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# Gastrophilanthropy: Utopian Aspiration and Aspirational Consumption as Political Retreat


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**Gastrophilanthropy: Utopian Aspiration and Aspirational Consumption as Political Retreat / Patricia Mooney Nickel and Angela M. Eikenberry**

**Abstract:** In this paper we inquire into the practice of gastrophilanthropy—the individualized consumption of food products under the aegis of philanthropic action. In particular, we examine the case of the philanthropic cupcake. By positioning gastrophilanthropy within the complex of consumption and social relations of power we attempt to shed light on why it has become so well accepted in society today and how the impulse to consume and the impulse to be philanthropic relate to each other and to the contemporary political moment. We question the transformative impact of gastrophilanthropy on those who practice it and on those for whom it is supposedly practiced.

**Keywords:** Benevolence; Consumption; Cupcakes; Philanthropy.

**Introduction**

<1> In the Highland Park neighborhood of Dallas, a fashionably-dressed woman stands in front of a counter, nearly quivering in anticipation of the luxury she is about to enjoy. She takes in the tempting patterns of pink ribbons and deep chocolate browns behind the glass. Beads of sweat break out on her forehead as she imagines momentary release in the varying soft folds of glittering red velvets and buttery vanillas. Although she desires to devour the whole scene, she coyishly announces to the man behind the counter, "I really only should have one." Finally overcoming her indecision, she announces, "I will have the Earth Day Vanilla Cupcake." [1] And, "I know that it's a bit bad of me, but give me a Pink Ribbon Cupcake, too. [2] For later. Everyone deserves a treat now and then, right? And it is for a good cause, after all." The employee behind the counter takes her seven dollars, hands her the products/philanthropy, and she rushes to the parking lot outside Sprinkles, labelled by the Los Angeles Times as "the progenitor of the haute cupcake craze" (Los Angeles Times, 2009, para. 5). Once seated behind the wheel of her Mercedes SUV, she opens the brown box and her tension momentarily releases as she immediately consumes both charitable acts - alone and in six bites.

<2> Scenes like this one in Dallas are repeated in similarly developed cities around the world, where physical hunger and emotional emptiness coexist with abundant wealth and abundant declarations of benevolence. This ravenous political state - a confused grumbling involving physically malnourished people without access to enough nutritional food existing alongside emotionally malnourished people who have so many non-nourishing foods to eat that they often seem helpless to stop - hints at how social problems that ought to be treated as political questions have been displaced by the framing of social problems as "philanthropic" opportunities. This complex practice, in which utopian aspiration for a better future is distorted and sequestered in individuals seeking comfort and escape, while simultaneously producing a fashionable philanthropic persona through quickly digested lifestyle choices, drains the slower act of reflection of one's political relationship to others as it stabilizes the consumption-based aspirational ascetic necessary for the continuation of things as they are.

<3> Philanthropy takes many forms: large donations of cash, small donations of cash; donations of time, donations of goods; local giving, global giving; establishment of foundations, establishment of relationships; and, recently, philanthropy has taken the form of a cupcake--a fashionable international trend. As Damian Thompson observed in his discussion of cupcakes as the new cocaine:

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The Magnolia bakery in New York's West Village kicked off a cupcake craze when Carrie and Miranda visited it in an episode of *Sex and the City*... The episode was screened 12 years ago, and still the craze rages. Yummy mummies in cosmopolitan cities can't get enough of the things... We think we like cupcakes because they are 'retro' and transport us back to our childhoods. Nonsense. The nostalgia thing is an excuse. We actually like them because they allow us to mainline sugar. (Thompson, 2012, para 2)

The "philanthropy thing" associated with some cupcakes is not only another excuse to mainline sugar; it is also an excuse for consumption in general.

<4> In all of its manifestations, the practice of philanthropy is infused with meaning and contests over this meaning offer a lens into the realtions of power that influence human well-being. The consumption of philanthropic cupcakes belongs to the relatively uncontested practice of what we identify as gastrophilanthropy—the individualized consumption of food products under the aegis of philanthropic action. In this paper we inquire into the practice of gastrophilanthropy by focusing on the latent utopian aspiration that gives rise to the desire to consume philanthropic foods and its contrast with the present social conditions that this practice stabilizes. We begin with an exploration of the social relations involved in the practice of philanthropy by way of utopian aspiration and consumption. Next, we critically observe the contemporary practice of and celebration of gastrophilanthropy and argue that it contributes to the myth that the present can be improved through aspirational consumption. Finally, given the implications of these practices, we question the transformative impact of gastrophilanthropy on those who practice it and on those for whom it is supposedly practiced.

