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Learning from the Corner Store

FOOD REFORMERS AND THE BLACK URBAN POOR IN A SOUTHERN US CITY

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Abstract

The problem of changing food habits has once again become a major public issue in the past decade in the United States. One of the main strategies developed by food reformers to change popular eating habits is to increase access to fresh food in poor urban areas identified as "food deserts," in an attempt to address the obesity epidemic and to revitalize the local economy by creating "healthy", "sustainable" environments. Based on a participant observation study in a large city in the Southeastern United States, I will start by discussing two of these initiatives: a farmers' market and a Community Supported Agriculture program. Although both were located in underserved communities, they failed to reach their poor black residents, attracting instead a clientele of white middle class professionals. To account for the urban poor's resistance to alternative food practices, I then turn to the results of an ethnographic study of consumption practices in an inner-city convenience store, where economic constraints and distinction strategies help to shape its customers' tastes for energy-dense, high-calorie foods. While these data are consistent with quantitative studies underlying the importance of economic access over physical access to food, the ethnographic method has the advantage of bringing food consumption back into its social setting, allowing it to reveal its significance in the competition for status and respectability, which takes on different meanings in different classes and cultures.

Keywords: African Americans, consumption practices, convenience store, distinction, ethnography, food deserts, food policy councils, obesity

Introduction

In *Outsiders*, his classic sociological study of deviance, Howard S. Becker stressed the need to study both "moral entrepreneurs" and "deviant groups," in contrast with most studies of deviance that focused only on the latter to discover the causes of unwanted behaviors such as juvenile delinquency, drug or alcohol use (Becker 1963: 22). Moral entrepreneurs, also called after Joseph Gusfield (1955) "moral reformers" or "moral crusaders," were defined by Becker as individuals with the power and legitimacy to determine what is deviant, and who attempt to force their own rules on those who do not subscribe to them and are thus labeled as deviant. But Becker did not see moral entrepreneurs as ill-intentioned—quite the contrary: "Moral crusaders typically want to help those beneath them [in the

social structure] to achieve a better status. That those beneath them do not always like the means proposed for their salvation is another matter" (Becker 1963: 149).

This interactionist perspective can be applied to the growing constellation of social movements promoting fresh, local or organic "natural" foods in the United States, echoing a long tradition of health and food reform movements (Gusfield 1992; Du Puis 2007; Biltekoff 2013). From the volunteer urban gardener growing food on abandoned lots in the inner-city to the likes of Alice Waters and Michelle Obama, today's food reformers can be referred to as moral entrepreneurs in their efforts to reform others' diets and lifestyles, labeling as deviant those groups who are "at risk" of overweight and obesity[1] (conditions which affect the poor more than the rich, women more than men, and minorities more than whites[2]). As Becker stated, "the real attack on the social order is to insist that all parties involved are fit objects of study" (Becker 1974: 54): by studying reformers' claims in relation to what people actually do, one can make sure that their definition of the situation is not taken at face value as the sole explanation of people's behaviors.

In the following, I will examine the activities of both groups, based on a participant observation carried out over ten months in 2009 and 2010 in a large city in the Southeastern United States, characterized by high levels of poverty and racial segregation. I will define food reformers as members of a "food policy council,"[3] an advisory body to the city council that was recently established to make recommendations to increase fresh food access in low-income neighborhoods identified as "food deserts," as part of a strategy to revitalize the local economy and to reduce the city's high obesity rate.[4] Housed and staffed by a community health research center in a school of public health under a federal grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the council brings together representatives from government agencies (public health professionals, urban planners, city administrators), the private sector (wholesalers, retailers, bankers) and non-profit organizations (farmers' market managers, urban gardeners, community organizers, educators, philanthropists).

These actors, who regularly meet at the council's meetings to share information and resources, are mostly white, upper middle class, college educated professionals, the council having an equal representation of men and women and one-fifth of blacks. They derive their legitimacy from their civic engagement and from the mobilization of scientific knowledge, which allow them to make claims about community needs:[5] from epidemiology, nutrition and agricultural sciences to economics, law and sociology, there is barely a discipline of the natural and social sciences that is not included among their fields of expertise.

Symmetrically, the deviant group is to be found among groups targeted by the reformers' interventions. Variably labeled as "low-income residents," "underserved communities" or "at-risk populations" in the food policy council and other organizations' documentation, this group can be

more straightforwardly defined as the "black urban poor."[6] One can follow this process of labeling by looking at two surveys presented by community health researchers at the city council meeting that established the food policy council. The first one was a map of the city's supermarket infrastructure, contrasting existing stores with the ones that had closed over the years. As the food policy council coordinator put it, anyone familiar with the city could see at a glance that most of its poor black neighborhoods were underserved by supermarkets.[7] The second was a survey of 219 "low-income residents" recruited from "clinic waiting rooms, Medicaid office, and low-income neighborhoods," 50 percent of whom stated they would buy more fresh produce if it were available at their local grocery store. Then, the resolution establishing the council mentioned "communities with the least access to affordable healthy foods" and the need to "increase the availability of fresh produce in low-income, inner-city neighborhoods."

How do these two worlds interact? Ironically, while food reformers honestly wish to improve the condition of the poor and while the latter claim their respectability in their everyday consumption practices, the following is the story of a misunderstanding, as the voice of reformers crying in the "food desert" fails to reach beyond the already converted white middle class.[8] To illustrate this case, I will question the "food desert" thesis by looking at two experiments launched in the city to increase fresh food access, before providing a counter-narrative to the reformers' story by exploring the social meanings of food consumption among customers of an inner-city convenience store.

