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DIGESTING THE FEAST: GOOD TO EAT, GOOD TO DRINK, GOOD TO THINK

AN INTRODUCTION

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With apologies to Lévi-Strauss for yet another usurping of his famous dictum, a central argument of this volume is surely that feasts are “good to think.” Indeed, these chapters collectively indicate the appropriateness of this statement in two crucial senses. In the first place, they convincingly demonstrate that thinking about feasts can, and should, provide an important point of departure for understanding culture and social life in both past and present societies. In particular, the time is long overdue for feasts to be taken seriously by archaeologists as a significant—perhaps a central—social practice. Secondly, however, these chapters also show that transforming feasts from something considered as epiphenomenal trivia worthy of little more than bemused speculation into a subject of recognized importance and analytical utility is by no means a straightforward proposi-

tion. We need to think seriously and critically about what feasts are, how they operate, and how we can detect and interpret them. Otherwise, they risk becoming one more ill-digested archaeological interpretive fad.

One of the main stimuli for undertaking this book, and for convening the symposium that generated it, was that both of the editors came to the conclusion over a decade ago that feasts are an extremely significant aspect of social life on a worldwide scale, and that understanding them is crucial for apprehending and comprehending many social and cultural processes in ancient societies. However, we arrived at this mutual conclusion by quite different routes and from very different theoretical dispositions.

As will be evident from our respective chapters and prior publications on the subject, Hayden's perspective (see Chapter 2) is firmly grounded in a cultural-ecology orientation. Furthermore, he was originally led to explore this line of research largely by his interest in the evolutionary implications of feasting in the transformation of sociopolitical structures in hunter-gatherer societies of the Pacific Northwest and Paleolithic Europe. Dietler's perspective (see Chapter 3), on the other hand, grew out of the domain of social theory often referred to by the ecologically inclined as "culturalist"—that is, a perspective that takes culture seriously as a historical agent as well as a historical product—although, because of its determinist implications, this label is one that few scholars would actually apply to themselves. Hence, Dietler's perspective actually has a strong social orientation, with roots in practice theory and political economy (in a nutshell, there is a central concern with the intricate relationship between culture and power). Moreover, he was induced to investigate feasting as a result of archaeological and ethnographic research among agrarian societies in Europe and Africa.

This very fact of arriving at a conjuncture of interest and understanding from such strikingly different directions strengthened our convictions that, despite our continuing dialogue of disagreement over a number of issues (see below, and Chapters 2 and 3), we had stumbled upon something of genuine and general significance.

One of the more disconcerting conclusions that we also agreed upon, however, was that feasting was both severely undertheorized in the existing literature and lacked systematic empirical documentation of a kind that would be useful for archaeological interpretation. This is not to claim that feasting has been completely ignored in the earlier archaeological and anthropological literature, or that significant insights have not been forthcoming (e.g., see Friedman 1984; Friedman and Rowlands 1978). However, these earlier works generally included analyses of feasts as peripheral observations: they did not generate a systematic theoretical exploration of the subject and they failed to engender a sustained archaeological pursuit of their implications. Hence, we sought to convene a group

of other scholars who have recently begun to pursue similar issues in a wide variety of both ethnographic and archaeological contexts in order to forge a better, if still provisional, understanding of the nature of the feast as a social institution and cultural practice. As the chapters in this volume attest, these scholars also exhibit a healthy diversity of theoretical orientations and ideas about how to understand feasts. Consequently, this brief introductory essay is less an attempt to force these chapters into a strained synthetic summary than it is a selective highlighting of a few key themes that indicate the current state of research and suggest future directions.

CATEGORIES AND DEFINITIONS

Perhaps the most obvious question that needs to be addressed at this point is, "Are we all talking about the same thing when we use the word *feast*?" Obviously, we are not really talking about a "thing" at all, but about a category used to describe collectively a diverse set of cultural practices. Hence, equally important to ask is the related question, "Is this a useful analytical category?" In other words, it is clear that we all use the rubric *feast* to cover a wide range of cultural practices. Are we agreed on the criteria by which we selectively lump these practices together and exclude others, and does the resulting category have enough coherence and specificity to be useful? We believe the answer to both questions is "yes," with a few stipulations.

Each paper provides at least a general working definition of feasts. These definitions show some variability in both the details (such as the requisite social distance of the participants and size of the gathering) and the ways they are phrased; and some are more explicit than others. However, common to all of these is the idea that feasts are events essentially constituted by the communal consumption of food and/or drink. Most authors are also explicit in differentiating such food-consumption events from both everyday domestic meals and from the simple exchange of food without communal consumption. These are important distinctions to maintain if the category is to have analytical utility. To the extent that one begins to conflate feasts with the general exchange of food or with the other kinds of transactions for which feasts may serve as a context, one precludes both understanding feasts as a specific social practice and understanding the important semiotic and functional relationships between feasts and these other kinds of practices.

