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— Raj Patel

HUNGRY FOR CHANGE

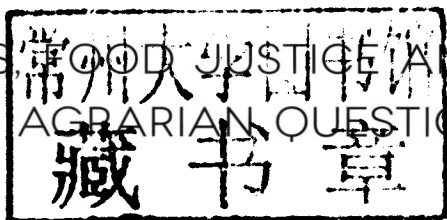
FARMERS, FOOD JUSTICE AND
THE AGRARIAN QUESTION

A. HAROON AKRAM-LODHI



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During the course of writing this book I lost my mother, Dorothy Miller Osborne Stewart. From her I learned that our purpose is to give of ourselves, with conviction and integrity, in order to make this world what it is capable of being. From her I learned that social justice is not an option — it is the future. To her, I dedicate this book.

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THE ARGUMENT

This book explains how the creation, structure and operation of the capitalist world food system is marginalizing family farmers, small-scale peasant farmers and landless rural workers as it entrenches a global subsistence crisis. It also shows how, on the margins of that crisis, an alternative future is not only being envisioned but is being built by movements of people.

The book starts by laying out the crude numbers that express the dimensions of the global subsistence crisis: almost a billion people chronically malnourished, another billion people always unsure from where their next meal will come, 500 million that are clinically obese and 1.5 billion people that are overweight.

Chapter 1 describes how, in the contemporary global food regime, entitlements to food require money, a fundamental historical change that sustains the insecurity of contemporary access to food. Yet money and markets in access to food have been around for time immemorial: what is now different?

Chapter 2 uses a number of stories to show that family farmers and small-scale peasants live and work in an economic system that compels them to make certain decisions and that when they fail to meet the dictates of that system they are forced to quit. That economic system is capitalism, and in the last three centuries it has transformed food provisioning and farm production. To understand how, the “agrarian question” is introduced: whether or not capital and capitalist relations of production are or are not transforming agriculture, and if so, how. This transformation occurs by dispossessing farmers through outright displacement from the land or through the advent of marked differences in rural wealth.

Chapter 3 explains how this transformation began to be engineered in the developing capitalist countries. Small-scale peasant farmers around the world were drawn into the world’s first global food regime, which reconfigured rural landscapes and farming systems to produce large quantities of food for export in rigged markets. This created food-based deprivation because peasant farmers needed money and therefore had to sell their crops.

Peasants resisted their incorporation into a global food regime, and Chapter 4 tells the story of this resistance as the peasant wars of the twentieth century sought to overthrow social structures by introducing pro-poor redistributive land reform. Yet socialist and capitalist land reform as it was introduced around the world failed to meet the aspirations of the peasantry, and indeed often increased the control of land by the rural elite. As such,

the processes by which capitalist markets and capitalism were transforming farming and agriculture to the detriment of the peasantry was in fact broadly accelerated in many places and spaces. This anti-peasant bias was reinforced by “Green Revolution” agricultural technologies that were designed to increase farm productivity per unit of land.

As explained in Chapter 5, these technologies were developed in the 1940s, applied in the 1950s and 1960s, and resulted in dramatic increases in farm yields between the mid-1960s and 1980s. However, the Green Revolution did not alleviate the increasing insecurity of peasant livelihoods in many places. No: reinforced by externally-mandated processes of economic “adjustment” the Green Revolution contributed to the ongoing and deepening differences in wealth and inequality evident across developing capitalist countries as capitalist relations of production spread through agriculture, and peasant populations, increasingly displaced from their land, were forced to migrate into urban slums. More recent efforts to use biotechnologies to bring about a “gene revolution” has the same potential to further deepen entrenched rural inequality and sustain the ongoing capitalist transformation of agriculture.

In Chapter 6 the contrasting story of two farms is used to explore the predatory role of the capitalist state in establishing a global food regime that undermined peasant and family farming in many countries, to the benefit of the large-scale capitalist farms and industrial agriculture that has consolidated its dominant position in the world food system over the last seventy-five years. The United States in particular has used its hegemonic position to suture together a contemporary global food regime that has dispossessed through displacement and differentiation small-scale farmers around the world, organizing and configuring a global food regime that is dominated by transnational agro-food capital, most particularly supermarkets.

This process is illustrated in Chapter 7, which shows how transnational agro-food capital has transformed societies in order to construct export-oriented agricultures, but in ways that deepen the global subsistence crisis.

