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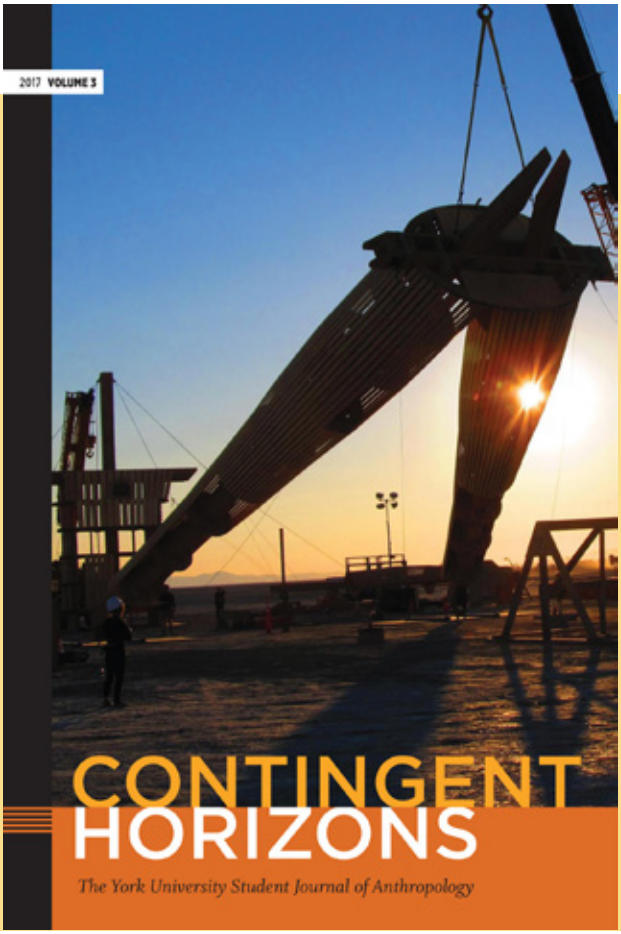

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A Critique of the 'Paleo Diet'

Broader implications of a socio-cultural food practice

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Relatively little has been written about the social, economic and political dynamics and relationships that are engendered through Paleo culture. Examining the tensions within and between the 'Paleo Diet' principles and practices reveals the application of a technical solution to a structural problem: power dynamics created at an individual and group level by the Paleo culture reveals an emergent food classism rooted in socio-economic and racialized inequalities. Participation in and adherence to the Paleo lifestyle (or the inability to do so) creates particular types of social subjects and subjectivities based on the implicit moralization of food and consumption practices. While the Paleo Diet reflects millenarian apprehensions about the state of the contemporary world and concerns with global food quality and food insecurity, it is dependent on and exacerbates the socio-economic dynamics and marginalizing practices of a global food regime that it seeks to critique and abandon.

KEY WORDS Paleo Diet, food inequity, biopolitics, food morality, marginalized consumption

In 2002, *The Paleo Diet* by Loren Cordain was published, becoming a bestseller and the basis of a popular North American health and fitness movement. Based on gastroenterology research first conducted by Walter Voegtlin in the 1970s and developed further by the pivotal work of Stanley Boyd Eaton and Melvin Konner in the 1980s, the Paleo Diet (or 'Caveman' diet) promotes an idealized diet based on the nutritional superiority of anatomically modern humans during the Palaeolithic era.[1] Since the popularization of the Paleo Diet, there have been numerous blogs, cookbooks, celebrity advocates as well as scholarly articles written, debating the merits and benefits of this nutritional program and its ability to combat the diseases of civilization.[2] However, relatively little has been written about the social, economic and political dynamics and relationships that are engendered through Paleo culture. Examining the tensions within and between the 'Paleo Diet' principles and practices reveals the application of a technical solution to a structural problem; power dynamics created at an individual and group level by the Paleo culture reveals an emergent food classism rooted in socio-economic and racialized inequalities. Participation in and adherence to the Paleo lifestyle (or the inability to do so) creates particular types of social subjects and subjectivities based on the implicit moralization of food and consumption practices. While the Paleo Diet reflects millenarian apprehensions about the state of

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the contemporary world and concerns with global food quality and food insecurity, it is dependent on and exacerbates the socio-economic dynamics and marginalizing practices of a global food regime that it seeks to critique and abandon.

