Battle for the World Food System

RAJ PATEL



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Introduction

Our Big Fat Contradiction

Today, when we produce more food than ever before, more than one in ten people on Earth are hungry. The hunger of 800 million happens at the same time as another historical first: that they are outnumbered by the one billion people on this planet who are overweight.

Global hunger and obesity are symptoms of the same problem and, what's more, the route to eradicating world hunger is also the way to prevent global epidemics of diabetes and heart disease, and to address a host of environmental and social ills. Overweight and hungry people are linked through the chains of production that bring food from fields to our plate. Guided by the profit motive, the corporations that sell our food shape and constrain how we eat, and how we think about food. The limitations are clearest at the fast food outlet, where the spectrum of choice runs from McMuffin to McNugget. But there are hidden and systemic constraints even when we feel we're beyond the purview of Ronald McDonald.

Even when we want to buy something healthy, something to keep the doctor away, we're trapped in the very same system that has created our 'Fast Food Nations'. Try, for example, shopping for apples. At supermarkets in North America and Europe, the choice is restricted to half a dozen varieties: Fuji, Braeburn, Granny Smith, Golden Delicious and perhaps a couple of others. Why these? Because they're pretty: we like the polished and unblemished skin.

Because their taste is one that's largely unobjectionable to the majority. But also because they can stand transportation over long distances. Their skin won't tear or blemish if they're knocked about in the miles from orchard to aisle. They take well to the waxing technologies and compounds that make this transportation possible and keep the apples pretty on the shelves. They are easy to harvest. They respond well to pesticides and industrial production. These are reasons why we won't find Calville Blanc, Black Oxford, Zabergau Reinette, Kandil Sinap or the ancient and venerable Rambo on the shelves. Our choices are not entirely our own because, even in a supermarket, the menu is crafted not by our choices, nor by the seasons, nor where we find ourselves, nor by the full range of apples available, nor by the full spectrum of available nutrition and tastes, but by the power of food corporations.

The concerns of food production companies have ramifications far beyond what appears on supermarket shelves. Their concerns are the rot at the core of the modern food system. To show the systemic ability of a few to impact the health of the many demands a global investigation, travelling from the 'green deserts' of Brazil to the architecture of the modern city, and moving through history from the time of the first domesticated plants to the Battle of Seattle. It's an enquiry that uncovers the real reasons for famine in Asia and Africa, why there is a worldwide epidemic of farmer suicides, why we don't know what's in our food any more, why black people in the United States are more likely to be overweight than white, why there are cowboys in South Central Los Angeles, and how the world's largest social movement is discovering ways, large and small, for us to think about, and live differently with, food.

The alternative to eating the way we do today promises to solve hunger and diet-related disease, by offering a way of eating and growing food that is environmentally sustainable and socially just. Understanding the ills of the way food is grown and eaten also offers

the key to greater freedom, and a way of reclaiming the joy of eating. The task is as urgent as the prize is great.

In every country, the contradictions of obesity, hunger, poverty and wealth are becoming more acute. India has, for example, destroyed millions of tons of grains, permitting food to rot in silos, while the quality of food eaten by India's poorest is getting worse for the first time since Independence in 1947. In 1992, in the same towns and villages where malnutrition had begun to grip the poorest families, the Indian government admitted foreign soft drinks manufacturers and food multinationals to its previously protected economy. Within a decade, India has become home to the world's largest concentration of diabetics: people – often children – whose bodies have fractured under the pressure of eating too much of the wrong kinds of food.

India isn't the only home to these contrasts. They're global, and they're present even in the world's richest country. In the United States in 2005, 35.1 million people didn't know where their next meal was coming from.¹ At the same time there is more diet-related disease like diabetes, and more food, in the US than ever before.

It's easy to become inured to this contradiction; its daily version causes only mild discomfort, walking past the 'homeless and hungry' signs on the way to supermarkets bursting with food. There are moral emollients to balm a troubled conscience: the poor are hungry because they're lazy, or perhaps the wealthy are fat because they eat too richly. This vein of folk wisdom has a long pedigree. Every culture has had, in some form or other, an understanding of our bodies as public ledgers on which is written the catalogue of our private vices. The language of condemnation doesn't, however, help us understand why hunger, abundance and obesity are more compatible on our planet than they've ever been.