Chapter 8 offers two contrasting visions of a way out of this crisis, namely the continued deepening of capitalism in agriculture advocated by the World Bank, or food sovereignty, which is advocated by the global peasant movement *La Vía Campesina*. The World Bank’s vision reiterates and indeed accelerates the very processes that created the global subsistence crisis while it is suggested that behind food sovereignty lie some dilemmas that must be tackled.

So, in Chapter 9, a series of propositions are elaborated in order to show the types of changes that are needed to construct a people- and community-centred, climate-friendly, local and sustainable food system that produces abundant, nutritious, culturally appropriate and tasty food using low impact

agroecological principles that work to conserve the environment. An alternative food regime is possible, and answering the agrarian question of our times and eliminating the global subsistence crisis is possible — and now — but it will require transcending capitalist social relations in farming and agriculture and instead uniting diverse food movements around an agrarian alternative that, in meeting the need for food justice, meets the aspirations of global consumers, family farmers and peasants.

“FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD!”

DIMENSIONS OF THE GLOBAL SUBSISTENCE CRISIS

The world faces a calamity of historically unprecedented proportions. The planet produces enough food to feed ten billion people — enough for the world’s population when it peaks around 2050 (Patel 2011). Yet almost a billion people are, day in and day out, chronically malnourished, and another billion people are always under the immanent existential threat of not knowing for sure where their next meal is coming from (Provost 2012). The result: every seven seconds a child under five dies somewhere because they have not had enough to eat (Sheeran 2009). This obscene, brutal picture has another side to it: the 500 million around the world who are clinically obese, the 1.5 billion people who are overweight and the astonishing acceleration in the last fifteen years of type 2 diabetes in developed and developing capitalist countries, a potentially life-threatening disease commonly associated with an unhealthy sugar-intensive diet (World Health Organization 2011). There is plenty of food to go around; and yet we see the particularly paradoxical combination of too many not getting enough of any food and too many getting too much of the wrong sort of food. Something is wrong.

There’s more though. The vast majority of those that do not get enough to eat live in the countryside and work, for the most part, as small-scale peasant farmers or landless waged labourers (International Fund for Agricultural Development 2011). That’s right: in the vortex that is contemporary chronic poverty, people in the countryside are the hungriest. Half the planet’s population of seven billion lives in the countryside. Of these, more than three billion rely on small amounts of land — typically, two hectares or less (Food and Agriculture Organization 2002). Using land that very often they have to rent because they do not own it, using family members to work that land and using small amounts of basic tools and equipment such as hoes and sickles, such small-scale peasant farmers have to cultivate arable land, either in settled farming or the slash-and-burn techniques of shifting cultivation, and prosper

or go hungry on the basis of whether the land, after meeting their costs, provides them with enough farm produce so that the family can maintain a rudimentary standard of living and, if possible, some farm produce that can be stockpiled as a surplus, to be sold or saved for future use.

With so many going hungry, many small-scale peasant farmers do not prosper; they do not live an idyllic, romanticized rural life, for such a life is a populist myth; their lives are harsh, harrowing and short, and they are continually hammered by forces outside their control. Nor do peasants live in surroundings where all are united in their trying circumstances: in trying to get land, they may have to deal with landlords, whose control of land attunes their power over the impoverished; in trying to sell farm produce, they may have to deal with traders, whose mastery of the complex calculus of markets conveys a power that can wreak havoc upon those without; and in trying, when necessary, to work for others because they do not have a stockpile of food, they may have to accept what is offered by stubbornly tight-fisted employers whose ability to offer a job gives them power. Small-scale peasant farmers live in communities riddled with and permeated by a Faustian bargain of notoriously incorrigible inequalities.

