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## Chapter 5. The promises of fasting: Between animal and primitive models<sup>12</sup>

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### Abstract

This chapter analyzes the recent development of the French “wellness” fasting market. The vast majority of the material collected has come from a netnographic study of websites promoting fasting retreats and interviews with those who run these marketing networks. After mapping out the socio-historical trajectory of the promise of fasting, the authors show that the contemporary practice of fasting is based on a promise of “rewilding the self” that takes the form of a dual process: 1) a regressive process, a rewilding of the body based on a primitivist philosophy that aims to restore modern humans’ physiological potential via an ancestral technique of the body: fasting; 2) a political process, a politicized rewilding of everyday life in the form of a radical experience of hunger aiming to challenge commercial routines and dietary habits, and to renew sensations and perceptions.

In her article entitled “Apostles of Abstinence: Fasting and Masculinity during the Progressive Era,” R. M. Griffith (2000) shows how, in the early twentieth century in the United States, the promise of fasting was “retailored” by certain promoters to support a masculinist discourse: “a shriller gospel of masculine self-mastery and force.” Fasting was no longer the preserve of women concerned about purity and repentance. Quite the opposite: it was becoming a technique of the body available to the conquering entrepreneur and the self-made man: “It was a crusade, moreover, in which food refusal played a key role, not simply among troubled (or fame-seeking) women but among highly enterprising middle-class men” (Griffith 2000, 632–633). The author thus shows that there is a strong political dimension to this discourse on the body. The promoters of fasting whom she analyses sought to forge the modern entrepreneur who, armed with perfect health and flawless religious morality, would be able to handle the brutality of the market: “an eschatology of the body that was also a sacralization of the market economy. In and through the capacious practice of fasting, religion, masculinity, and capitalist dreams coalesced” (Griffith 2000, 603). Fasting was therefore part of the capitalist ethic and the productivist logic: “extreme food reduction appropriately suited the period’s capitalist ethic of increased, efficient production” (Griffith 2000, 605). Our analysis fits into the perspective established by R. M. Griffith. We wish to show that the contemporary practice of fasting is based on a promise of “rewilding the self” that takes the form of a dual process. 1) A regressive process, a rewilding of the body based on a primitivist philosophy that aims to restore modern humans’ physiological potential via an ancestral technique of the body: fasting. 2) A political process, a politicized rewilding of everyday life in the form of a radical experience of hunger

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<sup>2</sup> Translated by Cadenza Academic Translations

aiming to challenge commercial routines and dietary habits, and to renew sensations and perceptions.

### **Fasting: A protean practice**

Fasting, as a voluntary restriction of food intake, is central in many religions. It is therefore analyzed by specialists as a practice of self-control and self-transformation, and the expression of a frugal way of life (Hervieu-Léger 2017). Although religion is the ultimate domain of this technique of the body, fasting has taken on very different forms in recent history. An obvious example is political fasting, with the figure of Gandhi and hunger strikes. The fasting person is also a recurring figure in the world of music hall, seeking to thrill the audience through an exploration of the body's extreme capacities (Gooldin 2003). But beyond these forms, fasting can also be an everyday practice, as for certain Native Americans (Blumensohn 1933) who, when asked about the meaning of their regular fasts, did not know how to answer: for them, fasting was as inexplicable as hunger, defecation, or digestion. Finally, fasting as a health practice was promoted throughout the twentieth century by many schools of thought, from natural hygiene to naturopathy. In Europe, these different promoters of fasting managed to institutionalize the practice, for example in Sweden, Germany, and Russia. Clinics, which still operate today and are enjoying greatly renewed interest, offer therapeutic or preventive breaks. In Germany, for example, therapeutic fasting, practiced at the Charité – Universitätsmedizin hospital in Berlin, has been part of the normal array of treatments used by doctors for decades. Its use to treat certain illnesses is therefore publicly funded. The promise of fasting has recently become scientifically topical again thanks to the high-profile works of Professor Valter Longo, an expert on the biology of aging. Thus, as we will describe, fasting has become biomolecularized and is connected to the Promethean dynamic of transhumanism. In France, the recent development of numerous scientific controversies, particularly in the sensitive domain of cancer, continuously keeps the promise in the spotlight. The French biomedical institutions, concerned with containing the development of marginal therapeutic practices and channeling patients' hopes, emphasize that fasting has no proven benefits for human health (Rapport NACRe 2017). Meanwhile, the promoters of fasting are exploring the interstitial opening offered by the wellness, anti-aging, and performance market.