Dietler (Chapter 3) also argues that it is crucial to recognize and understand feasting as a particular form of *ritual* activity. This is what distinguishes feasts from daily meals, gives them their peculiar power in articulating social relations and action, and makes them analytically approachable by building upon an existing body of theoretical work. The dramaturgical effects usually associated with

feasting (e.g., singing, dancing, inebriation, oratorical displays) underline the ritual nature of these events. They help to create the experience of “condensed meaning” (Cohen 1979) and render feasts such ideal stages for other important social transactions, such as prestations of valuables, making alliances, and, as Wiessner (Chapter 4) demonstrates, the construction of value.

In contrast, Hayden (Chapter 2) uses a somewhat broader definition, simply stipulating that any unusual occasion accompanied by an unusual shared meal should be considered a feast. Moreover, in his view, ritual aspects may or may not be identifiable archaeologically and may not even be overtly manifest in some ethnographic cases. Other authors propose yet other minor variations for the definition of feasts. However, despite these differences, there is still a very large degree of agreement on identifying many kinds of shared meals as feasts when confronted with empirical cases in ethnographic contexts.

Given these stipulations, it seems clear that “feasts” is a category that has sufficient specificity to be analytically powerful yet brings within its scope a significant range of important practices around the world and through time. Hence “feasts” is a productive category. It is “good to think.”

Within the domain of practices that we designate as feasts, there are many possible ways to categorize the range of differences and similarities. This fact explains the considerable diversity of classificatory schemes brought to bear on the subject by the authors in this volume. While some readers may find the lack of a uniform classification troubling or disappointing, we would suggest that this diversity need not worry us and is, in fact, a good thing—especially at this stage of theoretical development. Classifications are, after all, simply tools of analysis. Different ones will be appropriate for different purposes. The criteria for selecting them should be simply the effectiveness they demonstrate in achieving the goals for which they were designed, the interest of those goals, and, of course, the logical consistency of the classifications. As research progresses in this relatively novel field, our various ways of characterizing and understanding feasts will undoubtedly improve. But this does not mean that we will move toward the development of a single typology of feasts. In our view that would be counterproductive: in the social sciences, classificatory reification is generally the enemy of understanding.

Hayden (Chapter 2) has expressed the hope that eventually we may develop an archaeological classification of feasts based on material remains. Others (e.g., Dietler, Chapter 3) are less sanguine about this prospect, believing that the culturally constituted nature of feasts mandates that archaeological interpretation will always require the construction of a richly textured and culturally specific contextual argument grounded in a theoretical understanding of the complexities of feasting in comparative ethnographic perspective—in other words, a version of

what Hayden calls “triangulation.” The difficulties of distinguishing on a priori grounds between, for example, the permutations of ritual practices that are used to mark feasts off from everyday meals, and those that are used to mark off social classes in “diacritical” feasts (see Dietler, Chapter 3) suggest that uniform typologies of material signatures may not help us much beyond the mere identification of the existence of feasting.

Whatever the eventual resolution of this discussion, what is clear is that moving beyond the basic identification of presence toward understanding what kinds of feasts were being mounted, what kinds of ritual work were being undertaken, and what the social ramifications were, requires complex and nuanced forms of recursive argumentation. However, even if a handy interpretive formula may ultimately be unattainable for archaeologists (as well as for cultural anthropologists and historians), this does not mean that we cannot develop a much better understanding of the material dimension of feasting. Indeed, at present, the lack of precise information on this issue is one of the biggest impediments to the archaeological investigation of feasting and the evaluation of the relative plausibility of different archaeological interpretations. For the most part, archaeologists do not yet know precisely what to look for. The exemplary archaeological studies by Junker (Chapter 10), Knight (Chapter 11), Kelly (Chapter 12), Brown (Chapter 13), and Schmandt-Besserat (Chapter 14) in this volume point the way toward profitable strategies for interrogating the archaeological record for this kind of information (see also, for example, Blitz 1993; Clark and Blake 1994; Dietler 1990, 1996, 1999b; Gardeisen 1999; Moore 1989; Morris 1979; Murray 1995). But much more primary ethnographic research focusing specifically on feasting, of the kind undertaken by Clarke (Chapter 5), Hayden (Chapter 2), and Dietler and Herbich (Chapters 3 and 9), is urgently needed. Moreover, this work should be undertaken by scholars already familiar with the problems of detecting feasts in archaeological contexts. Again, it is the synergistic dialectical conversation between these domains that will propel the development of theory and method for both.

As a final note on classification, a brief word about the classificatory structure of this volume is also in order. Part One assembles considerations of feasting based upon ethnographic and historical data, either through comparative analysis or individual case studies. These chapters use these rich sources of information about social life to develop a fuller understanding of feasting practices and they discuss the material implications of the analyses they undertake. Several of these chapters are explicitly concerned with developing new theoretical approaches to feasting, and all offer at least implicit theoretical insights. Moreover, all have as a major goal assessing and aiding the possibilities for archaeological interpretation of feasts, although, given the limitations of space, they do not actually involve the application of such insights to specific archaeological cases.