These razor-sharp differences can also be found within communities, between small-scale peasant farmers who can appear, to the untrained eye, to look fairly equal. Of course, whether you are a man or a woman, whether you are younger or older, whether you are closer or more distantly related and whether you are on good or bad terms with local leaders: all continually collide to effect your position in your community, the character of the transactions that you undertake with others and the content and meaning of the culture within which you live. But differences can go much deeper. Having microcosmic stocks of basic tools and equipment as well as the labour-power of family members, small-scale peasants have to work, in a sense, as both a petty capitalist of little consequence and as a worker with little control. Trying to do both, within the complicated intricacies of a convoluted and often contradictory set of social and economic conditions, brings with it a set of Byzantine challenges. Most are not up to the task: needing to get essentials that they do not produce, they have to navigate the murky waters of ruthlessly arbitrary markets as both petty capitalist and worker, and only a few are able to solve the hard equations that define the incessantly confusing choices that have to be made. For the rest, the inexhaustible and continual judgments of the market are coldly and vigorously enforced: a continuum of polarizing processes both recapitulates and reconfigures the landscapes of the social and economic circumstances within which their all too human condition so often unhappily resides.

Incredibly, landless rural workers have it worse: lacking the existential security provided by trivial stocks of tools and equipment or access to land,

landless rural workers face the never-ending appetites of the “endlessly franchised petty exploitation” (Davis 2006) that permeates the daily drudgery that, if they are lucky, they get from employers ranging from rapacious landlords all the way down to micro-entrepreneurs. In lurid and often dangerous working conditions they are forced to creatively improvise in order to survive on the knife-edge of subsistence. Many enter into the compulsorily forced exodus that is migration to the cities; and, of course, many do not survive at all.

Here’s the rub, though: in a world where some with plenty of food cruelly collide with many that have a pittance, the way in which those have plenty is inextricably threatening those with a pittance. That’s right: the way that we get our food is considerably exacerbating the increasingly dense difficulties faced by small-scale peasant farmers and landless rural workers, because the way that we get our food is directly strengthening the multiple and convoluted processes that virulently marginalize the food insecure and deepen the extent of the food-based inequality that permeates the globe. We are witnessing an unparalleled betrayal of a fundamental human right — the right to food — that is ceaselessly crushing the rural poor. There has never been anything like it.

Imagining a future that can be found in the interstices of the present, where the abandonment of the disempowered is not so, this book explains the duplicitous conditions confronting small-scale peasants and landless rural workers. This explanation is not just done to enlighten the reader, for the current crisis demands more; it is done to map out a path by which the alternative future that I envisage here could be built. The alternative future is not just presented out of a sense of the need for justice, but is also presented out of a sense that the particular and specific horror that is contemporary rural hunger cannot continue: the human and ecological misery that endlessly erupts from the way we get our food is the ground zero of a threat that is, as I write, irresistibly undermining our very existence as a species. There is a possibility of hope, but the world cannot continue as an acutely vicious latter-day Dickensian poorhouse, with hungry children like Oliver Twist knowing that while there is a momentous abundance of “food, glorious food,” they have to go to Mr. Bumble and beg, “Please sir, can I have some more?,” only to be silenced by his apoplectic rage. The world is hungry for change; indeed, it demands it.

Together, we must end a global food regime in which one person’s inexhaustible cornucopia requires the creation of a community of hunger, for this accurate and painful description of our world is an inexcusable act. Together, we must build a food system where everyone can get the food they need. The world’s small-scale peasant farmers and landless waged workers want, as a preliminary yet extraordinarily important step toward a better life for themselves and their families, to be able to feed themselves, securely,

without having to submit themselves, like vassals, to the multifariously macabre agreements and arrangements of the market. They are hungry for change. We, who are the world's wealthy, have to imaginatively transform and inventively revolutionize what we expect of our food. We have to be hungry for change. If together we engage in the direct confrontation of the sources of human degradation that we have created, there is indeed a possibility of hope, if we begin now. So let's start.

THE THIN AND THE FAT

FOOD ENTITLEMENTS
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Noor Mohammed was sitting in a parched field under a tall solitary tree, getting some shade from the ferocious bright sun that radiated across the cloudless, starkly blue sky. It was 1996. A tall, thin man with angular fingers, his face showed the effects of a life working out in the sun, day in, day out, for it was dark and dry; so dark, in fact, that it almost matched the colour of his black mustache and his tousled, dirty hair, and was much darker than the dirty blue of the shalwar kameez that he was wearing, with its long-sleeved shirt draping down nearly to the knee and its loose-fitting pyjama-like trousers. It was probably his only shalwar kameez.