The premise of the 'Paleo Diet' culture is that the rise of human obesity, disease and malnutrition are the results of the agricultural revolution and Western, industrialized consumptive patterns (Eaton and Konner 1985). The Paleo Diet promotes lean meat and animal product consumption (such as grass-fed meats, eggs, fish and seafood), fresh non-starchy vegetables and fruit (including nuts and seeds), as well as "healthful oils" (olive, walnut, flaxseed, macadamia, avocado, coconut); while discouraging cultivated grains such as wheat, rice and corn, legumes, dairy products, refined sugar, potatoes, vegetable oils, salt, and other industrialized processed foods (Cordain 2015). According to the evolutionary discordance hypothesis, "the profound environmental changes (e.g., [sic] in diet and other lifestyle conditions) that began with the introduction of agriculture and animal husbandry 10,000 years ago occurred too recently on an evolutionary time scale for the human genome to adapt" (Cordain et al. 2005:341). Experts cite this genetic adaptive lag coupled with the rapid industrialization in the last century as being responsible for the "so-called diseases of civilization" and they call for all people to return to a Palaeolithic, or pre-agricultural diet in order to improve their health and well-being (Cordain et al. 2005:341). Western consumption and cultural food practices, with a heavy emphasis on processed, high sodium, high fat foods, are out of sync with the biological realities of anatomically modern humans.

Since the 1990s, public discourse on the assumed correlation between physical health, well-being (whether physiological, mental, or emotional) and food has grown and is most salient in debates surrounding obesity (Greenhalgh 2012). Framed as an 'epidemic', the North American obsession with being fat has tied the traditional idea of being overweight as an implicit moral failure, to the medicalized paradigm of "the now-routine definition of excess weight as a disease" (Greenhalgh 2012:471). Within this ideology, the complex socio-economic issue of obesity is reduced to a biopolitical problem deserving of a technical solution. Fatness is articulated by Paleo culture as a disease that is cured by changing the diet; it is seen as being controllable on an individual level, and the inability to curb fatness is an implicit moral failure. The disambiguation between morality, health and biopolitics has led to "moral pronouncements about consumption [that] are inevitable, but…are not arbitrary; on the contrary, they are highly patterned, and they have a social and historical context" (Wilks 2001:250; Greenhalgh 2012). The tenets of the 'Paleo Diet' are substantiated by the turn to a biopolitical rationalization of human existence, which fails to address broader structural issues of economic inequality and food insecurity, and erases the link between obesity and the decline in access to nutritious, quality food for marginalized populations (Greenhalgh 2012; Delaney and McCarthy 2014).

The moralizing dichotomy of healthy/good versus unhealthy/bad embedded in the ethos of the Paleo lifestyle can be seen as reductive and problematic. The Paleo ideology is a contemporary cultural construct that utilizes an adaptationist imaginary to reify the distant past. What Paleo culture attempts to capture is "the American utopia vision [which] posits a time of self-sufficient people who were satisfied with what they had" (Wilk 2001:248). Bolstered by the authority of Western science, Paleo culture creates a "consumption space" that uses the biopolitical paradigm of optimization to "fabricate

an aura of authenticity" (Zukin 2008:736). Moreover, in forging links between health, morality and consumptive practices, Paleo culture is able to "affect the self-definition of others … motivating their consumption [and] … affect[ing] who and what they think they are" (Mintz 2009:214). The normative, Western emphasis on self-sufficiency and independence discourages inclusion of those who rely on and are embedded in extended support networks to access food and other resources. By objectifying the individual to create Paleo subjects, Paleo culture objectifies the relation between the body and self by "the sheer fact of being alive in natural history or biology," which it accomplishes through the medicalization of the body (Foucault 1982:777). Through the prescription of "dividing practices", food is transformed into a type of moralizing and divisive power that can be exercised over the individual (Foucault 1982:777–8). Certain foods (and therefore people) that are deemed 'good', 'healthy', or 'natural' should be consumed while others that are considered 'bad', 'unhealthy', or 'processed' are best avoided.