Thus, Hayden (Chapter 2) examines feasting from a cross-cultural and ecological perspective toward the development of a general framework for the archaeological detection and interpretation of feasts. Dietler (Chapter 3) uses the Luo and other African cases to argue for the inherently political role of feasts and to develop a general theoretical analysis of the complex relationship between feasts, commensality, and power. Wiessner (Chapter 4) provides a rich ethnohistorical analysis of the role of feasts in religious cults and strategies of New Guinea big-men for promoting their self-interests and transforming conceptions of value. Clarke (Chapter 5) shows how feasts are used by the Akha tribes of Thailand to establish socioeconomic safety networks. Kirch (Chapter 6) uses a comparison of three Polynesian cases to demonstrate how the magnitude of, and facilities associated with, feasting increase with increasing size and complexity of the polities. Perodie (Chapter 7) documents the range of feasting on the Northwest Coast of North America and illustrates what advantages accrued to hosts. DeBoer (Chapter 8) provides an important example of Amazonian feasting with its unique girl's initiation features and competitive male boasting, and reflects upon long-term historical transformations and continuities. Finally, Dietler and Herbich (Chapter 9) use a comparative examination of the political-economic dynamics of work feasts among the Samia of Africa and other societies to propose a general theoretical model for the crucial role of feasts in labor mobilization and exploitation.

Part Two contains chapters that move in the opposite interpretive direction. That is, they attempt to grapple with the detection of feasting in the material record and to then make plausible inferences about the social life and culture of the people who were producing and participating in those feasts. These creatively ingenious studies illustrate both the difficulties and potential of this domain of inquiry, as well as the necessity of a recursive dialectical conversation between ethnographically derived theory and archaeological data. At first glance, it may appear curious that Wilson and Rathje's (Chapter 15) study of garbage in present-day Tucson should be classed together with these latter chapters; but, in fact, the logic of this interpretive exercise is thoroughly archaeological. The samples of refuse were obtained by means other than excavation, but these material items are then used to reason inferentially back to an interpretation of the practices that produced them based upon an understanding of the general social context (but without direct observation of those specific practices). Hence, they provide a good heuristic test of the possibilities for understanding feasting through material remains in a social and cultural context with which many readers will have some familiarity.

Other chapters in this section offer a range of more obviously archaeological case studies. Junker (Chapter 10) provides a regional analysis of the economic and political role of feasts in the very dynamic cultural environment of the Philip-

pines during the second millennium A.D. Knight (Chapter 11) explores the important role of feasting in the creation and use of the first platform mounds among the Woodland cultures of the southeastern United States during the first millennium A.D., while Kelly (Chapter 12) documents large-scale feasting at the largest Mississippian sites during the early stages of the succeeding millennium. Brown (Chapter 13) presents an analysis of new evidence for the use of special feasting structures for lineage feasts in non-elite Maya contexts around A.D. 600. Finally, moving to the ancient Near East, Schmandt-Besserat (Chapter 14) explores the use of feasts by Sumerian elites to collect surpluses.

It is worth emphasizing that, despite the impressive diversity of geographical and temporal contexts represented by the chapters in this section, the intention was clearly not to provide a comprehensive global coverage of feasting in prehistory. Hence, the absence of studies from certain regions should by no means be taken as an indication that the editors judged that feasting was not an important feature of the ancient social landscape in those areas or that the potential for the archaeological analysis of feasts is less good in those contexts. Far from it. Europe, for example, is not covered in this volume even though feasting is now increasingly recognized to have been a practice of major importance implicated in various kinds of social change throughout the region and despite the fact that one of the editors has previously undertaken several studies of feasting in different European archaeological contexts (Dietler 1990, 1996, 1999a, 1999b; see also Murray 1995; Schmitt Pantel 1992; Sherratt 1991). The intention of Part Two was simply to provide a selected set of fresh cases demonstrating cutting-edge possibilities for the identification and interpretation of feasts in a diverse, rather than exhaustive, range of archaeological contexts.

FEASTS AND FEASTING

Another important question to pose is whether one legitimately can discuss *feasting* in archaeological contexts without actually being able to identify specific *feasts*. In other words, can one detect the traces of a practice, or process, without necessarily being able to identify its constituent events? We would strongly suggest that one can. Indeed, archaeologists should have no inherent methodological objection to this kind of procedure. We do it all the time for other processes, such as trade or agriculture, for which specific events are usually very difficult, if not impossible, to identify. We feel quite confident in assuming the existence of trade, for example, on the basis of general regional patterns reflecting the results of its operation, without ever being able to point to a particular place where exchanges actually took place. We would suggest that the same is true of feasting. The requirements are that we have a good theoretical understanding of the social roles of feasting and their permutations, and that we know what the relevant

diagnostic criteria are and how to look for them in regional archaeological data. Archaeologists know quite well how to sniff out trade and characterize its quantitative and qualitative dimensions through the use of, for example, petrographic, chemical, and stylistic analysis of ceramics found in contexts of consumption. But they are generally not yet familiar with the ways that one can detect and characterize feasting *as a process*. Hence, they are less alert to the possibilities and more skeptical of the endeavor unless one can produce a Pompeiian example of a feast.