If many works have shed a critical light on providers of "good food" in the inner-city to make sense of their lack of appeal to the poor and minorities, most notably from an anti-racist, "whiteness" perspective (Slocum 2007; Guthman 2008; Alkon and McCullen 2010), food scholars must still compare these initiatives with businesses catering to poor black residents of US cities such as take-out restaurants or convenience stores,[9] in order to account for this group's resistance to alternative food practices.[10]

Beets 'n' the Hood: Reformers Lost in the "Food Desert"

Among the many programs developed by food reformers in the city in recent years are a farmers' market and a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) site,[11] both located in poor black neighborhoods where fast food joints, donut shops and liquor stores overwhelm the few "healthy" food options available. In these two cases, the programs failed to reach their residents, even though attracting them was a primary goal of their managers.

The Demise of the "New Age market"

The market was launched two years before my observations by a non-profit organization with the goal of improving quality of life and developing self-sufficiency among the city's impoverished residents. It

consisted of a dozen vendors who gathered every Saturday from 1 pm to 4 pm on the parking lot of a church on a major commercial avenue not far from the downtown core, between a poor black neighborhood to the north and a gentrified, racially mixed neighborhood to the south. It had from fifty to hundred customers a week, most of them middle to upper middle class whites, although some of the regular customers were elderly residents who lived in a subsidized apartment complex next to the church.

Among the vendors was Margery, the market manager, a sixty-year-old white woman who used to work as a caterer. She sold fresh products that she collected in the morning from local producers. Although she had no profit margin, her prices remained quite high, even among the area-limited shopping options: specialty breads was selling at US$2.50 a loaf, eggs at US$3.50 a dozen, cream cheese at US$4 for 12 ounces, cauliflowers at US$2 apiece, onions at 50 cents, tomatoes at US$1, oranges at 75 cents, etc. Contrary to what one might expect from a place claiming its authenticity, most of the vendors were new to the trade, like the former engineer for Lockheed Martin and NASA who bought a citrus farm downriver on his retirement, or the good-natured man selling green vegetables at six different markets in the region with the help of his wife and children, whose denim cap and southern drawl made one forget that he took on farming at forty-five years old, after being laid off from his refinery job. Other vendors were new to the region, like the retired farmer who had recently moved from Upstate New York, bringing with him a load of organic, kosher grape juice.

The fact that the market was failing to reach beyond middle class whites was a major concern for Margery. She said:

> I think we didn't have as much participation as I have wanted. And I was always determined to get the other part of [the avenue], which means, the black people, involved in that market. And I never could do it. Except on a very small scale … I worked to do that. I used to pick up produces and drive around, and say "Look, I have a market right down the street, you see this bunch of mustard greens? US$1.50." "Where ?" "Right over there, [at the church], you know." And I would get, I would get people. That was the hardest thing that I had to deal with.[12]

At some point, while discussing an upcoming "raw food party" with a new vendor selling kombucha—sweetened black tea fermented with a culture of yeast and bacteria, highly prized by followers of detoxification diets— Margery told me in a half-amused, half-delusional way: "We are gonna end up becoming the New Age market … This is the way it's developing."

The market closed after three years of operation. In order to reach its target population, the organization behind it developed a new project: selling fresh produce baskets at a reduced price (US$15 instead of the usual US$25) at various food pantries, where needy families get free food. Its

president, a forty-five-year-old black woman who had been a candidate for mayor and who describes herself as a social entrepreneur recognized the failure of the farmers' market in an evaluation form she sent to a foundation to renew a grant. She wrote:

> Increasing access to fresh produce among high-risk populations through farmers markets seemed like a positive intervention. As it turned out, our market attracted more white middle class clients who had cars than our target population of African American and Latino single female-head households with children. In response to this additional information and poverty data for our neighborhoods, we are realigning our food delivery system with 25 food bank agency locations.

Preaching to the Choir at the CSA

Located across the street from a baseball field in a working class black neighborhood, the CSA sells weekly baskets of seasonal produce harvested fresh from local and regional farms for US$25. While it operated on a membership basis at first, this organization, which presents itself as a CSA-style "non-profit store and farm education center," is now open to anyone without requiring them to buy shares in a farm and boasts in the region of 150 regular customers. Raised bed vegetable gardens have been built on the site, lining the path to the store which looks like an ascetic temple with its sober displays of fruits and vegetables on U-shaped tables. According to its president, a fifty-year-old white man with a master's degree in sociology who manages a community development corporation, its primary goal is "to give residents [of the neighborhood] access to locally-grown fresh produces," while its long-term goal is to open an "educational center" to educate them about "sustainable agriculture and sustainable living."[13]

Following the advice of a biologist volunteering with the CSA, I conducted a small survey of its clientele, interviewing customers as they left with their baskets over three Saturday mornings.[14] The following paragraph describes one of them, whose profile echoed many others.

Shannon is a thirty-seven-year-old black resident of a predominantly white and middle class neighborhood across the river from downtown. She was born in the city but moved to Southern California as a child, where she completed a master's degree in computer information systems, and is now a project manager for a local IT company. She goes to the market every week with her two sons, aged three and five, and her husband, a thirty-five-year-old white physician. She said:

> My boys are five and three so we come in, and our five-year-old reads the name of the vegetables. He'll identify the numbers, and then we do a very touchful experience, so that's smell what it is, touch what it is, so they identify that. Well, we're hoping that they get good eating habits … What's really amazing is that, to me, once you have the memory of food and this experience, you begin to remember all the things around it. So it's really a way to communicate, and that's a thing that a lot of people don't

> recognize as a manner of communication. Those are the kind of things that we as people can use to get to know each other.

If the market can be a way for a mother to communicate with her children, does it facilitate exchanges across racial and class boundaries? Of the twenty-two customers interviewed, more than three-quarters were white, half were from out of state, and while they all lived in the city, 90 percent lived out of the neighborhood. Most of them were in their late twenties and thirties, living in cohabitation or married with children. The clientele represented a highly educated public of young professionals, most of whom were working in education (elementary and high school teachers being the most represented profession, followed closely by university professors), health, media or technology. Three-quarters of them had at least a master's degree, while three of them had PhDs. Only one, a chef in a renowned downtown restaurant, had no college education. Indeed, it seems like such customers do not really need to be educated about sustainable living but are themselves in the role of educating others about it.