#### **Philanthropy, Utopian Aspiration, and Consumption [3]**

<5> Like all practices that govern the perception and distribution of wealth in order to impact the well-being of individuals, philanthropy is a social relation (Ostrander & Schervish, 1990). It is the practice of the self in relation to the world (stabilization, transformation, confusion, fear) that involves expression of our attitude towards others (contempt, care, solidarity). In order to understand the recent spread of the practice of gastrophilanthropy and its promise of transformation and improved human well-being through the consumption of luxurious foods, we begin with philanthropy's professed ideal: aspiration towards a better future. The practice of philanthropy governs utopian aspiration specifically because it originates in imagination about a better future: it is potentially transformative and thus it is a target of governing (Nickel, 2012).

<6> Philanthropy is the practice of aspiration and, as a potential basis for transformative practice, the meaning of aspiration is decidedly political. On the one hand, to aspire is to breathe into (Onions, 1974). In this sense, aspiration can give life to the present. It can constitute what exists as valuable and sustain it through the infusion of practice, which comes to seem like preference - aspiration becomes the practice of reification of the present as though it is a choice collectively made within the parameters of an economy which supposedly cannot be altered. On the other hand, aspiration conveys a desire for something above oneself (Onions, 1974). In this sense, to aspire is to be motivated by concern with the well-being of others. Both of these meanings are manifest in the contemporary practice of philanthropy. On the one hand, to infuse the practice of consumption with philanthropic sentiment seems to represent our longings for something above ourselves. Yet, on the other hand, this longing seems disciplined by a false imperative to breathe life into the compulsion to consume in the present, with all of its failings.

<7> In introducing *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age*, Russell Jacoby wrote: "Every generalization is false. We live in an age of hope and transformation. We also live in an age of resignation, routine, and perhaps alarm. We anticipate the world will get better; we fear it will get worse. We exist amid incredible riches and paralyzing poverty... for both the prosperous and the destitute utopian ideals are as dead as doornails" (2005, p. 1). It is no wonder, then, that a woman locks herself into an SUV with a box of supposedly guiltless philanthropic cupcakes and the momentary escape into the promise of a better tomorrow. If this practice originates in a utopian impulse, when it is directed into sugar consumption this impulse fails to be realized as political action. As Bauman (2007b) notes:

escape now becomes the name of the most popular game in town. Semantically, escape is the very opposite of utopia, but psychologically it is, under present circumstances, its sole available substitute: one might say its new, updated and state-of-the-art rendition, refashioned to the measure of our deregulated, individualized society of consumers. You can no longer seriously hope to make the world a better place to live; you can't even make really secure that better place in the world which you may have managed to carve out for yourself. (p. 104)

Bauman's observation highlights how in the contemporary political moment there are few sites of action beyond consumption in which to direct one's longing to escape or one's longing to make the world a better place.

<8> Gastrophilanthropy seems to many to offer comfort in the temporary sense of escape associated with sugary treats. As Thompson observed: "Cupcakes and mini-bites don't just play havoc with our blood sugar levels: they reinforce the sense, very strong among hard-pressed urban professionals, that life is only bearable if we reward ourselves" (Thompson, 2012, para 27) - a guilt perhaps assuaged by the philanthropic aspect of one's treats. This desire for a sense of release from the realities of everyday life through sugar consumption antedates the cupcake. As Sydney W. Mintz observed of the British sugar trade, dating back to 1650, "[S]ugar was an ideal substance. It served to make busy life seem less so; in the pause that refreshes, it eased, or seemed to ease, the changes back and forth from work to rest; it provided swifter sensations of fullness or satisfaction than complex carbohydrates did ...." (Mintz, 1985, p. 186). The contemporary philanthropic cupcake not only offers the comfort of sugar, but also the personal and social rewards of the philanthropic label of benevolence; consumption of a philanthropic cupcake as though it is an act of benevolence is in practice an act of political retreat that redirects the utopian impulse into the stabilization of the present.