Paleo culture also inadvertently bolsters a particular set of cultural capital that stems from the moralized, health paradigm that produces an emergent food classism along ethno-racial lines (Lamont and Fournier 1992). Like many alternative food discourses, "privileged perspectives tend to be normalized…despite the structural inequalities making it difficult for marginalized groups to eat with maximum efficiency, healthfulness, deliciousness and distinction" (Johnston et al. 2011:296). The Paleo Diet reduces food consumption to a nutritional cost/benefit dichotomy that obfuscates social, economic and historical constraints that shape contemporary eating practices (Johnston 2011).[3] Through the medicalization of nutrition and the power of cultural capital, Paleo culture produces divisive practices that are effectively colourblind to the ubiquitousness of white privilege, assuming a universalist appeal which does not account for the fact that food quality and security are largely mediated by economic viability, knowledge and resource acquisition determined by ethno-racial identity (Guthman 2008). The Paleo culture's focus on gourmet ingredients, such as coconut oil, and time-consuming preparation effectively "distribute[s] healthy diets to affluent [white] consumers, and highly processed high calorie foods for poorer [brown and black] populations" (McMichael 2009:159). Low income and racialized others are alienated from developing or accruing a form of cultural capital that as an alternative practice, theoretically aims to shift how *all* people eat (Slocum 2006). While Paleo culture advocates authentic, 'from the ground' food consumption, in reality it ignores the socio-economic inequalities that shape the participant demographic.

Paleo culture garners its legitimacy not only from health discourses and an appeal to a romanticized past, but also from the growing popularity of alternative food practices. Despite its populist rhetoric, Paleo does not appear to advocate explicitly for alternative food movements, but benefits from "public discourse [that] has raised questions about our ability to continue to transport food, or its components, across the world" (McMichael 2009:139). With its temporally remote historical narrative, Paleo culture resists being situated within its contemporary global, geopolitical and economic context. Unlike other alternate food movements that emphasize local production or subsistence agriculture, the Paleo Diet's consumptive mandates rely on the current global food system and agricultural practices that are responsible for the growth and proliferation of processed foods. "[P]aleo advocates don't just want us to cut down on processed carbs and grains, they're dedicated to a selective denial of modernity," including a selective denial of modern international

trade and agricultural relationships that allow for the mass production of vegetables, fruit and meat, as well as the ability to transport them around the world at the expense of the environment, food quality and food security (Wilson 2015). Corporations such as Whole Foods appeal to affluent consumers of fresh and gourmet products, appropriating the momentum of alternative food movements and principles to reproduce relations of inequality locally by catering to those who can afford to pay as opposed to advocating for equitable access to quality food, as well as globally by instituting principles of mass agricultural production through "green capitalism" (Friedmann 2005:229). This is accomplished primarily through global regulatory institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO) and trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which perpetuate relationships of economic dependence and trade inequality between the global north and global south (McMichael 2009; Freedman 2005). By focusing on a narrow discourse of food that concerns itself primarily with the technical aspects of nutrition, Paleo culture fetishizes foods as ahistorical commodities, erases the geopolitical relationships and dynamics between producers and consumers, and implicitly corroborates institutionalized agro-politics that enact global policy which detrimentally affects the agency of nations, communities and people. An example of what Foucault (1982) terms an 'immediate struggle', Paleo culture critiques individual consumption that prioritizes fast and convenient food over nutrition and quality, but fails to recognize that one of the "chief enemies" of health and well-being is rampant global food inequity caused by the domination of neoliberal capitalist agricultural production that enables its existence (780). From this analytical perspective, the 'Paleo Diet' is not "a postmodern retreat into locality, anti-urbanism and neo-populist nostalgia" but rather a pattern of consumption that is hinged on capitalist exchange-value relations and embedded in neoliberal agricultural practices (Araghi 2003:51; McMichael 2009:155). Paleo culture's fear of the diseases of civilization are starkly juxtaposed by emerging diseases of affluence which capitalize on the moralization of food and the body in its principles, but is morally bankrupt in its practices.

A broader millenarian concern about the state of a world dominated by hunger, war and environmental destruction; the use of monocultures and GMOs, fertilizers and pesticides; outbreaks of food-borne illness; and rising obesity rates have generated global uncertainties. The Paleo Diet and its populist, Western cultural following interpolates obesity and the problems of contemporary, global food systems as a technical, nutritional issue instead of a structural, socio-economic problem. Drawing authority from adaptationist theory and universalizing narratives of a distant, arbitrary and reified point in human history, Paleo culture is revealed as a performative and divisive practice. Articulated within the biopolitical paradigm, it isolates and reduces diseases of civilization to an ontological incompatibility between anatomically modern humans and the increasingly processed and nutritionally devalued foods following the agricultural revolution. Paleo culture divides and creates biopolitical subjects who are imbued with the moralized (or demonized) characteristics of the food they consume, reinterpreted through narratives of health and disease, and rooted in class and racialized identities that determine who is (or is not) able to acquire the knowledge, resources and cultural capital required to participate. At the same time, public discourse has given birth to alternative food movements which call into question global food quality, safety and agricultural practices. The fresh fruit, vegetables and meat that the 'Paleo Diet' requires ignores the exploitation of the environment,

