

Softcover: US

Reslicing the pie

Though his theories on the equal distribution of the world's resources err on the side of idealism, Raj Patel's heart is in the right place

BY MARY D'AMBROSIO

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

Reading *The Value of Nothing* is like listening to a dissident guest speaker in your first economics class. You've grasped the basic concepts, caught up in the big textbook. Then Raj Patel bursts through the door — and soon you're scrawling red question marks next to all your notes.

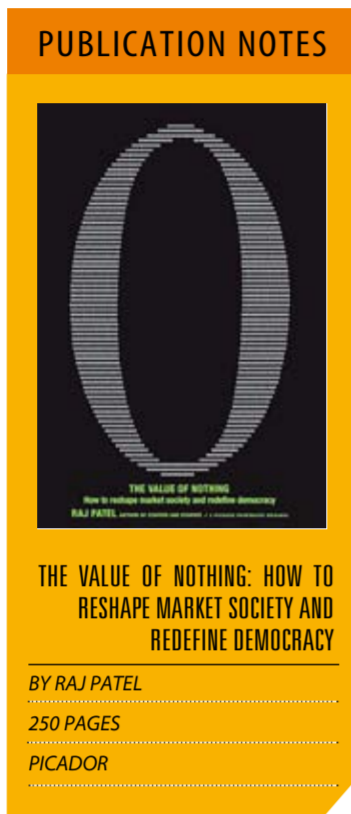
If nothing else, Patel, a visiting scholar at the UC Berkeley Center for African Studies, reminds you that economics, no matter how passionate its claims to science, is mainly theory, ideology and politics.

An academic, food rights specialist and passionate pro-democracy activist, Patel zealously takes on the fashionable economic thinking that he believes stacks the deck against poor people and countries, especially the belief that free markets always price accurately. That's false, he insists: Markets constantly mis-value. For example, they've priced the environment, crucial to our future, at zero and a hamburger at just a few US dollars when, factoring in environmental and social costs, a burger's real cost is about US\$200. (I suspect this of being a backhanded slap at the *Economist* magazine's famous Big Mac Index, meant as whimsical cross-cultural price measure).

Patel argues that there's nothing scientific or ordained about mainstream economic principles such as "rational man," homo economicus or the sort of University of Chicago-driven free-market idolatry that has justified a generation of Wall Street markets economic. Agnostically and passively letting markets price things, he says, licenses the wealthy and the global North to accumulate all the goods and value they need for survival and comfort, while leaving the poor bereft of most of those: food, shelter, health care and political power.

It's a fair, but idealistic, argument. Nor, since the powerful have always adopted rules to their advantage, is it new. Just ask Third World leaders who have tried for decades to win advantageous export terms for their farm products, only to be thwarted by protectionist policies favoring the North; who somehow landed so deeply in hock to US and European banks in the 1970s and 1980s that their countries were forced into debt default; who can find no argument strong enough to influence the "Washington Consensus"-inspired International Monetary Fund lending rules that generally mean more years of poverty for the already impoverished.

Patel evidently intends his book for a general audience. But lay readers might find it a tad ponderous and academic, especially since it takes us on a breathless drive-by economic history tour, from Malthus to Smith to Rand to Keynes to Hobbes to Locke; and then on through Rousseau, T.S. Eliot, W.E.B. Du Bois, US President Barack Obama and (Michael) Moore, without giving any thicker more than a few lines. If



you've not visited this neighborhood before, you could find yourself in a traffic jam. "Stop!" one wants to cry. "My blue book is full!" Perhaps *The Value of Nothing* is meant to catch the ear of Obama or his economic advisers — or a tenure committee.

Fundamentally, *The Value of Nothing* is the cry of a social activist who, beneath an attack on theory, seems to be shouting, "It's not fair!" Though London born and educated at the world's elite institutions — Oxford, the London School of Economics and Cornell — Patel, a son of convenience-store owners, sympathizes passionately with the bereft, and the global South. He calls for a theoretical revision that will redistribute more value to those quarters by, for example, more evenly distributing food and slowing down political decision-making to allow more people to participate.