Reasserting the "Food Desert" Thesis: Spatial or Social Inequalities in Health?

While it has long been known that the urban poor are disadvantaged in their everyday consumption practices, paying more for lower-quality goods (Caplovitz 1963), in the past decade, a growing literature has focused on identifying "food deserts" in English-speaking societies, that is areas that lack access to affordable, "healthy" foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables (Beaulac *et al.* 2009). In the United States, most of these have been found in low-income black neighborhoods; other studies have shown the same areas to have a higher density of fast food restaurants (Block *et al.* 2004). As such, these results have been used in social surveys and epidemiological studies linking food access and diet-related diseases, suggesting that environmental factors such as lack of access to supermarkets have a major responsibility in the current obesity epidemic (Gallagher 2006; Morland *et al.* 2006). However, as every student of epidemiology knows, "correlation is not causation": what if these observed spatial inequalities were merely a symptom of social inequalities in health—or as epidemiologists would say, a confounding factor? Because the poor and minorities tend to live in heavily segregated neighborhoods in most American cities, it is certainly difficult in this case to isolate social factors (such as one's position in the class and race structures) from environmental ones.

Then, if it is true that the urban poor have a lower access to fresh fruits and vegetables in the United States,[15] assuming that one can significantly alter their diet through changes in their retail environment may amount to "wishful thinking."[16] For instance, noting that the lower availability of "healthy" foods in poor or black areas may be due to low demand, Steven Cummins and Sally Macintyre—both among the earliest researchers of "food deserts" in the United Kingdom, where the expression originated—warn against overinterpretation of the link between food access and health in an international review of

the literature (Cummins and Macintyre 2006).[17] The United Kingdom is indeed a compelling case: although evidence for "food deserts" there is weak or at most ambiguous (Cummins and Macintyre 2002; Beaulac *et al.* 2009), British obesity rates are converging with those of the United States, while they are twice higher than in other European societies with similar retail environments, such as France or Italy.[18] International comparisons do suggest that socio-economic and political factors are stronger determinants of obesity: "market-liberal" societies like the United States and the United Kingdom tend to have a higher prevalence of obesity than "social-democratic" societies, which may reflect the effect of weaker business regulations as well as higher levels of stress caused by economic insecurity in the former (Offer *et al.* 2010).

Still, one may ask why would food reformers focus their efforts on increasing fresh food access in poor neighborhoods if they encounter such difficulties in reaching their residents, not to mention changing their behavior? Part of the answer may lie in the legacy of nineteenth-century sanitary reformers, who successfully fought diseases like yellow fever and cholera by improving urban environments.[19] But a broader intellectual tendency may be at work here. As Georges Canguilhem has argued, "To act, it is necessary at least to localize" (Canguilhem 1989 [1943]: 39): in the same way physicians localize diseases in organs and tissues of the human body, reformers frequently localize social problems in what they perceive to be "pathological" or "disorganized" spaces of the city, attempting to change human behavior through the physical environment—a belief Paul Rabinow terms "the myth of ecological determinism" (Rabinow 1989: 6). Such localized interventions are politically far less controversial and appear to be more economical (at least in the short term) than comprehensive social and political reforms. Thus, in order to make a change in the food system, it is certainly less costly for food advocates to produce data on food access at the neighborhood level to apply for a grant to open a food co-op or, say, to write to one's congressman to call for a soda ban in one's school district, than to raise an army of lawyers and lobbyists to compete with the likes of Monsanto and PepsiCo in influencing the next Farm Bill.[20]

To test the hypothesis that the framing of the problem of food access is influenced by a process of "spatialization" of a social problem, whereby questions of poverty and social inequalities are governed through the management of urban spaces (Topalov 1990; Tissot and Poupeau 2005), I will now analyze the consumption practices of low-income black customers of a convenience store, looking for class-based determinants unaccounted for in the literature on "food deserts."

Customers Hungry for Respect: The Social Meanings of Food Consumption at the Corner Store

Generally owned by East Asian or Middle Eastern immigrants, small convenience stores known as "corner stores" work as important sites of community interaction in poor black neighborhoods

otherwise devoid of public spaces. Because they usually lack fresh fruits and vegetables, these stores are among the food reformer's priority targets. For example, the recommendations of the city's food policy council resulted in a financing program aimed at retailers willing to sell fresh produce, including corner stores, while the community health research center which initiated the council has published a "toolkit" to help stores' owners develop healthy strategies. This brochure reports the results from a survey of 303 low-income residents, 59 percent living a few blocks away from a corner store, where they shopped an average of fourteen times a month, walking to the store on two-thirds of these visits. Fewer than one-third of these stores sold any fruits or vegetables, and they made most of their profit from "a mix of liquor, beers, cigarettes, soda, candy, chips, and cookies." Whereas this toolkit pointed to a set of reasons for corner stores not to sell fresh fruits and vegetables (such as limited shelf space, cost of refrigeration units, or contracts with soda and snack vendors), little was known of the reasons why these products may not appeal to their customer base in the first place.

Hard Workers and Wanderers

The store where I made my observations[21] is owned by Mohamed, a thirty-eight-year-old Mauritanian immigrant who has been in the United States for the last ten years and used to be a taxi driver in another state, before moving to the city in 2008 to join his brother, a gas station manager. He bought the store from a Palestinian immigrant, on the site of a former theater—a mosaic star on the front step of the building being the last remnant of its glorious past. After an unfortunate cooking experience Mohamed decided to hire a cook, Neshia, a black woman of the same age as him who was previously working in a seafood restaurant. He explained to me that he used to prepare chicken with olives but that his customers did not like it, justifying his failure on the grounds that "Black people are picky with their food." While Mohamed looks half black, half Arab to me and is married to a black American social worker, his customers do not consider him black. Even though they have christened him "Mike," his Muslim faith and his foreign accent make him stand out from this heavily Baptist neighborhood, where a lot of people still dress up for service on Sundays (children especially have a hard time understanding what Mohamed is doing when they see him behind the counter during his prayer).

There are between 150 and 200 customers a day, including the ones who come several times a day. Most of them are regulars who live in this segregated neighborhood where blacks make up 87 percent of its population of 11,000, and which is considered the poorest and most dangerous of the city. Some 53 percent of its residents are out of the labor force (either because of long-term unemployment, or because they are retired or disabled) and 50 percent of them are below the poverty level (75 percent among children under five), whereas a few years ago it had a record murder rate of 316 per 100,000 residents[22] (Mohamed once complained to me that his customers only bought the local newspaper to

read the crime section, as his newspaper sales would typically rise following the report of a murder). The median household income is about US$21,000, which compares with US$40,000 citywide and to US$71,000 in the nearest neighborhood, home to million-dollar antebellum mansions. The neighborhood, located across an elevated highway from the city's business district, could qualify as a "food desert" as the closest supermarket is 1.5 miles away from the store, while half of the households do not own a car.

According to Mohamed's estimates, about half of the store's sales are paid with food stamps.[23] Some of the customers are overweight or obese, but most are not. Indeed, some are really thin, especially children and the elderly. If one can see all types of body shapes among this population, a lot of bodies are marked with some kind of physical alteration, either deliberate or inflicted: many women dye their hair blonde, red or pink, while the men favor tattoos; some customers have a reduced mobility or walk with a limp; some men have bloodshot eyes and others are sweating "like they come from a coal mine," in Mohamed's words, as a result of their drug addiction. Here is how Mohamed describes the different people making up his clientele:

> We have the regular folks, fathers and mothers who go to work, wake up on time, either work in the night or work in the day. Regular people with decent manners and work ethics. And we have people who don't work at all, the last time they worked is 10–15 years ago. We have people with mental problems. We have ex-homeless. We have people with prostitute issues, or alcohol or other things. And we have just the jobless who don't believe in the system and don't believe in working hard and think the society is failing them. People who are wandering, doing nothing … watching.[24]

Customers who are currently employed pride themselves on having a job. They may be janitors, nurses, caregivers, housekeepers, construction workers or dishwashers; they may work in restaurants, at the local YMCA or in homeless shelters, but seldom talk about their work in itself. Their social prestige is based on not being unemployed rather than on doing low-paid, often boring, disregarded or "dirty" work. Invariably, when a customer one has not seen for a while is asked by others about his whereabouts, he will answer that he has been working—and working hard: the main dividing line between customers passes between the employed and unemployed, the law-abiding, hard-working citizens and those who depend on illegitimate or illegal sources of income to sustain themselves, as the customers recreate in their everyday life the longstanding administrative classifications between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor.

Still, some customers explicitly talk about their work when it implies greater responsibilities or better-than-average salaries. Once, an old, slender man with a blue hat came to the store with a paper sheet in his hands, enthusiastically asking Mohamed for the phone:

> It's for a job training program … That's a construction job thing, but they don't want you to jump into the job, first you got the training, you learn drywall, plumbing, carpentry, and they see what you want to do.

Another day, Neshia spoke to a middle-aged man wearing a safety vest:

> Neshia: You're still working on that train?
> Man: Yes but I work on my own, you make good money, good tips! 16–17 an hour!
> Neshia: You said you're doing 16–17 an hour?
> Man: Yeah, but only if you got the personality for that…

Some professions stand out for the respect they command: the occasional policeman is repeatedly addressed to as "Officer," and Mohamed often praises the work of nurses, teachers and other civil servants among his customers.

In the Realm of "Proletarian Hunger-killers"

If customers demonstrate a concern for social respectability in their mundane interactions,[25] this concern is also objectified in their consumption practices. Considering that objective social structures are embedded in subjective mental dispositions such as manners in food and fashion (Veblen 1899, Elias 1969 [1939], Bourdieu 1984 [1979]), to what extent do the customers' social positions influence their food preferences?

Mohamed's store is stuffed with a large variety of foods stacked on two shelves surrounded by fortress-like beverage coolers:[26] one can find staple foods like bread, rice, pasta and breakfast cereals, but also some fresh foods like milk, eggs, cheese and ham. There is a small kitchen in the back, serving hot food to carry out: fried chicken and seafood, hamburgers, hot sandwiches, corn bread, spaghetti and meatballs are on the menu. There is some fruit, mainly apples and oranges, placed in a cooler on top of piles of cheese, butter and ham, but nobody pays much attention to them. Where vegetables are available in cans there is no fresh equivalent on the shelves; however very occasionally some customers who lack an ingredient at home will come to the store and ask the cook for an onion, a tomato or a bell pepper that she will get from the walk-in cooler.

Cigarettes set apart, three kinds of products make up most of sales: sweet drinks, snacks and hot food from the kitchen. "Big Hug" is one of the top-selling drinks: for only 50 cents, the barrel-shaped 16-ounce bottle is a great thirst-quencher. While there is no real juice in it, different fruit flavors are available, such as fruit punch, blue raspberry, orange and grape. The most popular snacks are Cheetos corn chips, often bought in threes as a single dollar will buy three little bags that would otherwise retail

for 38 cents each. Among favorites, one can also notice Hershey's chocolate bars and Little Debbie's pastries. In the kitchen, chicken and seafood platters (that is, fried catfish) are the most popular items on the menu. Both are served on top of large-cut fries in a polystyrene container.