<9> Gastrophilanthropy belongs to the broader practice of philanthropic consumption (Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009). These philanthropic consumables promise a charitable benefit and, as they do so, they make a claim on the present as problematic and also a claim on a better future, to which their consumption allegedly will contribute. For some observers, "political consumption" represents an opportunity of revolutionary proportions. Ulrich Beck, for example, argues that:

the counter-power of global civil society is based on the figure of the political consumer... not buying certain products and therefore casting a vote against the politics of corporations... is completely free of risk. Nonetheless, this counter-power of the political consumer has to be organized... and requires a carefully planned dramaturgy in the public media... The consumer stands beyond the master-slave dialectic. His counter-power results from being able to refuse to make a purchase, at any time and any place. (2005, p. 7)

Beck's certainty that a transformation of global politics is taking place through a deeper embedding of the global practice of consumption wrongly conflates market participation and political action (see Grey & Nickel, 2009). He "delivers up a new kind of serf: the individual as consumption power" (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 85). Philanthropic consumption, like any type of consumption, is never completely free of risk any more than the conditions of labor are free of risk. Neither is it political to refuse to make a purchase at a time when so many are unable to purchase basic necessities such health care, shelter, or nutritious food.

<10> Beck's "global civil/consumer society," composed of individuals/consumers who "buy differently" is not an indication of liberation that might lead to social betterment, but it is an indication of the changing demands of consumer society and the individualization of responsibility for political issues and problems. Such practices of political consumption serve to postpone, redirect, or quash altogether the impulse to collectively or otherwise resist the impact of contemporary relations of consumption on well-being and mystifies our consumption of philanthropic foods, which are divorced from those whom they are supposed to benefit through some ambiguous donation of a "percentage of profit." As Luke (1989) argues: "The underlying social logic of consummativity under corporate capitalism never openly manifests itself. Instead it is masked as a democratic and economic revolution 'rooted in the democratic alibi of

universals' like religion, egalitarian humanism, or democratic populism..." (p. 111) - or the democratic alibi of the universal of benevolent philanthropy.

<11> While many consumers are perhaps becoming more aware that consumption is more detrimental than beneficial to human well-being, they are offered more and more opportunities to ease these worries by buying products that are supposedly green, fairly traded, or philanthropic. These practices pose no challenge to the assumption of "consumer sovereignty" or the fact that these purchases reward ever-increasing consumption (Princen, Maniates, & Conca, 2002, p. 2). The philanthropic cupcake, like the green car or the fairly-traded chocolate bar, has a built-in alibi that does not result in less consumption, but in more consumption.

<12> The myth of a global consumption imperative has been fairly successful in framing human well-being as being dependent upon "global economic growth," which is dependent on consumer participation and a regime of knowledge dedicated to the stabilization of individual "consumer power" (Maniates, 2002). Ethical consumer discourse, as Johnston notes, "contains a unifying logic suggesting that consumers can shop to satisfy their desires while producing an optimal social outcome" (2008, p. 241). Consumers "are increasingly asked to look beyond consumer capitalism's drab seriality and moral vacuity, to seek deeper meanings to wider life problems in a range of niche-marketed products bearing the stamp of rebellion, authenticity, simplicity, economic justice and ecological responsibility" (Binkley, 2008, p. 599). However, rather than instigating critical thought, these pre-packaged forms of corporatized resistance attempt to do our thinking for us (Grey & Nickel, 2008).

<13> Against this backdrop, state action - once the target of aspirations towards transformation - has been replaced by consumer action. As a result, actions to secure well-being once taken by the state "become a playground for the notoriously capricious and inherently unpredictable market forces and/or are left to the private initiative of individuals" (Bauman, 2007b, p. 2; see also Nickel & Eikenberry 2006, 2010.) While, with the decline of the welfare state, collective action and social solidarity have been dispersed and diluted "'community', as a way of referring to the totality of the population inhabiting the sovereign territory of the state sounds increasingly hollow" (Bauman, 2007b, p. 2). This voluntary state - a state that leaves matters of well-being to the voluntary and discretionary redistribution of individual wealth - places the burden on individuals to resolve the contradictions of capitalism in the consumption of a cupcake.