Junker's (Chapter 10) analysis of feasting in the Philippines is of great interest precisely because it is an excellent example of how the analysis of feasting as a process can be convincingly and profitably done through sensitive examination of things like regional patterns of ceramic import consumption. A similar case has been made for different regional patterns of feasting in Iron Age Europe (Dietler 1990, 1996) with the subsequent identification of an actual feast event (Dietler 1999b; Gardeisen 1999). What such studies demand is a careful contextual analysis of patterns of consumption. That is, not merely looking at the distribution of ceramic types or wares over the landscape, but undertaking an analysis of the quantitative, context-specific distribution of specific forms and the patterns of association where they are found. It involves asking, for example, whether certain kinds of tableware are found in all or only some graves or settlements in a region, in all or only some domestic or ceremonial contexts on those settlements, associated with what other kinds and sizes of ceramic cooking vessels and in what relative quantities in each of those contexts, associated with what kinds of faunal remains, and so on. It also requires looking at transformations of these patterns over time. Such analysis can be very revealing not only of the existence of feasting, but, more importantly, of its forms and historical significance. Of course, as Schmandt-Besserat (Chapter 14) has nicely demonstrated with her Near Eastern study, the possibilities for understanding regional feasting practices are greatly enhanced by the presence of contemporary pictorial and textual representations (see also, for example, Arsenault 1992; Joffe 1998; Schmitt Pantel 1992). But a great deal is possible even in the absence of these latter kinds of data.

Hayden (Chapter 2) provides a summary of the many kinds of material evidence that can potentially be used for dealing with feasting archaeologically, but virtually all the contributions to this volume address this issue in one way or another. One of the interesting features to emerge from this discussion is that feasting actually has an advantage over trade as a subject of archaeological investigation in that it offers much better possibilities for being able to identify at least some specific feasting events. This is true, in part, because feasting activities by their very nature produce copious amounts of distinctive refuse at the loca-

tions where they occur, and feasting locations are often associated with notable ritual structures. In contrast, specific trade activity areas are more difficult to identify, and the *act* of exchange produces little if any distinctive refuse. Ironically, because feasts often provide the context for exchange events, the advantages of detecting feasting in the archaeological record may even help us to better understand trade. Methods for accomplishing this are still being worked out, but the contributions by Brown (Chapter 13), Kelly (Chapter 12), and Knight (Chapter 11) all offer exemplary case studies showing how the presence of feast events can be teased out of various permutations of spatial, faunal, and artifactual data. As these chapters also ably demonstrate, the mere identification of the existence of feasts at individual archaeological sites is not the ultimate goal of such research. Rather, we want to know what they mean in terms of the societies that produced them—and this requires situating them within broader regional patterns.

Part of the potential visibility of feasts derives from the fact that, to reiterate once again, they are ritual (or, as Hayden would qualify it, "ritualized") events. This means that they are commonly a central element of life-crisis ceremonies such as initiations, weddings, and burials, of which at least the latter have a good chance of being preserved as single-event archaeological sites. More broadly, it means that the same kinds of diacritica (e.g., qualitative and quantitative differences in food consumed, spatial segregation, architectonic elaboration for dramaturgical effect, etc.) that may be used, often in combination, to symbolically mark feasts off from daily meals as ritual events may also make them stand out in the archaeological record—if we know how to look for them. That, of course, will require that we become sensitized to their existence and importance, and that we develop the theoretical competence to deal with their operation in a more sophisticated manner. This task is a large and complex one, but a task in which we can already see considerable productive strides being made.

One of the encouraging signs to emerge out of the studies in this volume is the frequent association of feasting with spatial differentiation or architectonic elaboration that may be readily recognizable. This is certainly the case in Brown's (Chapter 13) study of non-elite feasting at Cerén in El Salvador, Kelly's (Chapter 12) study of Cahokia, Knight's (Chapter 11) analysis of platform mounds, two out of three of Kirch's (Chapter 6) Polynesian cases, and the potlatches reported by Perodie (Chapter 7), to name a few prominent examples. It is important to emphasize that not only were these structures specially constructed sites *for* feasting, but they were most probably constructed *through* feasting. That is, the more marked the architectonic elaboration, the more such features represent the congealed labor of work feasts and are, in effect, an advertisement of the feasts that went into their construction (see Dietler and Herbig, Chapter 9). In other cases (e.g., Clarke's Akha example, Kirch's Tikopia