Those items can be grouped into three characteristics. First of all, they are all quite cheap—cheaper than most of the food to be prepared at home, if one takes into accounts transportation to the nearest supermarket, shopping and preparation times as costs. For instance the generously-portioned chicken platter ("5 wings or 5 legs with fries or salad") costs US$4.59 with a drink offered, which is also cheaper than the fast food franchise next door where menus cost at least US$6. Second, these goods fall into some criteria of convenience: they are all readily available, do not require any preparation, and are easily eaten with the fingers as soon as one leaves the store—a few customers choose to eat inside the store, while other prefer to sit on the stairs of an apartment complex across the street. Third and finally, they all correspond to what one might call "comfort food," that is to say high-calorie, energy-dense rewarding foods, being rich in fats, sugar or salt—a feature known to food scientists as "palatability," and to the common man as "tastiness." Some items are even branded to evoke a sense of security and nostalgia: this is conspicuous in the packaging of Little Debbie's snacks, with their bold, rounded typefaces calling for "honey buns" or "marshmallow treats," or in the name of the sweet drink "Big Hug."

So why does virtually nobody buy apples? Apples are both cheap (50 cents each) and readily available but do not fall into the "comfort food" category. Foods rich in fats are not only a source of hedonic reward, they are also the most economical type of foods, that is to say the most calorific for each dollar spent (Darmon *et al.* 2002; Drewnoski 2004): on a limited budget, the decision to buy potato chips instead of an apple is thus a rational one. Furthermore, the taste for "comfort food" can be seen as a product of class structure, like those "proletarian hunger-killers" defined by anthropologist Sidney Mintz to characterize products such as sugar, coffee, rum and tobacco that became popular among British laborers in the nineteenth century, delivering quick energy, stimulus to greater effort and respite from reality (Mintz 1979: 60).[27] Could one imagine better "hunger-killers" than carbonated soft drinks, with their high sugar content and their stomach-filling properties due to carbonation?

Still, there is much more than a direct income effect that can account for the poor's consumption practices.[28] One can talk here about an effect of "compensatory consumption," as defined by David Caplovitz in his study of low-income families in New York City in the 1960s to express the meaning of mass consumption for those who "have little opportunity to base their self-respect and the respect granted them by others on occupational, educational, or other accomplishments" (Caplovitz 1963: 180), reflecting the pattern of "conspicuous consumption" that Veblen (1899) described as symbolizing the superiority of the upper classes. George Orwell used a similar metaphor in discussing

food habits of the unemployed in 1930s Great Britain, pointing to the need for unemployment to be "constantly palliated" by cheap, pleasant foods that had to denote abundance and the sense of ease one does not get in other aspects of life (Orwell 1958 [1937]: 96).

Among examples of this behavior is a young mother picking her boy up after school who buys eight bars of Hershey's chocolate at once—hardly an economically-driven decision. Another day, a seventy-year-old man buys two bags of ice with food stamps. Even if he has no freezer at home, as might be the case, this would still appear to the casual observer as an irresponsible use of money—after all, the food stamp program was designed to alleviate hunger and malnutrition, and ice is certainly not a necessity of life. However, this act can also be seen as a social statement, an affirmation of status and achievement despite all appearances, echoing Janet Fitchen's observations:

> When a poor person buys a steak, she or he is committing a symbolic inversion, performing an action associated with the rich and acquiring a food appropriate only to the rich. If the poor person gets the steak with food stamps rather than with cash, the purchase further violates what is thought to be appropriate … It mocks our sense of societal order that demands separation of rich and poor. (Fitchen 1988: 330)

Consumers are not the passive recipients of market forces: they engage with products in creative ways, investing them with meanings and purposes that can challenge the social order (de Certeau 1984 [1980]).[29] Neither are they the powerless victims of a conspiracy to poison them: the store's customers do know that some of their eating habits are not healthy, and for the most part do not need to be educated about it. One of them is a young mother, a regular who comes in almost every day to buy two bottles of cola; that day she goes to the counter with a selection of donuts, buns and rolls. She confesses to Mohamed: "I'm getting a bunch of junk," awaiting his answer to free her of her guilt. On another day, James, an obese unemployed man goes to the kitchen table with his chicken platter and liberally adds more salt to his fries. Arriving on the scene, Neshia screams: "Oh! That's too much salt! You want a blood pressure test? You're gonna die!," to which James answers, laughing: "That's how I want to leave!" This provocative statement can be seen as the embodiment of a Keynesian ethos, as a way to say: "In the long run, we are all dead." Such unwillingness to defer gratification is common among those who have little to expect from the future and thus have no incentive to subordinate present desires to future desires (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]: 180).

Ostentatious Displays of Desired Wealth

Compensatory consumption is at work in areas other than food: it is a defining feature of the customers' "presentation of self" (Goffman 1959). Playing with appearances, customers use a whole array of strategies to better their social status in the eyes of others: the minority who own a car may hang their keys on their belt or dramatically put them on the counter when they pay, in everyone's view;[30] women ostensibly carry their mobile phone, turning it into a fashion accessory among glittering earrings, necklaces, bracelets or sunglasses; an ex-nurse, currently unemployed, still wears her scrubs, and a jobless janitor even keeps his CB radio on; some customers wear their clothes with the price tag on, as to affirm that they have the means to buy those items. Such compensatory practices have been repeatedly observed by students of the American ghetto. Ulf Hannerz made similar observations on concern with clothing in a 1960s ghetto in Washington DC, referring after Erving Goffman to "impression management" and "exaggerated claims" (Hannerz 1969: 80–4), while in Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner*, the group referred to as "streetcorner men" devise a "shadow system of values" where "failures are rationalized into phantom successes and weaknesses magically transformed into strengths" (Liebow 1967: 214).