<14> The professed ideal of philanthropic consumption towards a utopian end in the wake of the decline of state responsibility for guaranteeing well-being of those negatively impacted by the market, coupled with an increased responsibility for guaranteeing the well-being of markets against a decline in buying power, begs the question: to what utopian vision does consumption breathe life into? Who benefits when we shorten the horizon of utopian aspiration to the consumption of haute cupcakes? Through the aegis of philanthropy, the practice of consumption breathes life into a global economy. It does not, however, result in more well-being for more people in the world. The result of aspirational consumption is that the quest to display "who one is" through consumption of philanthropic products not only further embeds consumption as a mode of social life, but also opens new avenues for a postlapsarian consumerist society that has been challenged by the sobriety and austerity of the recent economic crisis. This is because philanthropic consumers are involved not only in consumption, but also in the reproduction of a society of consumers. In its repackaging of social problems as the palatable products of the present, gastrophilanthropy marries utopian aspiration and consumption through the divorce of social problems and political dialogue; it collapses the longing for a utopian future and the longing for escape from the dystopian realities of the present.

#### **Aspirational Consumption: Political Treats as Political Retreat**

<15> The opportunity to consume treats politically has evolved into a far more sophisticated and commercialized practice than the original gastrophilanthropy involving bake sales, Girl Scout cookies in the U.S., or Girl Guide biscuits throughout the Commonwealth. Today, Sprinkles sells speciality cupcakes for Earth Day and breast cancer awareness; Duncan Hines markets a Cupcake Challenge, in which they invite bakers to bake and sell 1 million cupcakes to support Share Our Strength's Great American

Bake Sale® to help end childhood hunger; Box Tops for Education rewards the consumption of cereal (and, recently, other products, including "disposable tableware" by Hefty®); philanthropic foods are ubiquitous in high end markets, where one can purchase candy (Endangered Species Chocolate™, which may cancel out one's purchase of disposable tableware for education), yogurt (Stonyfield Farms™) and snack bars (KIND Fruit + Nut™); the Scott L. Schwartz Celebrity Cupcake Charity Events invites celebrities to "name" their favorite cupcake, or ask the baker to design a custom cupcake on their behalf; [4] in between episodes of Cupcake Wars featuring creative competitions in excessiveness, the Food Network advertises its participation in the No Kid Hungry campaign to end childhood hunger by 2015; and celebrity Jon Bon Jovi has opened a "charity restaurant" called The Soul Kitchen, where "hope is delicious" (Jon Bon Jovi Soul Foundation, 2012). While the critical practice of philanthropy would instigate utopian thought about social problems, gastrophilanthropy treats social problems as an opportunity to sell more, eat more, and to celebrate those who have accumulated wealth.

<16> The practice of utopian aspirations toward a better future takes place in the present and in the present aspiration frequently is embedded in an ascetic that encourages consumption as a display of one's worth. As we argued above, in its benevolent sense, philanthropy is the practice of aspiration towards a future that originates in a longing for something beyond oneself. Consumption is the practice of aspiration as well, but consumption involves breathing life into the present. "The rapturous satisfactions of consumption surround us, clinging to objects as if the sensory residues of the previous day in the delirious excursion of a dream... We believe in 'Consumption': we believe in a real subject, motivated by needs and confronted by real objects as sources of satisfaction" (Baudrillard 1981, p. 63). This "vulgar metaphysic," for Jean Baudrillard (1981), is made up of a complex of assumptions - "object, need, aspiration, consumption itself" (p. 63) - all of which are manifestations of historically situated social relations and all of which can be identified in the fashionable philanthropic cupcake.

<17> When embedded in consumption, philanthropy takes on the social relations of consuming and is therefore, in part an act of pleasing oneself, in part participation in a stratified economy, and in part an expression of one's taste and social status. Philanthropic consumption infuses objects - products - with these expressions: it assigns a meaning to them that they do not possess outside of social relations. A cupcake is not organically philanthropic, nor is it particularly nourishing, and yet many rationalize its consumption as an act of satisfying the needs of others and nourishing the self.

<18> For some, the contemporary aspiration to consume in order to appear wealthy - to demonstrate one's place in a society that values the accumulation of wealth - is so strong that it sustains a black market of status indicators: those who cannot afford a luxury handbag can rent one in order to convey the impression that they are wealthy. "It's like having access to a celebrity's closet! Think of Bag Borrow or Steal as your 'pinch me this can't be true' closet - full of the most coveted designer handbags and accessories. All waiting for you to enjoy! See how fast, easy and fun it is to rent authentic luxury" (Bag, Borrow, or Steal, 2012).

