

Padkos follow up: Raj Patel “Crises in the Food Commons”

Especially for those who couldn't be here for Raj Patel's great talk on “Crises in the Food Commons” during March, we have uploaded a series of video excerpts at www.churchland.org.za

Background



Raj is a writer, academic and activist. He has degrees from Oxford University, the London School of Economics and Cornell University, and is both a Visiting Scholar at UC Berkeley's Center for African Studies, and is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in Durban, South Africa. He is the author of *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System*, and the New York Times and international bestseller, *The Value of Nothing*. He was recently hosted in Pietermaritzburg by the Church Land Programme to address issues of food sovereignty and food rebellions. (rajpatel.org)

Clip 1: Food rebellion as revolution's kindling

Growing hunger and inequality create fertile ground for rupture and political rebellion by the poor. Patel traces some of the origins of the recent upsurge of popular power against oppression and injustice in North Africa to an Algerian food rebellion – and points to South African research that demonstrates how similar conditions are being created here too.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8S4UpC8EYU>

Clip 2: The origins and politics of Food Sovereignty

Patel outlines the emergence of La Via Campesina – the global movement of landless, peasants, and small farmers. Formed in angry reaction against the 'representation' of the rural by development NGOs, La Via Campesina organised and connected those movements actually struggling for life and dignity in rural areas. They articulated a politics of “food sovereignty”, explicitly against the notion of 'food security' which stripped struggles of the landless and small-scale farmers of all its political content – as Patel remarks: “You can be 'food secure' in prison!”. By contrast, food sovereignty is inherently political, democratic and open-ended.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTP6Yi-H2_k

Clip 3: Food Sovereignty principles

Since it is inherently political and democratic, the praxis of working out 'food sovereignty' must always be specific and open-ended – but that doesn't mean it is without principles. Patel explores one key principle to have emerged in the struggles for food sovereignty, namely a principled position to end all violence against women. To illustrate, he takes us to Malawi, heralded by the mainstream as the locus of a new 'Green Revolution' in Malawi but where increased crop yields (in the short-term anyway) have worsened child nutrition indicators because the yield simply increased the labour demands on women and mothers!

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_NFT0zirKI

Clip 4: How the World Bank works – lessons from John Cleese

The World Bank, and its imposition of 'structural adjustment' on debtor economies, was key in creating the conditions of rural catastrophe against which food sovereignty struggles are waged. Raj reckons the best way to understand how the Bank works is a scene from the Terry Gilliam & John Cleese film, “Time Bandits” – which Patel recounts to great effect!

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lf8cJqr_ko

Clip 5: **World Bank in Africa**

Patel sketches the 'logic' and consequences of the rural/agricultural 'development' model for Africa – and highlights the role of NGOs complicit in the ensuing assault.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIH9TLMivlw>

Clip 6: **“Feeding the poor” – lessons from the Black Panthers movement**

In the present US situation there is state-approved pressure on those involved in food-related work with the poor to 'feed the poor'. Patel says this makes it important to “infuse the food debate with a radical edge” - and suggests there's much to learn from the history of the Black Panther movement and its political thinking about food provisioning for the poor. Food programmes within the Black Panthers were understood politically in terms of mobilising, organising and 'survival pending revolution'. This prevented their work from degenerating into dependency and welfarism but instead helped imagine the food issue is an issue of the commons.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XoFFvUbAHnU>

Clip 7: **Black Panthers, women and change**

Continuing to share insight from some new research into the history of the Black Panthers, Patel explores issues of gender oppression and modes of praxis for transformation that emerged in that struggle.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vyr_YY5CSKs

Clip 8: **Is hunger a crisis of food production?**

Elite mainstream responses strip real politics out of the equation and present the food crisis, in Malthusian fashion, as a problem of production (and 'overpopulation'). Patel shows how 'solutions' can then be framed in terms of technology and markets – effectively reproducing the underlying crisis.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uU1_LiKD4js

Clip 9: **Golden Rice**

One good illustration of the insanity of corporate-led 'technology and markets' (non)solutions is the story of genetically-modified 'golden rice' punted in Asia.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dv5XnAYCPjo>

Clip 10: **Walmart solves hunger crisis?**

Another illustration of the dead-end solutions framed by the dominant political and economic interests – Patel recounts how Michelle Obama recently praised cheap food from Walmart in the face of growing hunger among growing numbers of poor Americans.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIsPdDoKNSA>

Clip 11: **The commons for real solutions**

Picking up a thread woven throughout his talk, as well as questions from participants, Patel argues that real solutions lie in thinking and acting now to re-claim, re-build, and re-imagine the idea of the commons – including active processes of land occupation and redistribution through organised movements of the poor.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U83UdN_xM-0

Clip 12: **From the Nanny State to the Daddy State**

A participant suggests that the leftist mantra, that neoliberalism invariably means 'rolling back the state', is itself over-stated and that, in fact, the state is deeply implicated in 'development by force'. Patel extends the idea to reflect on the role of powerful donors and philanthropy as new forms of force and violence.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkzXzrsCtKw>