

# Food Apartheid

BY MARNI SOUPCOFF

**T**his past summer, Los Angeles decided to get tough. The L.A. City Council put a moratorium on fast food joints in South Los Angeles, stopping them from opening any new stores in the area's poor neighborhoods for at least one year. When the deed was done, gleeful activists celebrated the event, declaring themselves relieved that someone had finally taken a firm stand on Lalaland's "food apartheid."

By "food apartheid," the supporters of the moratorium mean — well, I'm not totally sure. They seem to be trying to characterize the difference between the wealthy parts of the city, where fresh fruits and vegetables are readily available at grocery stores and markets, and the poor parts of the city, where fresh food means French fries just out of the fryer.

Why exactly are activists equating a preponderance of golden arches in South L.A. with a violent and racially discriminatory South African government regime? Presumably because they skipped English class the day the teacher lectured on the proper use of metaphor. But also because they think poor people are helpless idiots who can't be trusted to make their own choices.

The moratorium champions and the city council members are hung up on the idea that anyone who isn't shopping for locally grown fennel at Whole Foods must have lost his free will along with his cash (if he ever had either to begin with). Honest demand for burgers and processed cheese be damned. If there isn't enough fresh produce being sold to the city's down and out, it must somehow be the sellers' fault for hawking too many tacos. A population that voluntarily chooses a Big N' Tasty over fresh sashimi? These people obviously can't be held responsible for their own actions.

The main justification for the moratorium is higher obesity rates in Los Angeles's impoverished areas. Apparently, people are squeezing into short shorts in Brentwood, but they're busting out of their baggy jeans in the ghetto. So concerned busybodies have declared a public health emergency. Never mind that half of Brentwood probably suffers from health-eroding eating disorders, or that it's possible that the different ethnic composition of South L.A. means the area is more

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likely to be home to heavier body types, regardless of how many drive-thrus there are. It's easier just to conclude that McDonald's et al. are killing poor people, and all will be well if only the council members can keep out that new Taco Bell.

So how is the moratorium supposed to work to end food apartheid?

(And, no, there are no bonus points for pointing out, as *Slate's* William Saletan and others have, that a policy that segregates restaurants based on the customers' geography — which in this case tends to be a proxy for race or ethnicity — is a far better candidate to be called food apartheid than an open market.)

Much of the hope rests on produce-heavy grocery stores, fresh food markets, and "healthy restaurants" popping up in place of the verboten eateries. Here the solution runs into a little snag: Why would any business choose to situate itself in an area full of people who have demonstrated little to no interest in buying its products? If there were a market for organic beets in Baldwin Hills, someone would already be selling them there. Putting the kibosh on a new Burger King isn't going to create a sudden demand for mesclun greens.

Even if stores like Whole Foods were somehow forced to set up shop in the south of the city (and the way things are going, I wouldn't rule it out), there's no reason to believe the residents would actually shop at these high-priced grocers. ("Hmm, should I spend my latest paycheck on a molasses spelt bread roll or the rent?") And if they did shop there, there's no reason to believe they'd buy lettuce and spinach rather than organic Tater Tots and SpaghettiOs if their priority is quick and cheap food.

The last thing people need, particularly when they are struggling (be it with poverty, drugs, gang violence, or other problems rampant in South L.A.) is bossy government swooping in like Richard Simmons and declaring take-away tamales off limits. What better way to add insult to injury?

And what better way to cut off entrepreneurial opportunities for residents who might otherwise have started their own hot dog stands or pit barbecue take-out joints or taquerías? Unlike a Popeye's or Wendy's, these small business people don't have the means to open up in another part of town.

It may not be food apartheid, exactly. But L.A.'s fast food moratorium sure tastes like a discriminatory abuse of power. **R**