Moral condemnation only works if the condemned could have done things differently, if they had choices. Yet the prevalence of hunger and obesity affect populations with far too much

regularity, in too many different places, for it to be the result of some personal failing. Part of the reason our judgement is so out of kilter is because the way we read bodies hasn't kept up with the times. Although it may once have been true, the assumption that to be overweight is to be rich no longer holds. Obesity can no longer be explained exclusively as a curse of individual affluence. There are systemic features that make a difference. Here's an example: many teenagers in Mexico, a developing country with an average income of US\$6,000, are bloated as never before, even as the ranks of the Mexican poor swell. Individual wealth doesn't explain why the children of some families are more obese than others: the crucial factor turns out not to be income, but proximity to the US border. The closer a Mexican family lives to its northern neighbours and to their sugar- and fat-rich processed food habits, the more overweight the family's children are likely to be.² That geography matters so much rather overturns the idea that personal choice is the key to preventing obesity or, by the same token, preventing hunger. And it helps to renew the lament of Porfirio Diaz, one of Mexico's late-nineteenth-century presidents and autocrats: '¡Pobre Mexico! Tan lejos de Dios; y tan cerca de los Estados Unidos' (Poor Mexico: so far from God, so close to the United States).

A perversity of the way our food comes to us is that it's now possible for people who can't afford enough to eat to be obese. Children growing up malnourished in the favelas of São Paulo, for instance, are at greater risk from obesity when they become adults. Their bodies, broken by childhood poverty, metabolize and store food poorly. As a result, they're at greater risk of storing as fat the (poor-quality) food that they can access.³ Across the planet, the poor can't afford to eat well. Again, this is true even in the world's richest country; and in the US, it's children who will pay the price. One research team recently suggested that if consumption patterns stay the way they are, today's US children will live five fewer years,

because of the diet-related diseases to which they will be exposed in their lifetimes.⁴

As consumers, we're encouraged to think that an economic system based on individual choice will save us from the collective ills of hunger and obesity. Yet it is precisely 'freedom of choice' that has incubated these ills. Those of us able to head to the supermarket can boggle at the possibility of choosing from fifty brands of sugared cereals, from half a dozen kinds of milk that all taste like chalk, from shelves of bread so sopped in chemicals that they will never go off, from aisles of products in which the principal ingredient is sugar. British children are, for instance, able to select from twenty-eight branded breakfast cereals the marketing of which is aimed directly at them. The sugar content of twenty-seven of these exceeds the government's recommendations. Nine of these children's cereals are 40 per cent sugar.⁵ It's hardly surprising, then, that 8.5 per cent of six-year-olds and more than one in ten fifteen-year-olds in the UK are obese. And the levels are increasing. The breakfast cereal story is a sign of a wider systemic feature: there's every incentive for food producing corporations to sell food that has undergone processing which renders it more profitable, if less nutritious. Incidentally, this explains why there are so many more varieties of breakfast cereals on sale than varieties of apples.

There are natural limits to our choices. There are, for instance, only so many naturally occurring fruits, vegetables and animals that people are prepared to eat. But even here, a little advertising can persuade us to expand the ambit of our choices. Think of the kiwi fruit, once known as the Chinese gooseberry, but rebranded to accommodate Cold War prejudices by the New Zealand food company that marketed it to the world at the end of the 1950s. It's a taste no-one had grown up with, but which now seems as if it has always been there. And while new natural foods are slowly added to our menus, the food industry adds tens of thousands of new products to the shelves every year, some of which become

indispensable fixtures which, after a generation, make life unimaginable without them. It's a sign of how limited our gastronomic imaginations can be. And also a sign that we're not altogether sure how or where or why certain foods end up on our plate.

Arcadia Lost

Old Macdonald had a farm, E-I-E-I-O,
And on his farm he had a cow, E-I-E-I-O,
With a 'moo-moo' here and a 'moo-moo' there,
Here a 'moo', there a 'moo',
Everywhere a 'moo-moo',
Old Macdonald had a farm, E-I-E-I-O.