A minority of customers may resort to intimidation in asserting their economic power. One evening, a leaving customer warns Mohamed: "You've got a crowd coming!" A woman enters the store, followed by eight children and two men, wearing dreadlocks and long white shirts.[31] The children start to mix up the merchandise and put their hands into jars of candy, while the woman shouts at them to stop and wait outside, to no avail. Mohamed stoically watches the scene, without saying a word, but when the woman goes to the counter with all kind of snacks and candies, he asks her to recount her money. She looks at him defiantly and shouts: "You want to check me? I got a thousand dollars on me, do you think I care?," pulling out a wad of 100 dollar bills from her jacket front pocket that she violently puts down on the counter.

Of course, customers do not all measure social value against the same scale. Some may claim loftier, future-oriented interests, as demonstrated in the following example of a woman working for a non-profit human services agency, discussing with Mohamed the virtues of fruits and vegetables (and sex) in maintaining a good look:

Mohamed:	You're looking good, I guess you take a cup of coffee every morning?
Woman:	And fruits and vegetables.
Mohamed:	And maybe sex?
Woman:	No, they don't validate me.
Mohamed:	They say sex makes you look younger …
Woman:	But I got all from within.

Mohamed: So you don't need an exterior validation!

Woman: No, with the work I'm doing, it has to come from within.

This is also the case with a short middle-aged man, who declines to take a disposable bag for his shopping. Mohamed says to him, visibly inspired by our frequent sociological conversations:

Mohamed: It doesn't make you have a better status if you got a bag, actually if you don't got one you got a better status.

Man: I'm not perfect but I try!

Mohamed: Changing your habits, educate people, reduce the footprint…

Man: Yeah, I try to educate people about the environment.

Mohamed: Have a nice day, sir.

For others, claims of social value often focus on statements of comfort and abundance in food choices, or on ostentatious displays of (desired) wealth in clothing behaviors. But these strategies are mostly unconscious if not repressed: in order not to lose face, customers will not recognize that their tastes and the way they present themselves ultimately depend on their economic deprivation. Thus, what could be seen as a mark of social stigma can be reclaimed as an act of cultural pride, as illustrated by the following example.

Calvin is a forty-something man with an ever-present cap and a sharp moustache, living across the street from the store in a subsidized apartment paid for by Catholic Charities. Having spent some time in jail he stayed jobless for a while, before finding work as a dishwasher in a fashionable restaurant on a neighboring avenue; from time to time, Mohamed also pays him to do menial tasks, like cleaning and stacking the shelves. One evening, he comes to the store and buys a white and red checkered cap matching his shirt, cheerfully telling Mohamed he needs it for a date. The next day when he comes in, Mohamed asks him how his date went, and why he still has the price tag on his cap—to which Calvin answers defensively: "It's a black thing, you won't get it!," as if racial consciousness was the only way to reclaim one's shattered sense of social value.

Conclusion: Social Reasons and Moral Judgments

The contemporary food reform movement derives some of its appeal from a noble, democratic premise: that poor communities across the nation are trapped against their will in "unhealthy" eating habits, and that increasing access to affordable, "healthy" foods would free them from this injustice. Acknowledging the lack of participation of low-income black customers to initiatives aiming to increase fresh food access in their neighborhoods, I decided to pursue my investigation into a convenience store catering to this clientele. There, the customers' tastes for high-calorie, "comfort"

foods appeared to be determined partly by cost constraints (for instance when buying hot food from the kitchen), while in other situations, the same customer's purchases seemed removed from any economic consideration (when buying chocolate, ice or other "luxuries"). This apparent contradiction can be resolved by bringing food consumption back into its social context, putting it in relation to other practices: visible in food and clothes preferences but also in attitudes toward work, the dominant pattern of interactions within the store's customers appeared to be based on a concern for social respectability, objectified in the form of ostentatious, compensatory consumption practices. In return, the sense of belonging to a distinct ethnic group with its peculiar way of life seemed to legitimate and reinforce compensatory practices that could otherwise be interpreted as a mark of social stigma. Finally, if at times concerns for health and the environment were brought to the surface, the values embodied in the food reform movement appeared on the whole to be a world away from the customers' experiences.[32]

By assuming that the urban poor would eat more fresh produce if only it were more accessible to them, food reformers may project their own desires onto others, "outsiders" to the mainstream producing their own autonomous system of values.[33] Contrary to a reiterated claim made by social scientists, community activists, health professionals and other authorities, there does not seem to be an unmet demand for fresh fruits and vegetables in this city's poor black neighborhoods. This does not mean that the customers' tastes are the result of a deliberate choice. As I have argued in this paper, they can be explained, at least partly, by objective social conditions.[34] Therefore, as others have suggested, improving economic instead of physical access to fresh food might be a better strategy to deal with the obesity epidemic (Drewnowski *et al.* 2012; Jiao *et al.* 2012).

Scientists and philanthropists have long complained that the American working classes do not eat enough fruits and vegetables, and that they buy unnecessary luxuries. Most famously at the end of the nineteenth century, pioneer nutrition scientist Wilbur O. Atwater[35] called for a "dietary reform" directed in particular toward "the classes who work for small wages," and consisting in the "use of less food as a whole, and in many more cases in the use of relatively less meat and larger proportions of vegetable foods." Atwater did not hesitate to mix scientific facts with moral judgments, as he blamed "the extravagance of the poor" in their food choices, resting on "a curious foundation made up of pride, ignorance and indifference" (Atwater 1886).