This market for access to celebrity subjectivity through luxury credentials, like the charity cupcakes commissioned by celebrities, belies a mechanism of aspirational power (Baudrillard, 1981). If one needed a handbag to carry things, the price of a luxury rental would cover the ownership of a suitable object. But the "question of consumption is not clarified by the concept of needs... these phenomena are no more than the characteristic effect, at the individual level, of a certain monopolistic productivity, of a totalitarian economy (capitalist or socialist) driven to conjuring up leisure, comfort, luxury, etc..." (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 85). The renter of authentic luxury is "the ultimate realization of the private individual as a productive force" (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 85). This practice of consummativity, for Baudrillard, is a mode of productivity: individuals who rent luxury handbags seen in the hands of celebrities and who consume cupcakes named by celebrities are involved not in the production of vital needs, but in the production of "cultural" needs. They produce aspirations and the system needs aspiration:

The system of needs must wring liberty and pleasure from him as so many functional elements of the reproduction of the system of production and the relations of power that sanction it... In this system, the 'liberation' of needs, of consumers, of women, of the

young, the body, etc., is always really the mobilization of needs, consumers, the body... It is never an explosive liberation, but a controlled emancipation, a mobilization whose end is competitive exploitation. (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 85)

Through this lens, we can understand the escape into sugar consumption with the built in alibi of philanthropy as a controlled emancipation: the mobilization of aspiration on behalf of the present.

<19> Like other "democratizations" of aspirational consumption, cupcakes have not only become a fashionable gastronomical luxury, they have become a fashionable gastronomical luxury for the handbag aspirant. If one cannot afford a Louis Vuitton purse for \$1,200 or if one simply wants to further associate oneself with its sign value, Cupcake Envy (2012) makes "Fashion Theme Cakeletes" including a Tiffany's shopping bag cakelete, an Ugg boot cakelete, or a Louis Vuitton purse cakelete: "Now you don't have to choose food over fashion - you can actually have your cakelet and eat it too! Cupcake Envy creates fashion that's actually good enough to eat!" The cakeletes retail for as much \$200 each, which, for many, is enough to feed a family for a week. Given that the cakelete is made up of no more than \$2 worth of food, how does it achieve a \$200 price tag? For Baudrillard, its value is "derived from relative distinction" (1981, p. 78, fn 17). The same is true of the philanthropic cupcake: if one wants a cupcake and one wants to be a philanthropist, both of these objectives can be achieved at less cost and more benefit if they are done separately; indeed, if one wanted to "do good" through the purchase of food, it would seem logical to purchase food for someone who has no food rather than purchase a treat for oneself. But the purchase of a philanthropic cupcake does more than philanthropy; it also allows for aspirational consumption, which, through Baudrillard's lens, is productive for a system that relies upon a philanthropic alibi.

<20> At the same time, for some, philanthropy satisfies the desire to be distinguished. When it is embedded in the medium of consumption, the practice of gastrophilanthropy reveals one's aspirations to display one's fit with taste makers in the present. While luxury goods distinguish the wealthy, luxury philanthropy is available to anyone with \$3.50 for a cupcake fashionably dressed in the latest cause; the cupcake becomes a target of branding. As Richard Sennett observed, in the new culture of capitalism "branding seeks to make a basic product seem distinctive... Imagining difference thus becomes all-important in producing profits. If differences can be magnified in a certain way, the viewer will experience the consuming passion. Gold-plating has changed the terms of planned obsolescence" (2006, pp. 143-147). The mundane cupcake can be distinguished by gold-plated insignias - as in the case of Louis Vuitton cakelette - or it can be distinguished by gold-plated philanthropic causes - as in the case of the Earth Day cupcake - without denying the consumer the consuming passions associated with sugar, luxury, and benevolence.