Traditional

The story of food production to which most of us can admit, almost as a reflex, owes more to fairy tales and children's television programming than anything else. Without a reason to revisit the creation myths of food we learned when young, we carry around unquestioned our received opinions of pastoral bliss, of farmers planting the seeds in the ground, watering them and hoping that the sun will come out so that the plants can grow big and strong. This is certainly one description of how food is grown. It's just one that glosses over the most important parts. The tales we tell about farming stuff a sock into the mouths of the world's rural poor. When food's provenance is reduced to a single line on a label, there's much we don't understand, nor even understand we should ask.

Who, for example, is the central character in our story of food – the farmer? What is her life like? What can she afford to eat? If only we asked, we'd know: the majority of the world's farmers are suffering. Some are selling off their lands to become labourers on their

family plots. Some migrate to the cities, or even overseas. A few, too many, resort to suicide.

The questions continue. What, for example, does a farmer plant? Most farmers' choice of crop is tightly circumscribed by the kinds of land they own, the climate, their access to markets, credit and a range of visible and invisible ingredients in the production of food. There is no moment of sucking a finger, holding it to the wind and deciding what it'd be nice to eat next year. If they're hoping to sell their crops for cash rather than eat them themselves, most farmers have few options, particularly those in the Global South (the term I use in this book to refer to the world's poorer countries).⁶ They will have to grow the crops that the market demands.

The business of farming is, at the end of the day, constrained by the playing-field of the market. What this language hides, though, is that the terrain of the market isn't so much a playing-field as a razor's edge. If there's room to make planting choices at all, they are tough decisions based on optimizing multiple parameters, with little room for error. The market punishes poor choices with penury. For farmers who are already highly indebted, this means bankruptcy. Banks and grain distributors have developed novel ways for dealing with the subsequent insolvency. Contract farming or land rental arrangements, for example, reduce farmers to providing raw labour on what used to be their own land. Old MacDonald now rents his farm. Yet farmers are willing to subject themselves to these new farming arrangements because they have so little choice. With banks wielding the threat of foreclosure, any kind of farming, even the kind of farming that asset-strips the soil, is preferable to no farming at all.

As the farmer is forced into 'choosing' among these alternatives, other options are removed as possibilities. And at the same time as the set of choices for farmers is winnowed down, others – powerful groups, corporations, governments – expand the empire of their options. At every stage of the story of food, choices are made over a

wide range of issues, from the obvious to the esoteric. Who chooses the safe levels of pesticides, and how is 'safe' defined? Who chooses what should be sourced from where in making your meal? Who decides what to pay the farmers who grow the food, or the farm workers who work for farmers? Who decides that the processing techniques used in bringing the meal together are safe? Who makes money from the additives in food and decides they do more good than harm? Who makes sure there is plenty of cheap energy to transport and assemble the ingredients from all around the world?

These choices may seem impossibly distant, so removed from our experience as food shoppers that they might as well happen on Mars. Yet the very same forces that shape farmers' choices also reach to the stacked aisles of the supermarket. Who, after all, fixes the range of items that fill the aisles in the supermarket? Who chooses how much it costs? Who spends millions of dollars to find out that the smell of baking bread and the wail of Annie Lennox in the aisles might make people buy more? Who decides that the prices in the market are higher than the poorest can afford?

Here lies the crux. The narrow abundance of the aisles, the apparently low prices at the checkout and the almost constant availability of foods, these things are our sop. 'Convenience' anaesthetizes us as consumers. We are dissuaded from asking hard questions, not only about how our individual tastes and preferences are manipulated, but about how our choices at the checkout take away the choices of those who grow our food.

About Joe

A recent report from Oxfam provides fodder for thinking about where the power lies along the chain of food production. Consider the case of Lawrence Seguya, a coffee-grower in Uganda. He puts it like this: 'I'd like you to tell people in your place that the drink they are now drinking is the cause of all our problems.'⁷ His assessment is

widely shared. Salome Kafuluzi lives on a coffee-farm with her thirteen children, and she has this to say: 'We're broke. We're not happy. We're failing in everything. We can't buy essentials. We can't have meat, fish, rice, just sweet potatoes, beans and *matoke* [a kind of green banana mash] ... We can't send the children to school.' Salome's husband, Peter, links their situation quite directly to the price of coffee: 'I remember when *kiboko* [the local term for sun-dried coffee cherry] sold for 69 cents/kg. We slept without worries. We could support our families. For me, I'd need to see a price of at least 34 cents/kg. Even at 29 cents/kg we can't look after the land.'⁸ The price at the moment is around 14 cents per kilo.