example, the Luo feasts in the homestead reported by Dietler, Chapter 3), where there is less architectonic elaboration or smaller feasts are held in or near domestic contexts, the detection of feasting sites may be considerably more difficult. However, under extraordinary conditions it may still be possible to recognize feasts in domestic contexts through analysis of permutations of faunal and artifactual remains (e.g., Clarke, Chapter 5; Dietler 1999b; Gardeisen 1999). Evidence for the presence of alcohol may be another usefully widespread diagnostic sign of feasts. In most small-scale societies, and particularly with pre-distillation forms of alcohol, drinking is not a part of daily meals—it is something reserved for, and indexical of, feasts (see Dietler 1990 and Chapter 3). As Wilson and Rathje's (Chapter 15) study shows, even in present-day Tucson there is a strong association between alcohol and feasts.

FEASTS AND GENDER

One of the topics that we would suggest still needs much more explicit treatment and fuller elaboration is the gender relations that underlie, and are reproduced and transformed through, feasts. Of course, these are by no means uniform. But one can already begin to discern a few significant tendencies that require further research and theoretical discussion.

In the first place, feasting practices almost always act to mark and naturalize gender categories (see Dietler, Chapter 3). That is, even in societies with a strong egalitarian ethos, feasts serve to define and inculcate social categories—and gender categories are among the most common distinctions marked by these rituals. Such marking occurs through a wide variety of symbolic diacritica that may be combined in different permutations. These may include: (1) spatial segregation or positioning while eating (i.e., differences indicated by men and women eating in different locations or seated in standardized configurations: alternate seating, opposite sides of a room, inner and outer circles, etc.), (2) temporal distinctions (i.e., differences indicated by order of serving), (3) qualitative distinctions (i.e., differences in the nature of the food, drink, or serving vessels offered to men and women), (4) quantitative distinctions (i.e., differences in the amounts of food or drink served to women and men), or (5) behavioral expectations (i.e., differences in the ways women and men are expected to act during and after feasting: for example, who is permitted to act drunk, who may talk while eating, who may reach for food, who retires from the meal first, etc.). Where social classes exist, these diacritical patterns may vary between classes such that gender is marked in different ways within each class—a situation suggested, for example, in Kirch's (Chapter 6) discussion of Hawaiian royal feasting.

In addition to this aspect, however, gender considerations must also enter the

analysis of feasts because feasting frequently involves a gendered asymmetry in terms of labor and benefits. That is, very often female labor largely supports a system of feasting in which men are the primary beneficiaries in the political arena. Female labor is frequently of primary importance in the domain of agricultural production and the raising of household domestic animals (such as fowl and swine), although the relative gendered contribution in this domain is highly variable (Boserup 1970; Guyer 1988). Far more common, however, is a dominant female contribution to the crucial culinary and serving labor that transforms raw food ingredients into feasts. These labor inputs are one of the main reasons why there is such a strong linkage between polygyny and male political power (see Dietler, Chapter 3; Dietler and Herbich, Chapter 9). In brief, cases where women provide the agricultural, culinary, and serving labor for male political activities are quite common (Bohannon and Bohannon 1968 provides a typical example). However, cases of the inverse pattern (where men consistently provide the agricultural, culinary, and serving labor that underwrites feasts formally hosted by women) may exist, but they are extremely rare.

These features need not be interpreted as a universal pattern of exploitation, however. In some cases there is a more balanced, or even male-dominated, pattern of labor in the production of feasts (especially in the butchering and cooking of animals), if not in the production of daily meals (e.g., the Akha case described by Clarke, Chapter 5). Moreover, women may share in the status and political benefits from their labor by being members of an influential household or lineage (in matrilineal contexts). They may also derive considerable categorical and individual status from their central role in the furnishing of hospitality (e.g., see Gero 1992; March 1998). And, in many societies, women do host their own work feasts and other feast events, although usually on a smaller scale than men. Finally, in the recent past, the common traditional female monopolization of cooking and brewing duties has frequently given them opportunities for entering the monetized market economy and gaining a source of income (e.g., through beer sales) that has enabled them to acquire considerable independence and intrafamilial power under changing socioeconomic conditions (e.g., see Colson and Scudder 1988; Netting 1964).

Hence, feasts are intimately implicated in the representation, reproduction, and transformation of gender identity and in the gendered division of feasting labor and benefits, although in complex and variable ways. Archaeologists can ill afford to ignore these features if we want to use feasting as a way of perceiving and understanding the development of sociopolitical relations in ancient societies. However, we urgently need more careful attention to such matters in ethnographic studies of feasting and the development of ethnological theory on feasts.

