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REVIEW ESSAY

Can Shopping Save the World? And if Not, What Can?

Andrew Szasz, *Shopping Our Way to Safety: How We Changed from Protecting the Environment to Protecting Ourselves*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, 323 pp.

Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System*, Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2007, 398 pp.

Andrew Szasz has produced a richly insightful book with relevance not only to environmental politics and the study of American politics, but also the sociology of everyday life in the United States. In addition to providing a provocative argument about how the environmental movement in the United States lost its way, *Shopping Our Way to Safety* functions variously as a primer on the threats to human health from contaminated water, unsafe food, and dirty air, an up-to-date assessment of green consumerism, and an on-target critique of suburbanization in the United States.

The central aim of Szasz's book is to critique what he terms "inverted quarantine" responses to the threats of modern life. The inverted quarantine approach attempts to cope with the reality of dirty water and unsafe food not through participation in collective action aimed at effectively regulating or eliminating environmental threats, but through individualized responses that seek to protect one's self from risk without addressing the ongoing threat itself.

Szasz uses two macrolevel examples to illustrate this concept. The first is the panicked rush in 1961 (triggered by a speech of President Kennedy) to protect one's household in the event of nuclear war. The fallout shelter craze was plainly irrational for two reasons: first, such shelters would do little good in the case of an actual nuclear war, given that survivors would emerge from shelters to a totally different, unimaginably unpleasant world. Second, the shelter craze encouraged a sense of fatalism, rather than constructive steps to reduce or eliminate the risk of nuclear war.

Szasz counts it as a success story that Americans eventually did stop building the shelters and moved toward détente with the Soviet Union. Rejecting an individualized response to a collective problem helped facilitate a more constructive political response, one that rejected the very idea of an acceptable nuclear war.

The case of suburbanization in the United States provides a more disturbing example. Drawing adeptly on the literature on suburban sprawl, Szasz describes the process of suburbanization as an effort by individuals and households to evade the problems associated with central cities and construct a comfortable cocoon in suburbia, with safe streets, good public schools, and relatively homogenous neighbors. Szasz also points out that this sort of spatial setting, once established, helps reinforce conservative political attitudes. Unlike the case of

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fallout shelters, however, Americans have yet to reject the logic of suburbanization and the desire to use spatial separation to avoid long-standing social problems. The result is a continued worsening of social conditions and the lack of an adequate political and social movement capable of addressing those conditions.

This line of argumentation is interesting and important in itself, but the heart of Szasz's book is his analysis of how "inverted quarantine" works with respect to three goods consumed by each of us every day: water, food, and air. In each case, Szasz reviews relevant scientific literature demonstrating the reality of widespread environmental risk and harms associated with these goods. Tap water really might be dangerous, especially as our pipe infrastructure ages, not simply because water quality sometimes fails to meet existing standards but because those standards (and the underlying logic of regulating one substance at a time) are often inadequate. Conventionally grown food often contains pesticides. Many Americans still live in areas in which air pollution exceeds federal standards, and indoor air pollution is a serious problem.

The logic of the inverted quarantine response to these real threats is to attempt to buy one's way out of trouble. The most clear-cut case of this phenomenon is the spectacular increase in bottled water consumption since the 1970s, marketed heavily as a "pure" alternative to presumably polluted tap water. While the industry later began pushing water as a healthy alternative to sodas and other sugared beverages, widespread belief that tap water is contaminated has been the driving force behind the industry's growth.

The catch, however, is that consumers are not necessarily getting a "purer" product when they drink bottled water. The industry is inadequately regulated and tests regularly turn up the presence of various contaminants. Moreover, whatever health benefits drinking bottled water provides must be weighed against the enormous environmental costs associated with the production and eventual disposal of billions of plastic bottles.

Inverted quarantine responses do not always lead to environmental harm, however. Szasz points to the contrasting case of organic food. Like bottled water, the organic food industry is booming, with small off-beat health food cooperatives now overshadowed by the expanding presence of corporate suppliers and retailers of "organic" or "healthy" food. Szasz uses industry data to show that only a minority of consumers of organic food are themselves motivated by a deep concern for the environment; most are simply looking for a safer and healthier product for themselves. Even so, Szasz thinks (unlike with bottled water) we can count the rise of organic agriculture as a positive environmental development.

That positive development, however, has serious costs for the environment, more broadly conceived. The crux of Szasz's critique of inverted quarantine responses is that they undercut political demand for more serious and effective regulation of environmental risk. Here Szasz deploys class analysis and the classic political science concept of issue saliency. The most affluent, well-educated, and politically influential Americans are precisely those likely to invest in green, healthy, organic, natural products, to protect their own health. But doing so reduces these persons' interest in tackling society-wide environmental problems, and makes environmental risks seem less urgent. Because an individualistic buy-out and protection of one's self alternative is available to the best educated, best-informed, and most active voters, the political saliency of environmental issues

remains low. Many Americans are concerned about the environment, but few make it their top political priority.

Szasz also points out that inverted quarantine responses cannot succeed on their own terms: not all "healthy" products have the promised effects, and it would be prohibitively costly even for fairly affluent consumers to eliminate all risks by buying more and more "green" or "natural" products. Moreover, even in theory some important goods such as clean air and a stable global climate cannot be obtained by inverted quarantine strategies.

A fundamental task of the modern environmental movement, then, must be to challenge the rejection of social interdependency implicit in consumerist responses to environmental threat, and to insist that responses to these threats must be collective in nature.