communities and nations. It objectifies and transforms relationships between producers and consumers into commodities of foodstuffs that are divorced from their own history and repackaged in the romanticized caricature of the Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer. Despite its universal rhetoric, Paleo culture engenders forms of neoliberal food classism that appeal to affluent groups, who often possess privileged and nuanced cultural capital, while recreating a marginalized, racialized divide that characterizes consumption practices as symbolic distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' eaters. The point of mapping these trajectories has not been to denounce or endorse the Paleo Diet as a nutritional blueprint. The scientific merits of Palaeolithic nutrition have been debated at length and are beyond the scope of this paper. However, through this essay I have attempted to highlight that some of the socio-economic and political 'work' and relationships that Paleo culture engenders is important, far-reaching and worthy of closer attention. By unpacking the social, economic and political relationships embedded in the Paleo Diet, masked tensions are highlighted between its ideological principles and the consequences that result from the complicit actions of its practices.

Notes

1 Eaton, S. Boyd, and Melvin Konner (1985), "Paleolithic Nutrition: A Consideration of Its Nature and Current Implications", *The New England Journal of Medicine,* 312(5):283–289 and Voegtlin, Walter (1975), *The Stone Age Diet: Based on In-Depth Studies of Human Ecology and the Diet of Man,* New York: Vantage Press.

2 Any Google query for "Paleo Diet" will return several hundred hits for blogs, cookbooks and various sites detailing the benefits and drawbacks of the food practice. For a small sampling of academic articles, see: Cachel, S. (1997), "Dietary Shifts and the European Upper Palaeolithic Transition," *Current Anthropology* 38(4):579–603; Cordain, Loren, et al. (2005), "Origins and Evolution of the Western Diet: Health Implications for the 21st Century," *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 81(341–354); Eaton, S. Boyd (2006), "The Ancestral Human Diet: What Was It and Should It Be a Paradigm for Contemporary Nutrition?", *The Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* 65(1):1–6; Garn, S. M. and W. R. Leonard (1989), "What Did Our Ancestors Eat?", *Nutrition Reviews* 47(11):337–345; Kuipers, Remko S., Josephine C. A. Joordens, and Frits A. J. Muskiet (2012), "A Multidisciplinary Reconstruction of Palaeolithic Nutrition That Holds Promise for the Prevention and Treatment of Diseases of Civilisation," *Nutrition Research Reviews* 25:96–129; Laland, Kevin N. and Gillian R. Brown (2006), "Niche Construction, Human Behavior, and the Adaptive-Lag Hypothesis," *Evolutionary Anthropology* 15(3):95–104; Ströhle, Alexander and Andreas Hahn (2011), "Diets of Modern Hunter-Gatherers Vary Substantially in Their Carbohydrate Content Depending on Ecoenvironments: Results from an Ethnographic Analysis," *Nutrition Research* 31(6) Elsevier Inc.: 429–435; Turner, Bethany L. and Amanda L. Thompson (2013), "Beyond the Paleolithic Prescription: Incorporating Diversity and Flexibility in the Study of Human Diet Evolution," *Nutrition Reviews* 71(8):501–510.

3 This is a real issue that is not readily discussed in academic circles which overwhelmingly debate the nutritional pros/cons of the Paleo diet and signalling theory where the expense of participating in fad health plans may have some evolutionary benefit of signalling access to resources for displaying health genes (for example see: Bliege Bird, Rebecca. and Eric Alden Smith (2005), "Signalling Theory, Strategic Interaction and Symbolic Capital," *Current Anthropology* 46:221–248; Bliege Bird, Rebecca, Eric Alden Smith, and Douglas W. Bird (2001), "The Hunting Handicap: Costly Signalling in Human Foraging Societies," *Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology* 50:9–19; Smith, Eric Alden, Rebecca Bliege Bird, and Douglas W. Bird (2003), "The Benefits of Costly Signalling: Meriam Turtle Hunters," *Behavioral*

Ecology 14(1):116–126. However, despite Paleo proponents arguments that it is perfect for everyone, there seems to be lack of recognition that a primarily meat and fresh vegetable diet is expensive and time consuming and therefore not readily accessible to many.

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