ECOLOGICAL MATERIALISM VERSUS CULTURE AND POWER

There is an interesting ontological tension underlying this volume that also merits a few comments. Indeed, a major part of the interest of the book is the dialogue it presents between radically different perspectives on the same set of practices. Although the most explicitly articulated contrast in ontological positions is that between the two editors alluded to earlier, the implications of this debate are apparent throughout the volume. Hayden (Chapter 2) makes a forceful case for an ecologically grounded materialist consideration of feasting, and this approach is closely echoed in several other contributions (especially Perodie, Chapter 7, and Clarke, Chapter 5). Others find this perspective less compelling and approach the subject from quite different theoretical positions (see especially Dietler, Chapter 3; Wiessner, Chapter 4; Kirch, Chapter 6; DeBoer, Chapter 8; Dietler and Herbich, Chapter 9). These perspectives need not necessarily be entirely in conflict with each other: Wiessner (Chapter 4) and Junker (Chapter 10), for example, discuss the ecological constraints on the historical development of feasting patterns within interpretive frameworks that are not ecologically deterministic and that are quite sensitive to the importance of culture and historical contingency. Moreover, a central concern with political power and the prominent role attributed to it in all the chapters provide a very significant basis for common ground. One can reach agreement on the forms and importance of political power while ultimately viewing it as either a major type of ecological behavior or as a culturally defined field of social action. It is for this reason that Hayden describes his approach as "political ecology."

However, a chapter claiming to fulfill an introductory role would be sorely remiss to the extent that it failed to reveal and explore a few of the divergences in basic ontological premises that characterize the volume. Clearly, neither of the editors undertakes this analysis from a disinterested position. Hence, *caveat lector*.

Hayden (Chapter 2) and Perodie (Chapter 7) insist that a practice as ubiquitous and enormously "expensive" as feasting must have some "practical benefits," with an understanding of practicality rooted in the perspective of Marvin Harris. They acknowledge that idiosyncratic values motivate some people to use their resources and power in nonrational, non-self-interested, nonpredictable fashions. However, they argue that in aggregate, people do tend to make decisions based on their own self-interests and the information or choices that are available. In this respect, they act in ecologically (and economically) rational terms. Idiosyncratic variations do occur but rarely are accepted, supported, or perpetuated by the communities at large for any length of time. In archaeological evolutionary terms, these idiosyncrasies become "background noise" for the basic trends that form the archaeological record. In this outlook, political power plays

a major role in promoting and defending individual or factional self-interests—which is why feasting becomes so important in traditional societies that can afford to produce the necessary surpluses.

Other perspectives, including perhaps most explicitly that of Dietler (Chapter 3), strongly disagree with aspects of this ecological/materialist vision, although not all from precisely the same theoretical basis. Without wishing to refight the "Culture and Practical Reason" battle (see Sahlins 1976, 1995), Dietler feels it is important to signal the quite widespread anthropological position, in which his and several other contributions to this volume are rooted, which holds that "practicality" is not a universal principle of bottom-line materialism, but is a culturally constructed concept. To the extent that Hayden and Perodie mean by practical benefits something like the proposition that feasting involves a strong element of "strategic," self-interested political action, whether consciously acknowledged or euphemized in the shared "sincere fictions" (Bourdieu 1990) that make possible the reproduction of the system, it is probable that all of the authors would concede some common ground. What then becomes the crucial question is the culturally specific definition of appropriate goals and strategic paths. Obviously, relentless material accumulation is not a universal goal of self-interested action: in many cases it will lead to scorn, ostracism, witchcraft accusations, and an early death. In such cultural contexts, the skilled self-interested actor will play by a quite different set of rules and toward a very different end than the capitalist robber baron. As the various chapters indicate, each in its own way, the interest of the feast is not simply that it enables the accumulation of wealth or material goods, but that it is a remarkably supple ritual practice that allows the strategic reciprocal conversion of economic and symbolic capital toward a wide variety of culturally appropriate political goals. This is what accounts for the striking ubiquity and durability of the feast as an institutionalized practice in the face of dramatic social transformations, as illustrated in particularly remarkable fashion by DeBoer's (Chapter 8) Shipibo-Conibo example.

There is an additional element of the "practical benefits" argument that moves the debate beyond common ground. This is the principle expressed by Hayden (Chapter 2) that, because of its costliness and ubiquity, the feast must be a form of "adaptive behavior"—that it must have practical benefits for reproduction and individual survival. Here a number of the authors would politely disagree. In Dietler's view, this functionalist logic would necessitate drawing the same conclusion about American professional football games and rock concerts. It is hard to see the significance of either of these for the *survival* of American society at large, and both are clearly deleterious to the long-term life of the performers. Similarly, feasts can easily escalate into conditions that are dangerous both for the

health of the society and for individuals involved. The Hawaiian royal pattern is a classic case in point (Kirch, Chapter 6; Sahlins 1992), as were Enga pig feasts (Wiessner, Chapter 4), the feasting customs among the Masa of Africa (Garine 1996), and Luo funeral feasts, which often impoverish families (Dietler, Chapter 3). Hence, from this point of view, the value of a concept such as "adaptive behavior" in explaining cultural practices seems highly questionable and the demonstration of a causal connection seems illusory at best.