Prescriptions for empowering poorer, weaker people make up the far more concrete and compelling second half of the book, where Patel can draw upon his specialty, food security. He draws from several grassroots democracy movements, in India, Bolivia and Chiapas, Mexico. Again, one wishes he'd taken it slower, with a potentially more accessible and convincing narrative case study approach, so readers could watch these movements in action. Instead, he gives each case just a page or two, in the service of theory-backing fodder.

The biggest flaws in his prescriptions, though, relate to the absence of clear incentives for a buy-in by the global North. Why, exactly, should the First World rich and powerful revise the rules of the game to share wealth and power with the 5 billion bereft? I look forward to hearing his thoughts on that in his next book.

PUBLICATION NOTES



THE VALUE OF NOTHING: HOW TO RESHAPE MARKET SOCIETY AND REDEFINE DEMOCRACY

BY RAJ PATEL
250 PAGES
PICADOR



Above and left: The Plastic Logic Que proReader electronic reading device. Below: The Lenovo IdeaPad U1, a hybrid laptop that features a detachable slate-style tablet screen.

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG AND AFP



Above: The enTourage eDGe electronic reading device.

PHOTO: AFP

Technology reviews

A deluge of devices for reading and surfing

BY BRAD STONE AND NICK BILTON

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, LAS VEGAS

You've heard of Amazon.com's Kindle. And you probably know that Apple is likely to introduce a tablet computer this year. Soon you may also be hearing about the Alex, the Que proReader and the IdeaPad U1 Hybrid.

Those products are part of a new wave of slender, touch-screen tablets and electronic reading devices that dozens of companies, both well-known and unknown, brought to the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas this week.

Some of these gadgets allow people to read for long periods of time without eyestrain and without killing the batteries. Others focus on allowing their owners to surf the Web, watch video and play casual games without being tethered to a bulky laptop and its traditional keyboard.

"There are a billion and a half Internet users on the planet today, and a lot of them are primarily using it for entertainment and social networking," said Glen Burchers, director of global consumer segment marketing at Freescale, a chip company hoping to power the new tablets. "The PC does a good job on a lot of things, but it's just not the ideal device for surfing the Internet or reading."

Tablets, of course, have been around for years. In 2001, Bill Gates erroneously predicted at an industry trade show that they would be the most popular form of PC sold in America within five years.

Advances in technology and manufacturing are belatedly making good on the early promise of this idea. So-called ARM processors — the low-power, low-cost chips found in many cell phones — are finally robust enough to take on some of the tasks, like Web surfing, that were previously the domain of full-fledged computers. As a result, companies have been able to build a wider range of devices, including thinner products with longer battery life.

At the same time, the big Asian manufacturers like Taiwan's Foxconn have been adding capacity and are now capable of churning out these devices at an ever-decreasing cost.

Recently, anticipation for new tablet computers has been almost absurdly focused on the magical product that people expect to emanate from the mind of Apple's chief executive, Steve Jobs.

Analysts who have spoken to Asian component suppliers now believe that an Apple tablet will ship by the end of March, and that Apple will hold an event to introduce a new product by the end of this month.

But Apple's tablet may not end up dominating the emerging market for tablets, as some seem to expect. One reason is price. Analysts think the Apple tablet could cost anywhere from US\$700 to US\$1,000. In contrast, the tablet design unveiled by Freescale this week will cost around US\$130 to manufacture and could sell for as little as US\$200.

Conversations with several former Apple engineers who worked on the long-gestating tablet also suggest that Apple may be asking users to learn a somewhat complex new vocabulary of finger gestures to control it, making use of technology it acquired in the 2007 purchase of a company called FingerWorks.

"The tablet should offer any number of unique multitouch experiences — for example, three fingers down and rotate could mean 'open an application,'" said one former engineer, who asked not to be named because Apple demands secrecy from all current and former employees.

Another former Apple designer said a team at the company had "spent the past couple of years working on a multitouch version of iWork," Apple's answer to Microsoft's Office software suite. This could indicate that Apple wants the tablet to be a fully functional computer, rather than a more passive device for reading books and watching movies. That could help justify a higher price.