His face was stretched taut. It was almost as if I was witnessing rage congealing with despair. He was quiet, but finally said, "I don't know what my children will eat tonight," the despair overwhelming him at last and tears welling in his fiercely proud eyes. "I am a poor *kisan* [small-scale peasant farmer]. I farm one hectare, but the land is *barani* [dry] and does not produce a good crop. The harvest was months ago, we have no money and I have nothing left to sell ... I don't know what my children will eat tonight," he repeated, a haunting mantra that brought forth no hope.

I met Noor Mohammad in the middle of doing some research into the impact of a big development project that was to reclaim land for farming and, it was hoped, contribute to reducing rural poverty.¹ I knew he was very poor when I met him, and I spent some time talking to him to get a more human, more humane understanding of the terrible lived experience that was his and his family's deprivation. In the distance, I could see the hamlet where Noor Mohammed and his family lived: a small cluster of ruefully basic one-storey mud homes, reached on a jarringly disintegrating dirt road. It was, literally, the middle of nowhere. There was little there but the shocking extremities of indiscriminate poverty: a dispiriting continuum that ranged from a lack of adequate food to a lack of even the most basic education and

beyond to a lack of any semblance of health care. Lacking even the dignity of a name, it went without saying that the hamlet had no electricity. Water, that most canonical of human needs, had to be carried from an open well in a neighbouring hamlet; and without water, no one had a toilet, pissing and shitting in nearby fields, as small-scale peasant farmers have done for time immemorial. I could see human excrement in the field next to the field in which we were sitting, but the micronutrients in it had had little effect; other than that below the tree we were sitting under, the soil was beige brown, dry and so crumbly that when I scooped up a fistful it ran through my fingers in small, lifeless lumps. The soil was achingly barren; without water, it would not produce anything at this time of year for Noor Mohammed and his family.

Yet I knew as he did not that a lack of water was not the critical mechanism that prevented Noor Mohammed from tilling his plots of land during the months when the rains did not darken the skies of the Peshawar valley, for there was, in truth, an abundance of water. The British, when occupying this part of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of northern Pakistan, built a huge canal system, diverting the waters of several large rivers into a massive irrigation system that reshaped the landscape (Akram-Lodhi 2001a). They were trying to turn this part of South Asia into the empire's granary. Where the irrigation canals run, the Peshawar valley is, in the warmth of the summer, strikingly and relentlessly vibrant: the fruit trees are green, lush and ripe with oranges bursting with flavour; the corn stalks grow high and the kernels deliciously sweet; and the stands of sugar cane are deep, tall and so dense that it is difficult to see how someone could walk through them, a man-made jungle that at ground level can cut off the light radiating down from the sky. I didn't have to be an agronomist to see that the canals and their extensive network of tributaries could allow the small-scale peasant farmers of the Peshawar valley and beyond — people like Noor Mohammed — to produce more from their fields, in the first place by getting at least two crops a year from land that without irrigation will yield only one. Yet they did not get that second crop, which was, for Noor Mohammed and many others, the difference between destitution and decency.

I asked Noor Mohammed why he did not leave and move to the city. "I prefer half a roti [bread] in the village to a full meal in the city; but we will starve here." Noor Mohammed was an intensely unassuming and unpretentious Pakhtun tribesman, and more than most other men Pakhtun do not display their feelings easily, for it is a sign of weakness; from weakness comes dishonour, something that above all else Pakhtun do not want to show, for it makes them less of a man, and, more to the point, less Pakhtun.² That day, though, without water, without food, without hope, Noor Mohammed despaired, and I saw the tears. That he despaired in a land that was bountiful for some shows that his circumstances were not an inevitable outcome of

an indiscriminate set of social and economic conditions that subverted the subsistence of his family. Rather, his circumstances were the outcome of a fundamental and divisive state of affairs that can and must be historically and socially explained: Noor Mohammed was unable to get irrigation water because of his landlord, Haji Shahrukh Khan.

When I met Haji Shahrukh Khan one morning for sweet milky tea in the comfortably furnished yet unpretentious reception room of his large concrete and brick home, I saw that he, like Noor Mohammed, was every bit Pakhtun: tall, with greying hair surrounding a weather-beaten face on which a neatly-trimmed beard marked ostentatious piety. Displaying the hospitality for which Pakhtun are renowned, his belly showed that he ate well. But it was Haji Shahrukh Khan's white shalwar kameez that was more revealing; to wear a white set of clothes in the dust and grime of the Peshawar valley meant that it would quickly get dirty. That it was clean meant that it had been laundered, that it had to be laundered every day, and so Haji Shahrukh Khan had more than one suit of clothing. In this part of the world a white shalwar kameez was a signifier of wealth and hence, amongst Pakhtun — with their demandingly strict and pervasively rigorous social code, called *Paktunwali* — of the independence and honour to which both Haji Shahrukh Khan and Noor Mohammed aspired. Haji Shahrukh Khan was wealthy compared to his neighbours, but for him his wealth was less important. More important was that his wealth allowed him to be Pakhtun, in the same way that Noor Mohammed's poverty did not.

