

Let Us Eat Cake: The Paradox of Scarcity

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Huffington Post:

Everyone knows by now that the U.S. is in the midst of an obesity epidemic, but for all the hand wringing, nobody really knows why. Experts have offered many theories about why Americans eat too much, especially too much fattening food, but these remain theories. It's because Americans are ill-informed about diet and nutrition and simply do not understand that double cheeseburgers are loaded with fat and calories. Or it's because we're constantly bombarded with stimulating ads for tempting but unhealthful snacks. Or it's because we simply lack the self-discipline of earlier generations. Or all of the above.

Or perhaps something else entirely. Two University of Miami marketing experts, Juliano Laran and Anthony Salerno, are now offering a new and provocative idea about why Americans make poor food choices, along with some preliminary evidence to back it up. They contend that the news we're exposed to every day, specifically information about the economic crisis, adversity, and struggle in a harsh world, is triggering a live-for-today mindset that makes us shortsighted about diet. For reasons rooted deep in our evolutionary past, living in a harsh world makes us focus on immediate reproductive success, which makes us fiercely competitive for scarce resources. This sense of immediacy makes us dismiss the future and focus on the here and now, including a filling diet rich in calories. Once adaptive, this life strategy leads, in modern-day America, to too many French fries and helpings of chocolate mocha ice cream.

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