



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Social Science & Medicine

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/socscimed

The neoliberal diet and inequality in the United States

Gerardo Otero ^{a,*}, Gabriela Pechlaner ^b, Giselle Liberman ^a, Efe Gürçan ^c^a Simon Fraser University, School for International Studies, 7200-515 West Hastings Street, Vancouver, BC V6B 5K3, Canada^b Department of Sociology, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, BC, Canada^c Simon Fraser University, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 April 2015

Received in revised form

1 July 2015

Accepted 3 August 2015

Available online 6 August 2015

Keywords:

Obesity

Inequality

Food

Nutrition

Diet

Neoliberalism

Health inequalities

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses increasing differentiation of U.S. dietary components by socioeconomic strata and its health implications. While upper-income groups have had increasing access to higher-quality foods, lower-to-middle-income class diets are heavily focused on “energy-dense” fares. This neoliberal diet is clearly associated with the proliferation of obesity that disproportionately affects the poor. We provide a critical review of the debate about obesity from within the critical camp in food studies, between individual-focused and structural perspectives. Using official data, we show how the US diet has evolved since the 1960s to a much greater emphasis on refined carbohydrates and vegetable oils. Inequality is demonstrated by dividing the population into households-income quintiles and how they spend on food. We then introduce our Neoliberal Diet Risk Index (NDR), comprised of measures of food-import dependency, the Gini coefficient, rates of urbanization, female labor-force participation, and economic globalization. Our index serves to measure the risk of exposure to the neoliberal diet comparatively, across time and between nations. We conclude that only a societal actor like the state can redirect the food-production system by modifying its agricultural subsidy policies. Inequality-reducing policies will make the healthier food involved in such change widely available for all.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

While the United States dominates the modern agricultural paradigm and its associated dietary patterns, it is nonetheless generating an acute dilemma within its own borders. On one hand, it has the most profitable and successful agribusiness multinational corporations. On the other, it is exacerbating what we term “the neoliberal diet,” composed of what is popularly known as “junk food” but also a broader range of highly processed and convenience products than the chips, pop and candy traditionally associated with the tem junk food. A watershed decision came in 1973, under President Richard Nixon, when the Food and Drug Administration repealed a 1938 law requiring the food industry to include the word “imitation” when a natural food was adulterated. The new requirement only stipulated that such edibles be “nutritionally equivalent” to real food: “Adulteration had been repositioned as food science,” said Michael Pollan (2008:36). These industrial, edible commodities are what nutritionists identify as “energy-dense” foods, which are usually highly processed, have high contents of fat and “empty calories” and low nutritional value

(Drewnowski and Specter, 2004; Drewnowski and Darmon, 2005; Nestle, 2006; Popkin, 2009). The health repercussions of this dietary shift, heavy on trans fats, are apparent as obesity becomes labeled a national epidemic due to mounting costs: according to America's Institute of Medicine, the United States spends about \$190 billion a year on obesity-related illnesses (Howard, 2012:13; Nestle, 2013:393).

Whereas the USDA estimates that about 12% of the U.S. population continues to face food insecurity (Nord et al., 2004), we argue that the core nutritional issue in the United States is not whether people have sufficient access to food, but what quality of food is accessible to most. The global food crisis set off in 2007–2008 has made even the US working classes vulnerable to price fluctuations, food insecurity and increased their exposure to the energy-dense, nutritionally-compromised food that typifies the neoliberal diet. This type of food is the most price-accessible to lower-income groups, which rise in numbers and proportion with greater levels of income inequality. Worsening income inequality has been drastic in the United States and drew much public and scholarly attention after the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011–2012 (e.g., Galbraith, 2012; Piketty, 2014).

In this paper, we discuss how classes or socioeconomic strata in the United States have increasingly differentiated diets. Upper-

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: otero@sfu.ca (G. Otero).¹ Web page: <http://www.sfu.ca/people/otero/html>.

income groups have growing access to higher quality and/or higher value-added foods like meats, imported fresh fruits and vegetables, wines and other alcoholic beverages (Otero et al., 2013), while the diets of low-to-middle-income classes are heavily focused on the energy-dense pseudo foods associated with the proliferation of obesity in the United States. The neoliberal diet is the nutritional expression of what Pechlaner and Otero (2008, 2010) have called the neoliberal food regime. It is the industrial diet as it becomes globalized under the impetus of neoliberalism, the international realignments and historically and geographically variegated national/local regulatory trends in global political economy since the 1980s.

The defining characteristic of neoliberalism is its reliance on market-based arrangements and norms in the interest of monopoly capitalism through active use of state power (Peck, 2010). Neoliberal ideology and practice proposes that the best way to achieve human welfare is through the liberation of individual entrepreneurial abilities within an institutional framework characterized by solid private-property rights, free markets and trade (Harvey, 2005: 2). The withdrawal of direct state intervention in the economy is also critical for neoliberal globalism so as to allow the private sector to take hold of resource allocation, presumably in a more efficient manner. Neoliberal discourse has been hegemonic since the 1980s to the point that it has become the common sense basis on which the world is lived, interpreted, and understood (Harvey, 2005: 3).

