

A 'strange combination': neoliberalism and embodiment in the global food system

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Abstract

This essay critiques the 'strange combination' (Patel, 2012) of mass undernourishment and increasing obesity perpetrated by the global neoliberal food system. It explores how these opposing conditions come into being and how they are differentially experienced by wealth, race, and nationality, as well as how obesity is discursively managed, and experienced as an embodied state. I conclude that this combination is a product of a profoundly neoliberal system which prioritises corporate capital accumulation over nourishment and wellbeing.

Patel (2012) presents an apparent paradox: 800 million people live in hunger across the world, while over one billion people are overweight. On preliminary examination, these two statistics seem contradictory – how can vast proportions of the world's population live simultaneously in such extremes, within one global food system? Patel (2012: 3) is clear that these phenomena are of pressing importance: 'the contradictions of obesity, hunger, poverty and wealth are becoming more acute'. This essay will argue that these apparent paradoxes are anything but contradictory; they represent a complementarity central to a neoliberally-aligned global food system which creates capital in some places at the expense of others. Furthermore, these effects are not just marked on economists' graphs or reported as news headlines. Central to the neoliberal food regime is the embodiment of capitalist processes. Neoliberal infrastructures, notably the prerogative for capital accumulation amongst shareholders and entrepreneurial citizenship (Bockman, 2013), create cultures of embodiment whereby the individual capitalist subject physically displays their interaction with the food system. This essay will discuss the neoliberal food regime, then examine the production and experience of the poles of Patel's paradox (obesity and undernourishment). I conclude that the neoliberal food system underpins the embodiment of obesity and malnourishment, conditions which are experienced differentially by wealth, race, and nationality.

How does the global food system work? Pechlaner and Otero (2010) emphasise the historical contingency of our neoliberal situation, outlining two (America-centric) regimes of food supply which preceded, and created, the present regime. Following the 'settler-colonial' regime (1870-1914), which consisted of a deeply exploitative relationship where the colonised state provided cheap provisions for the industrial metropolis, a 'surplus' regime (1945-1973) was enacted. Various conditions were established which fed the development of neoliberal structures in the late 20th century: US hegemony (aided by domestic farming subsidies); agriculture's exemption from many free-trade rules; and 'northern power and southern dependency' (Pechlaner and Otero, 2010: 183). The latter point here represents the emergence of a wider problem, as Pechlaner and Otero (2010: 183) observe: 'The issue of... grain surpluses was addressed through food aid to developing countries...creating southern dependency on cheap-food imports'. Experience of global food systems began to be experienced differentially depending on a nation's wealth and position within the world order. Market instabilities in the 1970s, combined with wider ideological

shifts exemplified by Thatcher and Reagan (Bockman, 2013), ushered in a neoliberal food regime which persists today.

The neoliberal food regime is characterised by a number of key features which reinforce capital and nutritional divides, determining experience and embodiment of food cultures. The integration of agri-food businesses (the merger and acquisition of companies to create multinational food conglomerates such as Kraft Heinz) is a neoliberal ideal which has manifested in the food system. As Fraser and Fraser (2014: np) exemplify: 'A very small number of corporations control the vast majority of the world's food trade: four companies produce more than 58% of the world's seeds...four produce more than 60% of the agrochemicals farmers use'. Along with this changing systemic design, the neoliberal regime has manipulated the purpose of farming in some countries. Increasingly, countries produce goods for export which previously constituted a significant segment of domestic consumption, for example the USA now uses maize as livestock feed to produce low-quality meat for export (Fraser and Fraser, 2014). Mass production through intensive agriculture or over-harvesting (Shiva, 2000) is also central to the neoliberal system, epitomising the principle of capital accumulation through economies of scale. The need for expansion and integration has encouraged companies to take on sizeable loans, resulting in huge, specialised farms which rely on specific market conditions to prevail (Van der Ploeg, 2010). On a bodily level, the neoliberal regime encourages self-regulation (Guthman and Dupuis, 2006) – the individual subject is expected to be the paradoxical consumer, buying and eating a suitable volume of food to aid economic growth while maintaining appropriate levels of health (to avoid becoming a burden) and thinness (to maintain desirability). The pressures of such a paradox may be embodied through eating disorders, anxiety, or obesity.