<21> The distinction of philanthropy is an aspirational goal for many because, like the handbag and the cakelete, it is a symbol of wealth, which is a symbol of the power that one possesses. In a profile of Stephen A. Schwarzman as "private equity's designated villain," James B. Stewart reported Yale president Richard C. Levin's remark that: "Now that he's reached a new level of liquidity, we hope that he'll become a world-class philanthropist" (2008, para 15). In Stewart's view, a "traditional measure of wealth is charitable activities and donations... In America, board memberships and contributions to worthy causes in the arts and education have traditionally helped cleanse a man of any taint of new money and can temper populist resentment of great wealth" (2008, para 12). Through this lens, philanthropy is not a measure of one's generosity, but of one's wealth and, to the extent that individuals aspire to appear wealthy, philanthropy becomes a display of status not unlike luxury cars or handbags. The display of one's tastes, status, obedience or disobedience through the practice of consumption philanthropy, which is one way in which consumption is given meaning, therefore is an act fraught with political significance (Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009). Although high-profile philanthropists often advocate a future in which well-being is universal, they frame such a future through the lens of aspiration towards wealth, not aspiration towards the transformation of how wealth is distributed.

<22> In their construction of the aspirations that one pursues in one's everyday life, contemporary ascetic practices, such as philanthropy, often aim to redirect utopian longings for transformation into longings to consume. Neoliberalism required a global economy sustained by the

distortion of utopian aspiration toward the goal of economic growth, which relied upon the individual aspiring to do that which would contribute to profit, rather than aspiring to collective action that would contribute to transformation. Aspiring towards wealth is productive for an economic system in which the legitimacy of governing relies upon harnessing individual aspirations to economic growth. In Baudrillard's (1981) understanding, the social logics of value and austerity produce an alibi for consumption: "Conspicuous luxury or conspicuous austerity answer to the same fundamental rule" (p. 77). The philanthropic cupcake is both conspicuous luxury (sugar, decadence) and conspicuous austerity (bite-sized discipline, philanthropic action).

<23> The need to encourage consummativity provides context for why philanthropy is so frequently conflated with the fashionable - the haute cupcake. Trendland (2012) asks, "How cool are these Fashion Cupcakes prop-styled by Lisa Edsalv and shot by Swede photographer Therese Aldgard. As if there weren't enough tasty treats on the runway, the duo created 5 delicious cupcakes, inspired by Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Christian Louboutin, Agent Provocateur and Betsey Johnson." For Baudrillard (1981) fashion is an: "apparently arbitrary and perpetual production of meaning - a kind of meaning drive... Truly beautiful, definitively beautiful clothing would put an end to fashion. The later can do nothing but deny, repress and efface it - while conserving, with each new outing, the alibi of beauty" (p. 79). Philanthropy as fashion and fashion as philanthropy produce meaning on behalf of the present: luxury for some and the alibi of the practice of benevolence. Yet, as Fred Davis notes, "it is precisely the differentiated, socially stratified character of society that fuels the motor of fashion and serves as the backdrop against which its movements are enacted" (1992, p. 9). The "fashion cupcake" packages what is - the differentiated, socially stratified character of society - into a beautiful treat as these stylized versions of stratification are bathed in their own philanthropic cleansing.

<24> Like the "massification" of other luxuries (Thomas 2007), the philanthropist's mark of distinction as one for whom it is possible to indulge in visible generosity is now available - in a less expensive version in the form of a philanthropic cupcake - to "the middle market"; the wealthy indulge in \$5,000 a plate benefits and galas, while lesser philanthropic gastronomic indulgences are available in the form of \$3.50 sugary concoctions. Through the consumption of sugar as philanthropy, one transforms the meaning of luxury and indulgence into a necessity to care for the poor or educate our children and the meaning of sugar consumption from excess to benevolence. This "pointillization" of consumption (Bauman 2007a, 105) gives consumption a philanthropic explanation at a time when consumption and the ability to affect social change look increasingly out of reach. Utopian vision is displaced as consumers direct their benevolent energies and longings for community into a market of placeless and faceless products, the consumption of which often is divorced from those whom they are said to benefit through the ambiguous donation of a "percentage of profit."

<25> In addition to the social relations of philanthropy and the social relations of consumption, gastrophilanthropy is also infused with the social relations of food, which is "a politicized, gendered, and globalized terrain where gendered labor and households intersect with states, capital, and civil society in varying balances" (Johnston 2008, 239). As Mintz (1985) observed, sugar was one of "the first objects within capitalism that conveyed with their use the complex idea that one could become different by consuming differently" (p. 185). Mintz notes that in British society sugar "was symbolically powerful, for its use could be endowed with many other meanings. No wonder the rich and powerful loved it so much, and no wonder the poor learned to love it" (Mintz, 1985, p. 186). The luxury of sugar was once an indicator of one's high class status; today, the uncontrolled consumption of too much sugar is an indication of one's low class status. The private consumption of a cheap cake from Wal-Mart by one obese person is a target of contempt; the public consumption of a philanthropic cupcake marked by distinction is a target of admiration.