The laws of supply and demand would suggest that coffee-growers would move out of the market and do something else. This would presuppose that there is something else they can do. Too often, there isn't. The immediate result of low farm income – and this is a law to which anyone living on the breadline can attest – is a panicked self-exploitation. Rather than throwing in the towel and moving to the cities, or trying to grow something else, farmers grow *more* coffee, working themselves to exhaustion and scraping together whatever they can to be able to maintain some sort of standard of living, and sometimes, reluctantly, hurting the natural environment in a desperate bid to survive. This has resulted in a global coffee surplus of 900 million kilos. You'd think that with all that coffee floating around, we'd see the end-price of coffee go down. But there are a good few steps along the way from the fields to the bottom of the cup.

Lawrence and his family live in an area well suited to coffee – it's high-altitude, hilly terrain. This means that their land is unsuited to anything else. The choice that faces them is this: grow coffee or leave. With little else to go to, they grow coffee.

They sell to a local middleman at around 14 cents per kilo, who then takes the bag to the mill and sells it for 19 cents. The mill will process it for an additional 5 cents per kilo – which is barely enough

to keep the mill going. Mary Goreti runs the mill in Kituntu to which the coffee is brought. 'The profit margins are so small right now,' she says, 'and the electricity is so high ... We have so few people bringing *kiboko*. Some farmers are just keeping it at home because the prices are so low. If the prices stay low, the business will fail. You can't open a factory to process ten bags.'⁹ But she can't choose to do anything else with the mill but process coffee. So, for the moment, Mary chooses to keep the mill open, and the coffee is processed.

The coffee is bagged and, with a 2 cent per kilo freight cost, sent to Kampala, by which time the price has reached 26 cents. Yet the vast profits aren't being made here either. Hannington Karuhanga, a manager with Ugacof, one of the larger Ugandan coffee exporters, is happy to be making a profit of US\$10 a ton, or 1 cent on the kilo. And that's on the quality coffee – 'Some of these grades we have are not worth transporting. It would be cheaper to destroy them.' Yet transport them he does, as part of the complex dance of sorting, grading, insuring and shipping the coffee to a roaster. By the time this kilo of coffee lands up in, say, West London, where Nestlé has a coffee-processing facility, it'll cost US\$1.64 per kilo. Already, at the gates of the Nescafé factory, the cost per bag is well over ten times what the Kifuluzis or the Seguyas received for it. But here comes the big jump. By the time the coffee rolls out of the other side, the price is US\$26.40 per kilo, or nearly 200 times the cost of a kilo in Uganda.

While coffee farmers there are living off their savings, Nestlé's profits seem unstoppable. In 2005, they sold over US\$70 billion in food and beverages. With high levels of brand loyalty, and with such market dominance, Nestlé is in a position to raise the price that its growers receive. But why would it choose to do that? Nestlé isn't a charity – it's a corporation in a world of other corporations, guided by the cardinal rule of market capitalism: 'buy cheap, sell dear'. By virtue of its size, Nestlé can dictate the terms of supply to its growers, millers, exporters and importers, and each is being squeezed dry. If the coffee industry in Uganda goes belly up, that's

OK. Vietnam has been brought into the world market by the World Bank, and they're turning out bags of coffee cheaper than anyone else. So wherever coffee is grown, farmers are struggling, pitted against one another across vast distances by the international market in coffee, with few if any choices about the future. Meanwhile, farmers who try to increase their share of the price find themselves facing the might of the food industry. Ethiopian farmers recently applied to turn their signature coffee bean names – Sidamo, Harar and Yirgacheffe – into trademarks, a move that might increase their share of the revenue by 25 per cent. They were opposed almost instantly by Starbucks, a company with an annual turnover equal to three-quarters that of Ethiopia. It is a fight that continues as this book goes to press.¹⁰

Large corporations are very reluctant to cede their control over the food system. Yet, Nestlé, Starbucks and every other food system corporation have a rock-solid alibi: us. In the name of consumers, and 'consumer freedom', wages are kept low and opportunities for farmers to increase their income are stymied. And, the thing is, it works. At my local Pick and Pay Supermarket in Durban, South Africa, there are 107 different kinds of coffee on sale, from a chicory blend to the freshest dark roast, across 15 feet of shelf space dominated by Nestlé. It's a very dark plenitude.