Many high-tech giants are not necessarily

waiting around for Apple to make a splash. At his keynote address at the electronics show on Wednesday, Steven Ballmer, Microsoft's chief executive, showed off a new Hewlett-Packard tablet running Windows 7 with a full-color touch-screen displaying videos and books.

HP is working on an array of tablets, including one about twice the size of the iPhone that will run Google's Android operating system, according to a senior editor at a major magazine publisher who said he had seen the device. The company is working with publishers to provide content for the tablets. An HP spokeswoman, Marlene Somsak, said the company would introduce more tablets but would not discuss them now.

In the private demonstration room of Lenovo, the Chinese computer manufacturer, executives showed a flashy product called the Lenovo IdeaPad U1 Hybrid Notebook. It appears to be a regular laptop, until the screen pops out of its shell like a snake shedding its skin, and it becomes a slender, glossy touch-screen tablet running a Linux-based operating system.

"We don't know exactly what Apple is coming out with, if indeed it is doing anything substantial in this area," said Michael Littler, a Lenovo spokesman. "We are just focused like a lot of companies on delivering products that are easy to use and offer good performance, and sometimes a little sprinkle of innovation and coolness."

Other companies are aiming their products at the more focused market for reading devices, where Amazon commands a 60 percent share. They believe dedicated e-readers, with their black-and-white screens that mimic paper, will survive an onslaught of versatile color tablets from Apple and others. Many analysts agree, citing the benefits of long battery life and reduced strain on the eyes.

"I think the black-and-white readers still survive in the niche market as reading devices," said Andy Hargreaves, an analyst at Pacific Crest Securities. "I'm not expecting the Apple device to be as good as the Kindle or Sony Reader for reading."

E-readers at the electronics show came in many shapes and sizes. Plastic Logic, a 10-year-old British company, unveiled its Que proReader, an impossibly thin 10.7-inch display with a rather high starting price of US\$649.

But the device is aimed at deep-pocketed professionals and is meant to be a replacement for a bulky briefcase full of paper. "In a crowded field and emerging market, the key is really to understand your target customer and stay laser-focused on them," said Richard Archuleta, chief executive of Plastic Logic.

Other players in this field are trying to distinguish themselves with devices that have more than one screen. enTourage Systems, based in McLean, Virginia, demonstrated a 9.7-inch touch-screen color display, married with a rotating hinge to a similarly sized black-and-white screen. The device, called the eDGe, will cost US\$490.

Spring Design, a Taiwanese startup, showed off a dual-screen e-book device, the Alex, that has a 3.5-inch iPhone-like color display and a 6-inch Kindle-like black-and-white display. The device, which is expected to be out in February and cost US\$349, could display book-video hybrids and "open up a whole new sector for publishing," said Priscilla Lu, the company's chief executive.

Many of these companies and their products may sink when exposed to a competitive marketplace that could be dominated by efforts from the tech giants.

At the very least, the smaller companies will have to stay nimble and keep on top of rapidly evolving technology.

Component makers like Freescale and Marvell, a semiconductor company based in Santa Clara, California, say they are building some e-paper functions right into their processors, which will cut costs and create even more possibilities for new tablets.

E-book: UK

Hope for the best and prepare for the worst

In Hamish MacDonald's 'Finitude,' humankind teeters on the brink of extinction after failing to clean up its environmental act and save the planet

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON

CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Over the past few months Taiwan-based journalist Dan Bloom has become more and more concerned with climate-change issues, notably the prospect of humanity retreating to new cities built in the polar regions to escape rising temperatures elsewhere. So when he strongly urged me to read a new novel, published online and set in an environmentally devastated future, I felt duty-bound to take a look.

E-books are the modern version of self-publishing. Contrary to what many choose to think, this is an honorable way of issuing works, and one with a long history. William Blake printed and colored his own books, Shelley had pamphlets privately printed and then tried to hand them out to passing citizens, and Ronald Firbank self-published all his novels, now considered by many as classics, in the 1920s. Even James Joyce's *Ulysses* was

self-published in a way — brought out by a friend who ran a Paris bookshop rather than by an established publishing house.