While today's food reformers who look at popular food habits no longer talk about "ignorant" people with "extravagant" ways, they may unconsciously reproduce the same class prejudices that their predecessors openly expressed. This may take the form of taken-for-granted, naturalizing assumptions about the poor, such as their lack of nutritional knowledge and cooking skills,[36] or their irresponsible use of money, as was recently shown by proposed bans on using food stamps to buy soda, from New

York City to South Carolina (McGeehan 2011; Shanzenbach 2013). Some in the food reform movement are well aware of this prejudice, and struggle to make their voice heard. As an educator at a food bank and member of the food policy council put it, answering to the charge of elitism in the movement:

> That's sort of my issue, that's one of the things that really would get my blood pumping. You know, the Alice-Waters-slow-food folks … What people eat is a very personal thing. It's a very intimate experience. Pass those value judgments, no matter how you frame them, it's still a value judgment, and you're looking down somebody who is not eating the way you think.[37]

Appendix: Methodological Note—An Outsider among Regulars

Searching for a corner store to carry out observations, I decided to focus on the "Innertown"[38] neighborhood, having noticed a large amount of corner stores in the area during previous fieldwork on unrelated matters. Riding my bicycle on a winter Saturday afternoon, I stopped first at the "Royal Food Store."[39] As it was located only a couple of blocks from the place where I was living during my stay in the city, I naively hoped that I could pass as a neighbor there. Heading for the kitchen in the back of the store, I ordered a hamburger when the cook said to me: "Is it cold enough for you?" (the weather was then surprisingly cold and windy for the city's standards)—"At least you don't get cold when you're working on the grill," I replied, adding that I was used to severe winters in my homeland of Eastern France. As I was going to pay at the counter, the manager said to me, in French: "*Cinq dollars quarante-cinq, s'il vous plaît.*"

When I entered the store that day, I had noticed that the man behind the counter appeared to be of North African descent. If my impression was correct, then there was a chance he would speak French. Letting the cook know I was French, I hoped the manager would hear it, and that it would be a good conversation starter. And so it was: we talked for fifteen minutes or so about American cultural peculiarities, engaging in "folk ethnography"—"Why is it that Americans care so little about controlling their information?" I remember him asking me (we reverted to English after a few minutes, up to the end of my visits). I returned to the store two other times the following week, buying food and cigarettes, before I dared asking Mohamed if I could hang out there to do a sociological survey of the people's social interactions, their food and culture. He told me I was welcome anytime, if not on a daily basis. In return for his gratitude, I offered to help him at the store—he would accept it only once. From then on, putting my foot in the door, I would stay at the store for several hours every second day or so, over the next four months.[40]

I decided to observe and listen to the customers instead of interviewing them, to give them a chance to express their own classifications, and to avoid collecting data that would merely reflect my own values. At first I tried to keep a detailed account of the customers' purchases, but I soon realized that I could not grasp the social meanings of consumption practices without paying attention to other statements customers made in their dress, appearance and mundane conversations. On my first week there, I sat near the entrance door taking notes in my journal from time to time, until Mohamed told me to sit in the back after one customer apparently mistook me for an undercover cop and left.[41] Then, I used to spend more and more time at the counter, chatting with Mohamed, who would disclose details about the regulars after I gave him a copy of Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner*.[42] It was not until a few months later that he invited me to sit behind the counter.

During my long visits to the store, I had little success in making contact with the regulars, while those people who came to me were invariably outsiders: a few white neighbors and non-profit volunteers, an Ethiopian immigrant, a black real-estate investor, etc. Despite my good-hearted, if clumsy efforts to share more than a few words with the regulars, being a white upper middle class college graduate, I constantly hit against the "plate-glass pane"[43] or "chain-link fence,"[44] that stands between the observer and the observed.

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Notes

1 Becker himself refers to "people who are excessively fat or thin" as an example meeting the statistical definition of deviance (Becker 1963: 5).

2 Some 31.6 percent of black men are obese versus 25.4 percent of white men, and 39.2 percent of black women are obese versus 21.8 percent of white women (CDC 2009). Obesity prevalence is generally similar at all income levels among men, while it increases as income decreases among women (Ogden *et al.* 2010).

3 The first food policy council was founded in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1982 (Haughton 1987). As of 2012, according to the Community Food Security Coalition, there were close to 200 food policy councils in the United States and Canada, bringing together various stakeholders of the food system at the city, regional or state level.

4 At 28 percent, the city's obesity rate is five points above the national average according to the Centers for Disease and Prevention Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System in 2011.

5 In this case, the dominant model of knowledge is undoubtedly the quantitative social survey (or questionnaire), which, alongside the use of maps, is critical in framing the problem to secure grants from the government or foundations. Beyond their use of "hard" quantitative data, the success of these methods can be attributed to their totalizing, "democratic" coverage of an area or population (sample).

6 Naming this social group is no easy task as employing one term instead of another amounts to a statement on the respective importance of race, culture and class in its formation. Terms used by social scientists to describe it have ranged from the somewhat folkloric "ghetto dwellers" to the ideologically loaded notions of "underclass" and "black subproletariat," among others. I have here chosen to use the more neutral term "black urban poor" and its derivatives to describe the black residents of American cities living near or below poverty levels.

7 Supermarkets were defined as "full-service grocery outlets with three or more registers."

8 This observation echoes Warren Belasco's characterization of food co-ops as "nonprofit specialty stores supplying countercuisine staples to the already converted" (Belasco 2007 [1989]: 93), and Rachel Slocum's description of a Minneapolis farmers' market as catering to "the culturally middle class who might be some combination of bourgeois suburban, left, hippie, alternative, academic, non-profit urban or tourists out for a day in the market." (Slocum 2007: 528).

9 While those institutions often work as gateways for urban ethnographers exploring the "field" (Whyte 1943; Liebow 1967), they are rarely studied for their own sake. Among notable exceptions are Elijah Anderson's study of patrons of a bar and liquor store (Anderson 1978) and Mitchell Duneier's study of black working class men in a restaurant catering to a racially mixed clientele (Duneier 1992), both located in Chicago's South Side.

10 Progressive reformers' frustrated efforts to contain working class wage demands and to Americanize immigrants by promoting "scientific eating" at the turn of the twentieth century is well known to historians (Kirkland 1974; Levenstein 1980; Aronson 1982; Shapiro 1986; Jass 2004; Jou 2009). In another context, social scientists serving on the National Research Council's Committee on Food Habits during the Second World War have given a first-hand account of Americans' resistance to changing their food habits to adjust to wartime conditions (Mead 1943).