<26> The philanthropic cupcake has become far more stylized and profitable than the sprinkled concoctions most of us recall from our childhoods. The cupcake is now a life-style product, judged for its aesthetic qualities as well as its fit with the entertainment industry. Its public consumption is an expression of one's orientation towards others and towards the world in which one lives, a fashionable moment of leisure, and a public cleansing



display of aspiring to provide for the needs of others. This was demonstrated in the Food Network's show, "Cupcake Wars," which includes episodes titled "Charity Golf Tournament" and "Good Cause Cupcakes." In "Good Cause Cupcakes," the host announces:

For the presentation challenge, you were asked to take your grown up aesthetics and apply them to a child's vision... Today's cupcake war was about more than just taste and presentation. It was about creating a cupcake display that bring as much attention to the great cause of the Children Mending Hearts Foundation as possible. Kara, today you proved yourself to be an artisan with cupcakes... So it comes down to this: How can you take your cupcakes and make them speak to a cause? (Cupcake Wars, 2012)

Indeed, gastrophilanthropy is exactly the answer to the question: How can you take your cupcakes and make them speak to a cause? Or, rather, how can you transform your individual consumption of luxury goods - taste and presentation - into a charitable act? How can you achieve a philanthropic alibi for that which is not philanthropic, while also reifying status hierarchies and ensuring your place within them?

<27> These competitions to display the best taste belong to what Luke called entertainmentality - the way in which entertainment governs our aspirations and everyday practices. Entertainments like Cupcake Wars are:

arrangements to keep one occupied, to engage one in a specified manner, or to maintain one as such. To speak of entertainment, one already moves rhetorically into spaces of an 'entertainmentality,' or practices that keep us held in some mutually prespecified manners. An entertainment industry is in business to keep its charges occupied, to hold them together, to engage their time and attention as a psychosocial means of furthering their containment. Of course, at the same time, one can admit to other semantic charges in the term: an entertainment also will be an agreeable engagement, an amusing occupation, or some interesting diversion that helps constitute the experience. (2002, p. 4)

When food and philanthropy - gastrophilanthropy - are packaged to fit with the entertainment industry they function to contain philanthropy's utopian aspirations, while preoccupying individuals with an interesting diversion. It is the all too familiar practice of entertaining potentially disruptive children with attractively decorated cupcakes.

<28> In the 30 minute episode of Cupcake Wars described above, between advertisements for things that we should consume, we are persuaded that cupcakes are an adult aesthetic that must be applied to a child's vision, that those who create cupcakes are artisans, and that the entire enterprise belongs to the philanthropic life-style and its associated fashions. Theodor Adorno's (2001) analysis of the culture industry is instructive here. "[T]hrough the culture industry capital has co-opted the dynamics of negation both diachronically in its restless pursuit of new and 'different' commodities and synchronically in its promotion of alternative 'life-styles.' 'Life-styles', the culture industry's recycling of style in art, represent the transformation of an aesthetic category, which once possessed a moment of negativity, into a quality of commodity consumption" (p. 23). Philanthropy, which is a cultural product as well as a form of entertainment, has spawned a generosity industry that transforms philanthropy, which once possessed a moment of negativity, into a quality of commodity consumption. Gastrophilanthropy capitalizes on food and philanthropy as indicators of one's life-style, or aspiration towards the life-style of the wealthy.