The U.S. government (and those of other wealthy nations) has always been inconsistent with neoliberalism regarding state intervention: it continues to heavily subsidize its agriculture while promoting neoliberalism for the rest of the world. It also selectively practices trade protectionism for some of its sectors and industries, including some agricultural products (McMichael, 2009; Otero et al., 2013). Neoliberal capitalism has represented a frontal attack on working class rights in the market, e.g., by undermining unions and citizenship rights of even the market-dependent, liberal welfare states characteristic of Anglo-American nations until the 1980s (Coburn, 2004:44). As for the neoliberal food regime, its key dynamic factors are state neoregulation, which promotes the central economic role of agribusiness multinationals, and agricultural production based on biotechnology as its key technological form. Much of the neoliberal diet can ultimately be traced to transgenic crops such as corn and soybeans—the most subsidized US crops (Pollan, 2008:117)—used for the production of livestock or processed food, including high-fructose corn syrup (Pechlaner and Otero, 2008, 2010).

In this paper, we first offer a brief literature review on the class and inequality dynamics of dietary consumption. Much of this literature focuses on the individual as the chief locus to address obesity, as if consumers had equal economic chances of choosing their food. Our major goal is to contribute to this literature by providing an index that measures the risk of exposure to the neoliberal diet and highlighting the structural determinants of food choice. The second section begins our analysis with macro data from the UN FAOSTAT, demonstrating how the US diet has evolved since 1961. It shows an increasing emphasis on fats and high-caloric foods. Next we compare and contrast the patterns of U.S. household food consumption for five income quintiles for 1972, 1984, 2006, and 2012 to illustrate the consequences of inequality. We then offer five socioeconomic indices towards the construction of a new index of the risk of exposure to the neoliberal diet, which we label NDR. We demonstrate how the NDR has changed 1985, i.e., soon after neoliberal reforms were initiated, to 2007, the year when the global food-price inflation crisis started. Our analysis shows that food systems and social inequality constitute structural realities, placing most solutions well beyond individual choice. We thus conclude that the state is the only social agency that can ameliorate the deteriorating food quality and security situation, as well as

inequality and the increasing health risks they have generated.

1. Class and inequality in dietary consumption: the state of the literature

There is general support in the academic literature for the correlation between various socioeconomic-related variables and diet (Darmon and Drewnowski, 2008; Dixon, 2009; Drewnowski, 2009; Drewnowski and Specter, 2004; Dubowitz et al., 2008; Larson et al., 2009; Lee, 2011; Thirlaway and Upton, 2009). The social class dimension of this correlation is encapsulated in Andrea Freeman's (2007: 2245) term of “food oppression”, a “form of structural subordination that builds on and deepens pre-existing disparities along race and class lines.” According to Freeman, governmental support of the fast food industry—through industry-friendly subsidies for animal feed, sugar and fats—serve to reduce the cost of fast food and create a structural constraint on dietary choices. For example, a report by the Economic Research Service (ERS) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) itself discusses how government policies helped make corn sweeteners less expensive than sugar, through mechanisms such as “investments in public research that raised yields for corn, sugar production allotments and trade restrictions, and subsidies for corn production” (Morrison, Buzby and Wells, USD ERS, 2010:17). Consequently, the availability of sweeteners increased from 113.2 pounds per person between 1924 and 1974 (excluding the war years) to 136.3 pounds per person in 2008. No doubt this ease of access and affordability has something to do with the unhealthy increase in soft-drink consumption.

Julie Guthman also contends that the current problems in our food system—and thus the source of their resolution—have to do with the nature of capitalism (Guthman, 2011: 16). More specifically, Kathryn Thirlaway and Dominic Upton's (2009) show that “people living on a low income have higher rates of diet-related diseases than other people” (Thirlaway and Upton, 2009:58). Most notable of these health impacts is the proliferation of obesity that disproportionately affects the poor (Dixon, 2009; Drewnowski and Specter, 2004; Drewnowski, 2009; Popkin, 2009). Drawing on an extensive review of existing literature, Hedwig Lee (2011) concludes that social inequality is closely linked to the question of obesity in the United States at the individual-, family-, school-, and neighborhood-level. Furthermore, Katherine Mason (2012) has shown that obesity itself has become a new basis for discrimination and furthering inequality, affecting women more severely than men.

The reasons why diets differ by socioeconomic class are less straightforward, although a number of variables have been identified. A key mediating factor between socioeconomic status and diet is the simple fact that highly processed, high fat, high sugar, energy dense junk food is usually more affordable. Fresh fruits and vegetables and leaner proteins are far more expensive (Lee, 2011). Drewnowski and Specter's (2004) analysis of food energy and cost found an “inverse relation between energy density and energy cost ... [suggesting] that ‘obesity-promoting’ foods are simply those that offer the most dietary energy at the lowest cost” (2004: 9). In general, “dry foods with a stable shelf life are generally less costly (per MJ [megajoule]) than perishable meats or fresh produce” (9). Thus, for example, the energy cost of cookies or potato chips was ~20 cents/MJ, but ~95 cents/MJ for carrots (9).

Not only is healthy food more expensive, but it also may be more difficult to obtain for lower income individuals and racial minorities due to accessibility issues. This issue taps into the food deserts literature (e.g., Gordon et al., 2011; Shaw, 2006; Walker et al., 2010; Guptill et al., 2013), with its admittedly inconsistently defined concept that indicates some form of exclusion or impediment to

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7331682>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7331682>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)