This is an interesting and important argument. Some political scientists may not be satisfied that Szasz has really demonstrated a causal link between individuals pursuing inverted quarantine strategies and lowered political concern for the environment. Nor does Szasz sufficiently consider the possibility that less individualistic forms of green consumerism might be a gateway into a more robust environmentalism.

Beyond this, the alternative direction Szasz points us toward is not sufficiently clear. Szasz calls for a much tougher regulatory regime that would hold producers of toxics to much higher standards. But surely the inverted quarantine "mentalité" (as Szasz terms it) is not the only obstacle to that goal: so too is direct resistance from affected corporate interests. Indeed, there is room for Szasz to develop his argument further by emphasizing to a greater extent the role corporate interests—both within the "healthy" products industries and more generally—have in promoting and encouraging individualistic responses to environmental harms and what Szasz calls "political anesthesia."

To be sure, Szasz cannot be accused of blithe optimism. He believes the forces (including widening inequality) driving inverted quarantine responses are deep and will be difficult to reverse. The powerful deconstruction Szasz offers of why strategies predicated on buying our ways to environmental safety cannot work and should be considered the antithesis of good green politics is an important contribution, however. For teachers of environmental politics, this is an almost perfect text for challenging the assumptions and deepening the analysis of students who may regard themselves as environmentalists simply because of their conscientious shopping habits.

Raj Patel's book *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System* shares two of the principal goals of Szasz's book. Like Szasz, Patel decries the lack of political engagement of most Americans and seeks to illustrate some of the costs of that disengagement. Likewise, Patel also uses a key phenomenon of everyday life in which everyone has an interest—food—as a launching pad for a far-reaching political argument.

Stuffed and Starved is written for a more popular audience, and is chock full of interesting stories and lively prose. Patel's thesis is radical and direct: the overwhelming control of the world's food system by large corporate entities is bad both for producers (especially in the developing world) and for consumers, including in the United States.

The central metaphor of the book is presented in the introduction with a diagram of two hourglasses depicting the "concentration of power and players in

the food system" in Europe and the United States. At the wide ends of the glasses are many producers and many consumers. In between, at the narrow part of the glass, are a much smaller number of food manufacturers and retailers. Food manufacturing in turn is dominated by a relatively small number of large corporations with immense market and political power.

The book's succeeding chapters offer not so much a sustained argument as a series of analytic snapshots at particular aspects of the world food system. (Most of the chapters are readable as stand-alone pieces.) Chapter two starts with an investigation into the rising phenomenon of rural suicides worldwide, and links deteriorating rural conditions to the neoliberal, "free trade" policies of the last two decades. Chapters three and four examine the impact of that trade regime on farmers and agricultural workers in the United States and Mexico and use English tea-drinking habits to tell the history of colonialism and its transformation into neoliberalism. Subsequent chapters detail the power of corporate food conglomerates, document the dubious legacy of the Green Revolution, examine the worldwide soy industry, tell the history of the supermarket, and explore the causes of obesity in rich countries.

The strongest parts of Patel's book come in his descriptions of numerous important social movements aimed at challenging corporate control of food. The landless worker movement in Brazil, the Indian state of Kerala, the antihunger initiatives of the Black Panthers in Oakland, community supported agriculture and the contemporary "slow food" movement all (among others) receive appreciative attention from Patel.

Building on discussion of these alternatives, in the final chapter Patel offers a ten-point program to promote what he terms "food sovereignty." The key analytic point here is that Patel believes movements should not aim simply at consumer protection or settle for *ad hoc* "fair trade" arrangements. Rather, Patel argues that we should seek a root-and-branch overhaul of the world food system. This means altering not just consumption—though Patel is admirably clear in saying that consumer preferences in the United States need to change—but also production. In an overhauled food system, consumers would be reconnected with (mostly local) producers, cutting out corporate intermediaries and making it possible for agriculture to provide decent livelihoods to farmers and workers while also moving in an ecologically sustainable direction.

Taken as a whole, Patel has provided a compelling brief against corporate control of food. Like Szasz, Patel stops short of the next logical step of linking the problems with corporate control of food to the structure of capitalism itself. Nonetheless, the sort of food system Patel calls for and the principles he endorses, as well as the practical alternatives he celebrates, all point in the direction of a fundamental reorganization of production. But Patel deliberately leaves open-ended the question of whether this reorganization needs to involve collective forms of ownership, smaller scale private ownership, or some blend thereof.

Academic readers looking for a detailed examination of the nuts and bolts of the corporate food system, or a technical analysis of the causes of the recent world food crisis, may be slightly disappointed by *Stuffed and Starved*. Patel's aims are to illustrate the larger logic of the system, sometimes in rather broad strokes, and to show that practical alternatives to that system are plausible and in fact being practiced.

From a pedagogical point of view, using food to illustrate the profound inequalities of the global economic order is a brilliant strategy to point readers and students toward a systemic analysis of the economic system under which they live. Undergraduates and general readers have much to learn from this book, not only about food, and not only about neoliberalism and its history, but also about possibilities for advancing radical social change by changing our relationship to food, here and now. This is a book that will broaden readers' political and sociological imaginations, in multiple directions.

Indeed, if Szasz's book illustrates the dangers when citizens are incapable of thinking sociologically and respond to shared harms and risks in an individualized manner, Patel's book offers a richer version of what a vibrant alternative to the inverted quarantine might look like: not simply better government regulation of production, but altering the nature of food production itself, and in the course of doing so, changing the way we live.

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