An Hourglass Figure

There is a superabundance of coffee farmers and coffee drinkers, there are many millers, and a good few exporters. But there's a bottleneck in the distribution chain, and what goes for coffee also works for a range of other foods. At some stages in the chain that links field to plate, power is concentrated in very few hands. If there had to be a picture or two showing where power is concentrated in the way food is grown and sold, figure 1.1 would do the trick. The first figure shows aggregated data from the Netherlands, Germany,

France, UK, Austria and Belgium. The second shows similar but not entirely comparable data from the United States. The numbers need to be taken with a pinch of salt. For instance, the total number of farmers who grow food for Europeans and North Americans is far higher than indicated here. After all, millions of farmers and farmworkers, growing all kinds of tropical fruits and vegetables for export, live *outside* the wealthiest countries in the world.

As far as power is concerned, the bottleneck is the central clue. Somehow, we've ended up at a world with a few corporate buyers and sellers. The process of shipping, processing and trucking food across distances demands a great deal of capital – you need to be rich to play this game. It is also a game that has economies of scale. This means that the bigger a company is, and the more transport and logistics it does, the cheaper it is for that company to be in the business. There are, after all, no mom-and-pop international food distribution companies. The small fish have been devoured by the Leviathans of distribution and supply. And when the number of companies controlling the gateways from farmers to consumers is small, this gives them market power both over the people who grow the food *and* the people who eat it.

One measure of the power wielded by these 'bottleneck corporations' is the size of the industry, and of the biggest players in it. The retailers turned over US\$3.5 trillion in 2004, the seed-sellers US\$31 billion a year, the agrochemical industry in 2004 sold US\$35 billion,¹¹ food-processors' revenue was US\$1.25 trillion.¹² (Just for comparison's sake, the total GDP of Canada in 2005 was US\$1.1 trillion.)¹³ If the output of these industries feels a little rich, the US\$240 billion a year global weight loss industry is happy to help. And for those countries unable to find enough to eat, well, the US\$2 billion food aid industry can step in there too. (And that doesn't factor in the oil industry that stands behind them.¹⁴) Meanwhile, those who can afford to consume are left with calories too cheap to meter.¹⁵

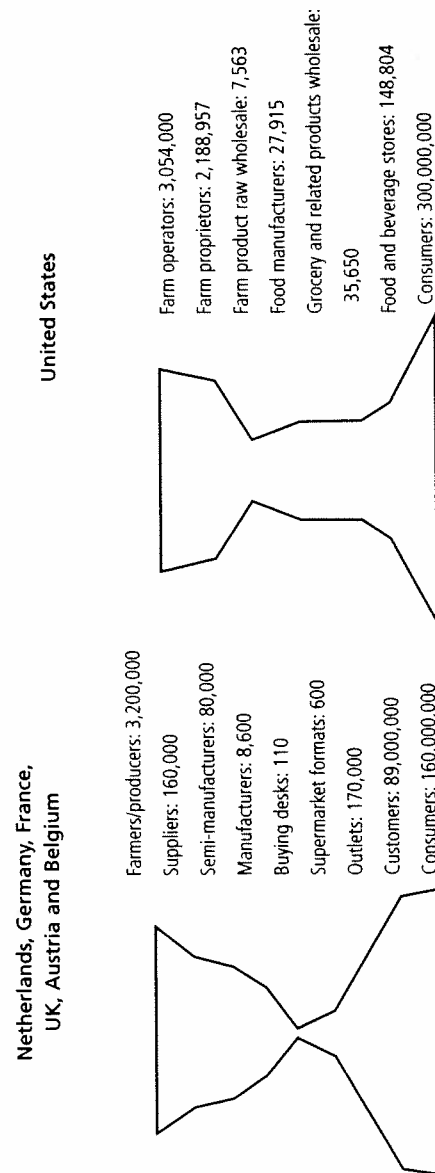


Figure 1.1: The hourglasses: the concentration of power and players in the food system (source: Grievink 2003, US Census 2000, USDA 2007).