Pechlaner and Otero (2010: 184) observe that 'export-oriented agriculture...and import complexes arising from developing country food dependence have been identified as central features of 'contemporary global food politics''. Relationships of dependency and exploitation, so fundamental to capitalist systems (Clarke, 1991), have been established between new (marginal) agricultural nations and Western governments or corporations. The example of coffee export from Uganda (Patel, 2012) illustrates this point. Throughout the 2000s, coffee cherries sold at a price of around 69 cents/kg, more than double the price that farmers need to be profitable. By 2012, this price had dropped to approximately 14 cents/kg. The law of supply and demand suggests that these farmers should diversify their agriculture, or switch crops, but owing to various constraints (lack of expertise, seed availability, climate) they often cannot. This allows corporations enormous power to extract value – Patel (2012) explains that coffee enters Nestle factories at cost of \$1.64/kg and leaves at \$26.40/kg.

Beyond the financial, this value extraction has corporeal effects on the overworked farming body through the embodiment of poverty and exploitation – a lack of capital is worn as undernourishment. Power in the food system is concentrated in the hands of a mere handful of corporations (see MarketWatch, 2014), in an 'hourglass' structure which detracts from state power (Bockman, 2013). The system does little to support undernourished bodies, as under neoliberal ideology they must be subject to market forces, rather than receive state aid. Amartya Sen (cited in Murphy, 2008) suggests that governments tolerate

some hunger, provided this doesn't escalate to famine. In this way, governments' neoliberal priorities are clarified – capital accumulation and free-market trade are valued above all else, even malnutrition and bodily exploitation, to the extent that malnutrition is accepted as an inevitable part of global food production and consumption.

Farm workers, and poorer people dependent on low-cost food, are also subject to market volatility. Van der Ploeg (2010) explains that abrupt food price increases (particularly of staple foods) in 2008-9 created an extension of hunger as producers created unsellable surplus. This reflects a neoliberal logic of maximising profit through price increases when demand is high, rather than regulating market prices to ensure that people have access to food. Instability is capitalised on rather than managed. Bodies are worn down and left unfed, rather than supported. Neoliberal logics apply beyond Western exploitation of farm workers and citizens in the Global South, however. Even in wealthy nations, the impacts of food-market instability and price flux are most deeply felt by disadvantaged bodies – women, children, immigrants, and the poor (Howard, 2016) – reinforcing existing societal inequalities. Neoliberal corporations not only indirectly cause this marginalisation through market control; the behaviour of Walmart (which pays extremely low worker wages) and Monsanto (which carries out surveillance on farmers who save and replant seeds) directly impacts the experience of exploited groups (Howard, 2016). Neoliberalism does not provide security to those who need it – in the case of food, the undernourished are exploited, working for low wages and growing crops from which corporations extract significant value.