Haji Shahrukh Khan owned fifty hectares of land, most of which was irrigated by the canal system built by the British. Ask him what he does, and Haji Shahrukh Khan, like the few others with similar quantities of land, would be strikingly forthright: "I am a farmer." Yet you would never see Haji Shahrukh Khan standing with a hoe, furrowing a field; you would never see him spraying a plot with fertilizer; you would never see him driving the tractor that he proudly owns. For Haji Shahrukh Khan's idea of farming is to rent out most of his fifty hectares, in often miniscule plots, to men like Noor Mohammed, who in turn have to give Haji Shahrukh Khan one half of everything that they produce on the land as an in-kind payment for the land they farm but do not own. This pernicious arrangement, which is as old as small-scale peasant farming, is called sharecropping.³

Pakhtuns of the Peshawar valley have a saying that captures the essence of the pervasive and perverse logic of sharecropping: "we earn only for you." If the land is irrigated, and much of it is, it becomes capable of producing more than one crop a year, a lot more, and Haji Shahrukh Khan coldly closes off the opportunities for his sharecroppers by assuredly getting his share of the crop produced on the more productive land. If the land is not irrigated, it produces less, but Haji Shahrukh Khan still indifferently impoverishes his

sharecroppers by getting his share of the crop produced on the less productive land. In either case, nineteen families are mercilessly dependent for their livelihoods and their lives on Haji Shahrugh Khan — 171 men, women and children who earn for him, seeing half of what they produce on their farms given over to him, the brutal hardware of a ceaseless social and economic situation that allows him to have his shalwar kameez laundered.

So Noor Mohammed lacked irrigation water because Haji Shahrugh Khan only allowed him to farm unirrigated land, and Noor Mohammed had no choice in the matter. Despite the strikingly marked egalitarianism amongst men articulated in Pakhtunwali the two men are only rhetorically equal; in practice, Haji Shahrugh Khan's status was based on his ability to systematically further disenfranchise the already marginalized, forcing their continued sublimation to one who was incomparably more powerful, a power that was based, ultimately, on the control of land that they needed to farm by those who could, if and when necessary, use the force of arms to sustain their control. In this way, Haji Shahrugh Khan stood at the apex of a set of social relations that produced the poverty that crushes the rural poor.

Yet Haji Shahrugh Khan's capacity to do this was not the result of his superior entrepreneurial skill set or of his greater ability to read the market runes and understand deep-seated and elemental shifts that might be underway. No: Haji Shahrugh Khan was able to do this because the British, in their attempts in the late nineteenth century to pacify Pakhtun tribes that continually threatened the northwestern corner of the Raj, deployed a tactic used extensively throughout their empire, allocating the ownership of good farmland in the Peshawar valley to a highly select group of local leaders (Lynch 2005). In exchange for getting the security of large holdings of land, which brought with it independence, honour and a stronger capacity to be Pakhtun, these imperially-created landlords became a conservative agrarian bulwark against a potentially unruly Pakhtun peasantry. It was, in so many ways, a nefarious compact between a tiny and fractious embryonic agrarian elite and the imperialists, a compact predicated upon the sustained subordination of Pakhtun small-scale peasant farmers. And it worked. All Haji Shahrugh Khan has done is inherit his position and self-centredly reproduce, by force if necessary, the extraordinarily inequitable social and economic conditions that sustain his privilege.

Across the space of the world and a mode of life and standard of living that is, literally, centuries ahead of that of Noor Mohammed, Jessica Carson stares out of the window of her Canadian university residence room at the river that flows past. It is 2008. It has been an unusually severe winter, and with its end the river is running high and fast. Jessica Carson considers herself lucky to be able to see the river from her room, for many of her friends have windows that look out onto parking lots or the concrete monstrosities that