From Hayden's perspective, on the other hand, the adaptiveness of rock concerts is not to be found so much in the present cultural context, but in the early genetic evolutionary roots of the human species where ecstatic rituals included rhythms and music that enhanced emotional bonds between individuals and groups critical for surviving severe periods of stress (Hayden 1987, 1993:159ff). Emotional aggressivity toward groups identified as enemies, whether in sports or real conflicts, may have a similar origin and may still be part of our innate emotional heritage (Hayden 1993:175-176). In more immediate terms, it is clear that, irrespective of the physical effects these events may have on the players involved, the players clearly feel that they are benefiting handsomely, which their multimillion-dollar contracts amply confirm. Hayden argues that benefits of comparable scale ought to exist for the principal players in feasts that escalate in costs far beyond the norm, such as the royal Hawaiian and Enga feasts. However, all-out competitive feasting undoubtedly entails both winners and losers who risk everything in their economic battles; and as in competitive businesses, those who are losers are typically ruined and crushed so that it is not surprising to find families impoverished by feasting where feasting becomes competitive.

Much of this disagreement turns around different views of culture. From Dietler's perspective, feasts, like many other important cultural practices, have little direct significance for "survival" (except occasionally in the negative sense when practices sometimes have deleterious unintended consequences) and the concept of "adaptation" is powerless to explain either the generation of the myriad forms that feasts take or their social significance. On the other hand, he would claim that feasts have a great deal to do with politics and power, and that much of what Hayden calls "adaptation" is simply social competition of highly variable, unpredictable, contradictory, and largely unverifiable adaptive significance for societies, social groups, and individuals, respectively. Alternatively, for Hayden and others, politics and the creation of differential power or social safety nets through feasting play critical roles in economic success, reproduction, and survival.

Within Dietler's perspective, Hayden and Perodie's dismissal of "prestige" and "status" as inconsequential psychological phenomena is also highly contentious. For Dietler, these words describe crucial aspects of the kind of symbolic capital that is a necessary condition for becoming an influential member of society.

They are the preconditions for developing the moral authority to influence group decisions, exert leadership, and wield power—or to resist the power of others. They are the essential elements of the possibility of political action. Indeed, the case can be made that, even in late-capitalist America, they are what the accumulation of economic capital is ultimately all about. From Hayden's perspective, on the other hand, "prestige" and "status" in traditional societies are simply euphemisms for economic success and political power.

Finally, from Dietler's ontological position, it is also important to envisage culture *not* as something that is destroyed by confrontation with "external realities," or that withers away or can be abandoned in the face of opportunities for self-advancement (cf. Hayden, Chapter 2)—a kind of optional, external decorative façade covering a universal bedrock core of materialist rationality. Nor is it something inherited from the past as a static bundle of traits. Rather, it is a way of perceiving and thinking about the world, and of solving the problems of daily life through the application of distinctive categorical and analogical understandings. Hence, culture is not an alternative to a universal "practicality," but rather the very way that practicality is constituted.

Ultimately, Hayden feels (somewhat more optimistically than Dietler) that some of these contentious issues may be only a matter of difference in emphasis and that more common ground may be recognized in the future. Both of us argue that some of the agendas behind the hosting of feasts are unvoiced but driven by political or other self-interested considerations. Moreover, neither approach sees cultural norms as imposing such stringent controls on human behavior that no innovation or change ever takes place. On the other hand, neither approach goes so far as to claim that cultural traditions do not impose some constraints on the behavioral and conceptual options that people must choose from. In Hayden's view, the emphasis, however, is more on people's penchant to recognize the existing constraints and to use cultural concepts as well as technology simply as tools to achieve their own self-interested goals. If suitable concepts, values, or other cultural tools are not available, highly motivated individuals typically set about trying to create them, as documented in Wiessner's Enga data (Chapter 4; see also Wiessner and Tumu 1998). Whether they succeed or not depends upon the economic costs, the effectiveness of the introduced elements, and the competing self-interests of other community members. That is where selection comes in. While there may be idiosyncratic variations among people and even communities in the short term, self-interest in the long run and for most people is ultimately characterized by basic ecological imperatives of survival, reproduction, and health.

In Dietler's view, people's very concepts of self-interest are constituted not by universal ecological imperatives, but through logics of action that are defined by

both specific cultural context and the social situation of actors and which are, at the same time, inculcated and continually transformed through the practices of everyday life and ritual. Hayden acknowledges this factor, but argues that what he views as the distortion or redirection of self-interest through cultural values applies primarily to situations where the practical impacts are not extreme. He believes that, as the consequences of cultural values become increasingly detrimental to individual self-interests, people must eventually refuse to accept values that authorities promote, even under extreme threats of retribution. It is difficult to explain revolutions otherwise. In Dietler's view, this conclusion, with its classic "false consciousness" vision of culture as something that can be equated with values promoted by authorities, underlines again the fundamentally different conceptions of culture held by the editors (for a fuller discussion of this perspective on the relationship between ideology, hegemony, and culture, see Dietler 1999a).