The other face of Patel's (2012) 'strange combination' is the relatively novel notion of the 'obesity epidemic' (LeBesco, 2011). The increasing prevalence of obesity (that is, having a BMI defined as 'extremely overweight') in the USA and some European nations is attracting unprecedented media attention (Guthman and Dupuis, 2006), often expressed through body-shaming or parading fat bodies as bad examples. Explanations for the 'epidemic' tend to fall into what Guthman and Dupuis (2006) describe as either 'supply-side' explanations (i.e. 'fast food culture causes obesity') or 'demand-side' explanations (i.e. 'people now have enough money to eat their way to obesity'). In my view, such categorisations are excessively simplistic, displaying an absence of historical contingency and a failure to account for the myriad factors contributing to weight gain. Additionally, these explanations eschew an important point – obesity is also high among the poorest sections of society. This represents the embodiment of a capitalist paradox, where exploited bodies in poverty can still be obese. Patel (2012: 4) argues that 'obesity can no longer be explained exclusively as a curse of individual affluence'; a range of factors contribute to this embodied condition. The growth in obesity is grounded in neoliberal ideology, where the individual subject is expected to consume significantly to support capital accumulation. Free-market conditions have led to the proliferation of low cost, low-quality food, which is then heavily marketed (Guthman and Dupuis, 2006) within the context of neoliberal pressure to consume. For example, farmers in the USA use subsidies for maize cultivation to produce livestock feed for low quality meat, used by corporations such as McDonald's (LeBesco, 2011).

The 'obesity trend' also reflects neoliberal governmentalities. Firstly, it is imperative to remember that obesity is a statistical measure, subject to government definition. For instance, the US National Institute of Health lowered the 'overweight' BMI from 27 to 25 in

1998, instantly recategorizing millions of citizens (Guthman and Dupuis, 2006). Focusing on obesity may also represent a governmentality of surveillance, as the individual body is policed, measured, and ranked. Increases in obesity statistics are also accompanied by the distancing of the state from such bodily affairs, an expression of neoliberalism which places markets and corporations as the central actors in global systems. LeBesco (2011) asserts that state involvement tends to be supplementary (e.g. minor publicity campaigns) or healthcare related rather than tackling the issue at source. Finally, alternatives which may increase engagement with healthier or less corporatized foodstuffs are differentially experienced by race and class. Simply, there is a relative lack of local, organic produce available in low-income communities and communities of colour (Alkon, 2014). In this way, classed and/or racialised bodies are suspended in the neoliberal system, constrained by the lack of availability of high-quality (let alone affordable) food.

Management of obesity often results in discursive exclusion, where the obese body is presented as a poorly disciplined subject. Weight becomes a method of marginalisation and control. Guthman and Dupuis (2006: 433) explain that the discursive construct of obesity is about more than just health: 'the ideal body has less to do with health and more to do with ideas of perfection, goodness, femininity' (Guthman and Dupuis, 2006: 433). The obese body has failed to self-manage and is viewed as a burden on the well-behaved capitalist consumer. LeBesco (2011: 160) goes as far as to argue that fatness is an 'expression of human diversity. Why does fat have to be unhealthy?'. I assert that this comment constitutes a romanticisation of fatness, and a failure to consider the vast negative health effects of obesity, including increased risks of diabetes, cardiac arrest, and high blood pressure. These health effects shape a deeply uncomfortable, precarious experience of obesity. Although I appreciate LeBesco's desire to oppose the vilification and marginalisation of obese people, the detrimental effects are well-documented and should be worked against, not glorified. Further academic consideration of the role of ideology within discourses of obesity would be welcome, with a view to forming policy which is sensitive to both mental and physical indices of wellbeing.

I conclude that the deeply connected co-production of obesity and undernourishment indicates that the global food regime is neoliberal in its ideology and practices. This primarily involves the pursuit of capital accumulation (which is discriminatory based on wealth, race, and nationality), integration (which overconcentrates power), and re-centring markets within global economic systems. The neoliberal system has exacerbated the 'strange combination' (Patel, 2012) of obesity and undernourishment – rather than paradoxical, these opposing bodily conditions are a reflection of the deeply flawed neoliberal food system which forces the individual to consume and contribute to corporate profit, then vilifies them for doing so. This combination is embodied through the discursive management of obesity and the gradual but constant exploitation of the undernourished food producer. Further research to solidify the notion of connectivity between individual bodies and the vast, totalising global food system would be timely. I assert that, ultimately, the poor and obese become surplus bodies, abandoned in the wake of the unrelenting pursuit of mass consumption and profit generation.

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