<29> A recent episode of *DC Cupcakes*, a TLC "reality" show exhibiting the Georgetown Cupcake shop located in an upscale neighborhood of Washington D.C., featured a campaign to raise money for a local Boys and Girls Club. In the episode, an employee proposes a competition to see who can sell more of the pink and blue cupcakes. With the competitive zeal of a philanthropic salesman, he rubs his hands together and asks his fellow employee, "are you ready to get stomped?" In his quest to win, he tells a customer "for each cupcake sold, Discover will donate the purchasing price to local Boys and Girls Club charities." The customer replies with a shrug, "sure." Throughout the episode, we see a sticker displaying the Discover logo being placed on a bright pink box of philanthropic cupcakes. In the end, a group of Boys and Girls Club participants visits the shop, where they learn that the "sales target" has been met - over 1,800

cupcakes have been sold, and therefore Discover will donate \$5,000 to the Boys and Girls Clubs in the greater D.C. area. The children thank the shop owners with a song, "Georgetown Cupcakes make me feel like singing and swinging... Georgetown Cupcakes makes me feel like home." The proud shop owner announces that she is going to cry.

<30> In their promise of hope for a utopian future, cupcakes and charity are coupled together with the advertising and consumption patterns of the present. In practice, the Georgetown Cupcakes "charity" and its vision of the future involves a "sales competition," a consumer whose political input into the discourse is "sure," and the beneficiaries singing in celebration of a fashionable luxury bakery. This decidedly is not a departure from the present towards a utopian future in which the organization of well-being would be divorced from sales competitions, credit card debt, and the promotion of consumption as a charitable act. Consumption practices such as gastrophilanthropy, which involve the paradoxical individualized consumption of non-nourishing foods under the guise of nourishing others, are not philanthropic practices aimed at a utopian future.

<31> Gastrophilanthropy's popularity offers an opportunity to reflect upon a political situation that is now so degraded that individuals aspire to become through retreat into consumption. The recipe of the philanthropic cupcake in this context is a short-term, flexible, portable, consumable, adaptable buffet of individualized consumption choices that one makes in order to display one's place in the status order. As Sennett notes, "like the marketing of consumer goods, the marketing of politics," - in the case of gastrophilanthropy the marketing of consumer goods as politics - "can take a much more negative turn. What's missing in the hope for progressive change is an understanding of the profoundly enervating role that illusion plays in modern society. I mean here to propound a paradox, that people can actively enter into their own passivity" (2006, p. 161).

<32> The essential element of iconoclastic utopianism,[5] for Jacoby, is "regard for the here and now. It yearns for the future and values the present... One savors the sweets of the present and yearns for a future still sweeter..." (2005, pp. 141-42). The retreat into enervating consumption of philanthropic sweets is not an embrace of the sweetness of the present; it is the loss of hope. It is resignation to the fact that capitalism is out of our control. One submits to the medium of consumption, which seems to be the only available option and takes momentary comfort in "treats." These acts may be an indication of selfishness or they may be an indication of benevolence; they may also be an indication of a state of despair. In this context, it is easy to see why Beck's call for political consumption is so appealing. The possibility of larger collective action seems so remote that we instead escape into philanthropic consumption as a way to care for ourselves while also influencing politics perceived to be under our control.

### **Conclusion**

<33> Directing one's longing for a better future into purchase of cupcakes is not an opportunity for philanthropic or political engagement leading to widespread social change, but rather its opposite: the containment of the philanthropy's utopian aspiration in order to stabilize the present. The practice of gastrophilanthropy redirects utopian aspiration into consumption, which only contributes to the practice of the present as if it were a practical reform; it capitalizes on the utopian impulse, but does so without encouraging a utopian transformation that departs from the practices that influence the maldistribution of the means.

### **Endnotes**

[1] In celebration of Earth Day 2010, Sprinkles Cupcakes donated the proceeds from its vanilla cupcake sales to local tree planting and environmental care organizations. <http://www.nbcdfw.com/the-scene/food-drink/Eat-A-Cupcake-Save-a-Tree-91543794.html>.

[2] During the first week of October, Sprinkles donates the proceeds from their Pink Ribbon cupcakes to the Entertainment Industry Foundation's Women's Cancer Research Fund. <http://www.sprinkles.com/gourmet-cupcake-flavors/calendar-october/womens-cancer-research-fund-pink-ribbon-cupcake/>.

[3] Part of the discussion of aspiration here was first developed and presented by Patricia Mooney Nickel at the Opening Plenary Panel of the Sociological Association of Aotearoa New Zealand Conference (Wellington,

New Zealand, December 7-9, 2011) and later published in the New Zealand Journal of Sociology 27(1), 70-74.

[4] <http://celebritycupcakes.wordpress.com/about/>.

[5] Jacoby (2005) distinguishes between blueprint and iconoclastic utopianism.

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