11 I have conducted several months of volunteer work with these two organizations and I am deeply indebted to their staff for their cooperation. I hope they will understand that the following critique aims to reveal the pitfalls of a system, and not individual failures.

12 Interview with the market manager at a restaurant, May 25, 2009.

13 Interview with the president of the CSA in his office , April 30, 2009.

14 I selected customers in a random fashion, inviting anyone who was leaving the store with food baskets and followed an interview grid composed of fourteen questions. Only one person refused to answer the survey, citing a lack of time. This sample amounts to roughly 15–20 percent of the CSA's estimated 100 to 150 weekly customers.

15 On "white flight" and "commercial devastation" in American inner cities in the 1960s and 1970s, see Cohen (2003: 370–87).

16 In the words of Kelly Brownell, director of Yale University's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, "It is always easy to advocate for more grocery stores, but if you are looking for what you hope will change obesity, healthy food access is probably just wishful thinking" (Kolata 2012).

17 In a review of the literature on food access and obesity, Martin White has similarly indicated that "the research presented so far does not provide strong evidence that food retailing in isolation affects diet" (White 2007).

18 According to OECD health data from 2011, the prevalence of obesity in the United States is 33.8 percent, in the United Kingdom 23 percent, in France 11.2 percent and in Italy 10.3 percent (OECD 2012).

19 This legacy is often claimed by epidemiologists researching environmental health issues, especially in the context of obesity prevention. For instance, see Tom Farley and Deborah Cohen's discussions of Edwin Chadwick (Farley and Cohen 2005: 21–36).

20 Julie Guthman talks about "supply-side interventions" to describe such localized efforts (Guthman 2011: 87–9).

21 On this field experience, see the methodological note in the appendix.

22 In any given year, the average murder rate in the city is between 50 and 100 per 100,000.

23 The average monthly food stamps benefits in the state amounts to US$300 per household (that is, a little more than 1 dollar per person per meal), which is on par with the national average.
24 Interview with Mohamed at a restaurant, April 11, 2010.
25 Urban ethnographers have pointed to the centrality of notions of "decency" and "respectability" as folk classifications among the urban poor (Bourgois 1995; Anderson 1999)
26 Mohamed makes a point of not selling alcoholic beverages, despite the fact that the store would be more profitable by doing so.
27 As a substantial part of the store's clientele is unemployed, one might argue that Mintz's framework is here irrelevant, as it applies to populations engaged in heavy manual labor in a particular phase and location of industrial capitalism. It might be replied that food habits and taste are deeply entrenched cultural patterns that do not quite keep up with economic fluctuations. That the last forty years have seen a rise in unemployment among the urban poor does not mean that they will readily abandon eating habits passed to them by generations of workers.
28 In a similar fashion, comparing family budgets from different European countries in his PhD thesis, durkheimian sociologist Maurice Halbwachs showed that the consumption patterns of industrial workers significantly differed from those of employees, even at the same income level (Halbwachs 1912).
29 Cooking figured prominently among the practices observed by de Certeau to account for the everyman's resistance to commodification (de Certeau *et al.* 1998 [1980]).
30 Mohamed observed the same behavior among Nouakchott's poor. This was not the first time my informer helped me in elaborating my observations. In many respects he could be mentioned as a co-author of the present study.
31 Also known as "white tees," these inexpensive and versatile clothes are sometimes associated with gang or criminal activity as they can make suspect identification more difficult.
32 If eating fresh, locally-grown or organic foods has become a status symbol among the American upper middle and upper classes (Johnston and Baumann 2010), this strategy of distinction is still foreign to the lower classes.
33 Pierre Bourdieu's work offers a theorization of these class-based cultural conflicts, defining "uses of body" as one of the last refuges of autonomy of working class culture (Bourdieu 1977: 53).
34 Another line of inquiry would have been to explore "cultural" factors in food choices as they relate to African-American history. The culinary tradition known today as "soul food" (or, depending on the perspective, "southern cuisine") was born of necessity, to make the best of rations of pork and cornmeal and leftovers from the master's table supplied to the slaves on the plantations (Douglas Opie 2008).
35 The son of a Methodist minister, Wilbur Olin Atwater (1844–1907) obtained a PhD in chemistry at Yale and studied nutrition in Germany under Carl von Voit before directing the country's first agricultural experiment station at Wesleyan University.
36 While this study design did not collect data on cooking, the few surveys available seem to indicate that the popular classes possess as much cooking skills, cook more and eat fewer ready-to-eat meals than the middle and upper classes (Darmon and Drewnowski 2008: 1,112).
37 Interview with an educator at a food bank, January 22, 2010.
38 Fictitious name.
39 Fictitious name.
40 I ended my observations when Mohamed sold his store to a second-generation Vietnamese immigrant, in order to join his wife who was living out of state. Two years later when I came back to the city, the store was closed, its wall paintings covered up.
41 Being mistaken for police is a very common experience among urban ethnographers (Whyte 1943; Bourgois 1995).
42 Once he read it, when asked about the book's relevance to his own experience, Mohamed replied: "It was like watching a movie for a second time."
43 "Whichever way you turn this curse of class-differences confronts you like a wall of stone. Or rather it is not so much like a stone wall as the plate-glass pane of an aquarium; it is so easy to pretend that it isn't there, and so impossible to get through it." (Orwell 1958 [1937]: 156).
44 "Whether or not there is more to these citations than 'Some of my best friends are …' or 'Yes, but you're different,' the wall between us remained, or better, the chain-link fence, since despite the barriers we were able to look at each other, walk alongside each other, talk and occasionally touch fingers." (Liebow 1967: 250–1).

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