The giants in the corporate food system are big enough that they don't have to play by the rules. They can tilt the playing field. At home and at venues such as the World Trade Organization, these corporations lobby governments for an economic environment conducive to their activities. Trade agreements are one among many routes through which governments help the corporations at the waist of the food system hourglass. Other support is available too. If an overseas investment seems a bit risky, a public-funded export credit agency or perhaps the World Bank can help shoulder the risk directly, or persuade a country to underwrite the risk itself. If a country refuses to accept a particular product on grounds of health, safety or environmental concerns, direct diplomatic pressure can be applied.¹⁶

Against accusations that they are merely selling favours to the highest bidder, governments have gone to great lengths to ensure that interventions in the food system can be seen as functioning in the national interest. Often, these views are genuinely held by the people who provide governmental support, and the public undoubtedly benefited from initiatives such as the US New Deal, the European welfare state and the Indian Public Distribution system. Yet governments' motives are rarely pure. Governmental concerns about poverty, for example, have historically been driven by fear, not least because of their concerns of what large groups of politically organized, angry and hungry urban poor people might do to the urban rich. In the UK, back at the beginning of the twentieth century, Cecil Rhodes was a passionate advocate of colonialism as a means to hush the speeches of angry workers on street corners who wanted for bread.¹⁷ And, in different ways, the countries of Europe and North America set their food policies in order to ensure that the cries of the urban hungry didn't lead to civil war.

To put it slightly differently, the current food system isn't an arrangement dropped from the sky. It's a compromise between different demands and anxieties, of corporations pushing for higher

profit in food, of governments concerned with social unrest or, occasionally, a drubbing at the polls, and of urban consumers. Written out of this story are the rural communities, who seem to be suffering silently. And yet it is they who are leading the way in forging a new and different food system. They do it out of necessity, for they are dying.

Ways of Being Free

To none do countryside elegies sound flatter than to people in dying rural communities. As lands have fallen before the banks, repossessed and repurposed, suicide rates for farmers across the world have soared. Yet farmers and the dispossessed are not going quietly. There have always been, and continue to be, rebels. The food system is a battlefield, though few realize quite how many casualties there have been. While consumers have been only recently wrestling with the problems of how to eat well, farmers have long been fighting against the vanishing of their freedoms, and their battle continues today. From the ten-million-strong Karnataka State Farmers' Association (Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha or KRRS) in India, to the *campesinos* (translated as 'peasant' but without the pejorative association in English) in and from Mexico – there's a fistful of organizations not only fighting against this food system, and sometimes dying in protest, but building alternatives to it, and living in dignity.

Farmers' groups in the US, India and Mexico, for example, have taken their grievances about low prices from their fields to the barricades outside the World Trade Organization, or to the offices of companies that end up buying the fruits of their labour, like Taco Bell, or to the offices of the corporations who profit from the sale of seeds and pesticides, like the Monsanto Company, or to the governments which have abetted rural privation.

In Brazil, over one million landless people have organized and

occupied disused farmland. As a result, they are living healthier, longer and better-educated lives than those in comparable schemes elsewhere. The members of this movement, the Brazilian Landless Rural Workers Movement, are part of arguably the world's largest independent social movement organization – La Via Campesina (The Peasant Way),¹⁸ representing as many as 150 million people worldwide.¹⁹ Incorporating groups from the KRRS, with an estimated membership of twenty million in India, to the National Farmers Union in Canada, the Korean Women Farmers Association, the *Confédération Paysanne* in France and the *União Nacional de Camponeses* in Mozambique, it's nearly as globalized as the forces against which it ranges itself. It's a mixed bag of movements. Some of its members are landless, some own land and hire the landless; some are small producers, some are medium-sized. What counts as a small farm in Canada is an estate in India. Clearly not all farmers are equal, and neither are their social organizations.²⁰ Even within countries, there are important differences. In the US, for example, black farmers have consistently had it harder than white. One of the largest anti-discrimination lawsuits was settled in 1999 by the US Department of Agriculture, in restitution for the consistent and ongoing discrimination against black farmers in the disbursement of federal funding for farmers.²¹ As of 2006, many of those farmers had yet to see compensation from the federal government.²²

In the places where they fight, each movement confronts specific conditions, constraints, opposition and arms. Yet they are able to unite around a common understanding of the international food system – the view that informs this book. These movements don't restrict themselves to joint analytical work. They are also able to come together in action, in complex and sophisticated ways. When the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami struck farmers and fishing communities in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, the movement was there helping them to rebuild.²³