It is important that the reader have a clear sense of the differences outlined above. This is not simply an arcane bone of friendly contention between the editors, but a crucial issue that is manifested throughout the book in often quite subtle ways. We are not, of course, suggesting that all of the chapters can be lined up on either side of a binary "great divide" defined by the terms of this debate, and we have, in fact, hesitated to speak for other authors in specifying their diverse, and often implicit, ontological premises. What we are suggesting is both that such fundamental differences are important to consider in reading the ensuing chapters and, perhaps even more importantly, that *the issue of feasts is not the product of a particular theoretical camp*, but can be approached profitably from a variety of quite different theoretical orientations. In fact, what is surprising is not that the various authors of this book have contrasting ontological positions, but that, given those positions, we are able to agree on so much. That we all see feasts as an extremely important cultural practice with characteristic social and political roles, despite our respectful divergence on fundamental theoretical matters, is, we believe, a strong endorsement of the viability of pursuing the exploration of feasting.

FEASTS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

One of the main reasons for exploring the subject of feasts was the suspicion that they have been intimately involved in processes of social change. That is, it was suspected that they were not simply epiphenomenal reflections of changes in culture and society, but central arenas of social action that have had a profound impact on the course of historical transformations. Indeed, Hayden (1990, Chapter 2) has even suggested that the origins of agriculture may be tied to the production demands generated in political feasting contests, while Dietler (1990, 1996)

has shown how feasts have served as arenas for the articulation and entanglement of colonial encounters and the transformation of tastes, value, and relations of power. Many of the papers in this volume have contributed other novel and compelling arguments for the role of feasts in social change.

Wiessner's (Chapter 4) rich historical study, for example, shows how feasts among the Enga of New Guinea have acted as ritual theaters for the cultural construction and transformation of value (see also Wiessner and Tumu 1998). The dramaturgically charged presentation of the pig by big-men resulted in its incorporation into feasting and exchange networks in ways that had major consequences for the historical transformation of politics and the ecology of the region. Similarly, Junker's (Chapter 10) analysis shows how the importation of ceramics for feasts played into the competitive rivalries between chiefs in the highly unstable political landscape of the prehispanic Philippines and how feasting became a socially transformative practice through its constant realignment of alliances and patron-client networks. Dietler (Chapter 3) uses the case of the Luo of Kenya to show how feasts can serve as mechanisms for the transformation of informal power into institutionalized formal political roles, and how dependent the maintenance of authority is on the practice of feasting. Finally, Dietler and Herbich (Chapter 9) show how the work feast can become a mechanism of labor exploitation that can result in spiraling asymmetries in economic and symbolic capital and in the emergence of social stratification in egalitarian societies.

AN INVITATION TO THE FEAST

These chapters offer a compelling collective demonstration that feasts are indeed "good to think" in many ways. Moreover, they go a long way toward showing archaeologists *how* to think about feasts. Clearly, much empirical and theoretical work remains to be done in order to improve our ability to deal with the interpretive subtleties of feasting in archaeological contexts. But there is now a solid foundation upon which to build. It is no longer possible to ignore the significant role that feasts have played in the social, political, and economic domains of life around the world and throughout history. Archaeologists need to be aware of this and to develop the skills necessary to seek and interpret evidence of feasts.

But our challenge at this stage is also to not let this new awareness dissipate into yet another ill-digested vogue or an oversimplified mechanistic model of feasts to meet all occasions. The detection of some form of feasting in the archaeological record is, we would strongly emphasize, but the first of many hurdles that must be overcome before archaeologists will be able to reap the rich insights into the past that we think the in-depth study of feasting has to offer. Invocations of feasting are clearly becoming increasingly popular in the recent archaeological literature, but sometimes this appears to amount to little more

than signaling the presence of feasts, as if their significance were uniform and self-explanatory. However, we emphatically reiterate that, without an adequately theorized and contextualized analysis of feasting, the mere documentation of the existence of such practices will not yield the kind of understanding of prehistoric societies and their social, political, and economic dynamics for which this domain of activity holds such heuristic promise. It is crucial to identify the specific nature of prehistoric feasts in particular cases and to explain how and why they operated in specific socioeconomic contexts that can be inferred from archaeological remains or other data. Hence, although the task is complex, we need to further develop the exploration of feasts as a powerful, versatile, and subtle analytical tool capable of providing a window of entry into the diverse array of forms of political and economic action and social relations in ancient societies. The collective effort represented in this volume provides a solid basis for optimism and further work in this quest.

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Feasts

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