Hamish MacDonald stands in this august tradition, writing novels and issuing them online, but also hand-printing and binding them in his own workshop. This combination of the newest and one of the oldest technologies feels like the true mark of a dedicated indie publisher.

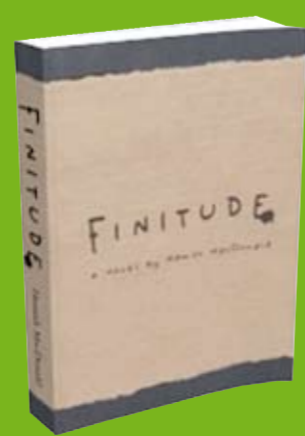
Finitude is set at an unspecified time in the future. Two men, Jeremy and Victor, are heading for somewhere called Iktyault in search of Jeremy's parents. On the road they encounter other travelers, plus whole societies, that have responded in different ways to the horrors brought on or threatened by climate change. "Terraists" roam the land, frozen ground is thawing and releasing methane that's waiting to ignite, there are Non-Reproduction Benefits, compressed air cars (now obsolete), something intended to be edible called Mete ("no amount

of cooking was going to make it better"), a city of the blind, a sea of plastic, gangs, looting and, needless to say, wars over resources.

This is essentially a novel of ideas. None of the characters is particularly memorable, and you wouldn't lose much sleep if one of the major players disappeared in a flash of light — an ever-present possibility. But the ideas are strong — sometimes ingenious, but more often just humane. Others had "spent the wealth of the world," says a warlord, Tydial Lupercus, in a memorable phrase; once a farmer, he began to move north as his topsoil turned to dust. Disaster struck because people debated the science of the situation rather than simply caring for the planet, argues another. And carbon trading was intended to help poorer nations, but when one of them didn't play ball the world government (the "International Coalition") simply invaded, and so on.

There's some grim humor, too. The pair arrive at one destination and a character offers a toast

PUBLICATION NOTES



FINITUDE
BY HAMISH MACDONALD
95 PAGES
HARVILL SECKER

to "the ultimate survivors." Jeremy, however, "wasn't sure if he was referring to them or the cockroaches." And the permafrost is thawing, the ice in the oceans melting, and if the trapped methane suddenly erupts the planet is going to become "a big, lifeless rock." To which a character replies: "Suddenly the fact that I'm feeling hungry doesn't seem so important."

The government and its efforts are viewed with considerable skepticism. It had announced a "VC (Victory over the Climate) Day," and was now planning to launch a rocket to block the sun's rays and so reduce the Earth's temperature. Little goes according to plan, however. Yet the book ends on a slightly optimistic note, with any final collapse at least temporarily delayed, and the now reunited family setting off by boat towards some sort of viable future. The author doesn't give many credible grounds for their optimism — someone mentions the possibility of a 50-year

reprieve — and you feel that this ending was adopted in preference to a bleak one of total collapse, or an ecological equivalent to Orwell's Room 101.

One curiosity is that there's a casually-treated gay element in the story. Maybe the lack of comment by other characters is meant to represent a likely characteristic of society in general in the future. Certainly it's never explained in any other terms.

Finitude stands in the tradition of dystopian novels like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*. These offered visions of nightmarish futures with the implicit message that this was how things might turn out if we didn't take action to change our ways. Huxley warned of eugenics, or tampering with the genes of our descendants, and Orwell of the totalitarianism that was inseparable, as he saw it, from communism. In the place of these fears, *Finitude* offers unchecked global warming, the danger almost everyone is now

focusing on. The strange thing is that we haven't been deluged with novels on this theme already.

This book reads more like Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy than the science fiction it would have been classified as 10 years ago. Science fiction is supposed to deal with future events that are, from a rational viewpoint, never likely to happen. *Finitude*, by contrast, feels more like ecological prophecy.

This is a coherent, lively and fast-moving attempt to put a widely feared future into imaginative, fictional form. It's all the more attractive for being available free of charge online for prospective readers to sample at their leisure. All this author's novels are available in a format that can be downloaded to e-book readers at hamishmacdonald.com/novels/novels.html. *Finitude* can also be read online at hamishmacdonald.com/novels/novels/finitude.html, and hand-bound copies ordered from the home page of the same Web site.