As the hourglass shows, though, the food system doesn't just put

farmers at the blunt end of abuses of power. Consumers are also subject to the market power of corporations. Of course, as consumers our position is slightly different – as consumers we can shape the market, however slightly, by taking our wallets elsewhere. But the choice between Coke and Pepsi is a pop freedom – it's choice lite. Community organizations are fighting back for a deeper kind of choice. The ways such organizations have tried to reimagine our choices range from the creation of alternative food distribution mechanisms for people of colour, such as the Peoples' Grocery in Oakland, California, to the struggle to redefine what food means, as the gastronomic grammarians at the Slow Food movement are trying to do. Groups around the world have been trying to broaden the food system to give back the choices that have been taken away from the people who grow, and the people who eat.

Of course, no group is without contradiction. There is no pure ideology made flesh, no holier-than-thou land in which resistance is perfect and untrammelled. We all make our politics with the tools we have at hand, in the places we find them. And I've made choices in presenting the politics I have in this book. There are social movements that want to turn back the clock – that are ready to funnel rural discontent towards conservative chauvinism and xenophobia. So, no mention in this book of the traditions of rural radicalism that have, for instance, generated the Ku Klux Klan.²⁴ The history of movements for 'pure food' aren't unsullied either. The British Soil Association, for example, provided agricultural advice to the British Union of Fascists in the 1930s, both being keen on the purity of blood and soil.²⁵ The wish of environmentalists to imagine a pristine environment and pure food, without any farmers or immigrants on the land, isn't only a European failing. The Sierra Club in the US has also been riven by worries over whether immigrants belong on the horizon, or beneath it.²⁶

Instead, this book examines the fights over the food system that have a bent towards a politics of internationalism, ones with vistas

as wide as the corporate globalization that they fight and shape and supplant, movements that can embrace migrants rather than lynch them. Despite the despair in the fields, such movements exist, and are binding themselves to one another through gifts of seeds, of culture and of practical successes. These movements aren't just the 'alternative' at the end of the desolate story. They're the constant reminder, throughout, that choices are there to be made, and to be imagined. Not just choices to turn back the clock, but to imagine something new. This can only happen after a cold look at where we are now, and at what has failed.

The Menu of Chapters

This book travels the length of the world food system, beginning with choices made in the fields and ending with the choices that are made for our palates. In the course of this book, I look at some of the ways the food system is shaped by farming communities, corporations, governments, consumers, activists and movements. The sum of these choices has left many stuffed and many starved, with people at both ends of the food system obese and impoverished, and with a handful of the system's architects extremely wealthy. Sometimes, the choices produce new ways of being free, and of connecting with one another, and the world around us. Sometimes, the choices are desolate. The next chapter examines farmer suicides, and the forces that are destroying rural communities across the planet. From the city, it is hard to see the violence in the countryside, both physical and economic, to which rural communities have been subjected. In the city, we see the effects of rural devastation through migration, both domestic and international. Chapter 3 takes stock of this migration, and situates it in a discussion of one of the most powerful instruments of modern rural change – the trade treaty.

The history of trade agreements is bound up with that of food

aid, development and insurrection, and chapter 4 discusses the evolution of the global food system in the aftermath of the Second World War. The food system was designed to redistribute just enough to keep it stable, but the needs of the world's poorest have never been foremost in its design. Chapter 5 scrutinizes the food system's major winners, agribusiness corporations, and chapter 6 shows how their rise to power has used ideas of race, science and development to further their control over the very source of life: seed. On the way, national histories have been rewritten, to suggest that no other choice could have been made. Chapter 7 gives a concrete example of how all these forces have come together in one of the most important crops on the planet's surface: soybeans. An increasing number of us, however, meet the food system not in its fields or factories, but in its emporia of choice, and chapter 8 discusses the supermarket, the newest and now most powerful agribusiness. Chapter 9 asks how our tastes are sculpted, and how the food system constrains us not as consumers, but as people living in the world. The final chapter suggests that there are ways to reclaim our sovereignty, to become more than just consumers, by reconfiguring the food system and rewriting the relations of power that exploit people both in growing, and in eating. There are no guarantees that the hard tasks of living differently will succeed. But unless we choose to try, we are certain to fail.