### **Studying the French “wellness” fasting market**

To analyze the contemporary practice of fasting, we will examine the recent development of the French “wellness” fasting market, in the standardized form of week-long group retreats. The vast majority of these voluntary deprivation retreats combine fasting with daily hikes. It is in this specific form that fasting practice has been spreading in France for around twenty years, in close connection with the growth of the alternative medicine and naturopathy market. It also exists in a specific dietary context, characterized by a process of *nutritionalization* (Poulain 2009; Scrinis 2013), a growing distrust of industrial food (Lepiller and Yount-André 2020), and an intensification of what is known as dietary reflexivity, meaning the growing recognition and consideration of the impact diet can have on health, the body, and the environment (Fournier 2014). In order to understand what this redeployment reveals about the public's expectations and the ideologies at work, we will analyze this promise of wellness fasting in France by studying the content of the websites promoting the retreats. Our approach therefore belongs to the field of the sociology of expectations (Borup et al. 2006), which has shown the role that declarations about the future and strategic anticipation play in the launch of new scientific

programs, the introduction of new technologies onto the market, and the institutionalization of new practices. By choosing the term *promise* (Dalgarrondo and Hauray 2015) to refer to this strategic actualization of the future, we will highlight the relational and circular dimension of the phenomenon. In fact, the performative efficacy of the promise is guaranteed only by its capacity to draw on shared aspirations and compatible imaginaries. This approach to therapeutic innovation aims to shed light on the legitimization processes involved. Beyond organizational phenomena, the focus is mainly on the cultural dimension, on the changing or shifting norms, on the symbolic rearrangements brought by these promises, and on the ideological investments at work.

The first part of this chapter presents the fasting market in France, first from a socio-historical perspective by retracing the development of the “fasting and hiking” concept, then by characterizing the online offer. In the second part, we will pursue the idea of primitivism explored by R. M. Griffith, by analyzing contemporary fasting practice as a rewilding of the self.

## 1. The development of the “fasting and hiking” concept in France

### 1.1. The importation of a concept

The contemporary practice of wellness fasting in France, as promoted by many websites (which we will analyze below), was introduced in 1990 by Gisbert and Gertrud Bölling, a German couple living and offering horse riding in Drôme. The two *soixante-huitards*<sup>3</sup> (in their own words) attended a fasting and hiking retreat in Delémont in the Swiss canton of Jura in March 1990. Excited, they returned to France, gathered some friends from the organic farming community, and organized a first fasting and hiking retreat the very next week, over Easter. This week-long retreat was inspired by the concept created in Germany by Christophe Michl, a teacher involved in the “marches for hunger,”<sup>4</sup> with whom the Böllings trained in the Black Forest. The protocol differed in two ways from that advocated by the natural hygienist school, which was very fashionable at the time, particularly due to the notoriety of Herbert Shelton, a naturopath recognized as its founding father. First, unlike the natural hygienists, who recommended strict water fasting, Michl and the Böllings were promoting Buchinger fasting, named after the German doctor considered to be the pioneer of therapeutic fasting<sup>5</sup> and who showed that a small daily calorie intake (200 to 300 calories, corresponding to a fresh fruit juice and a clear vegetable broth) could alleviate the unpleasant effects of the first days of fasting (nausea, migraines, etc.). Second, whereas the natural hygienists encouraged complete physiological rest, fasting and hiking retreats combined fasting with daily physical activity (walking), claiming that this supports or even accelerates the body’s “self-restoration” process. Despite great popularity in Germany, fasting and hiking retreats struggled to take off in France. The Böllings promoted them via small ads in the local press and their stand at the Marjolaine organic exhibition in Paris. Demand was initially low but grew gradually, particularly thanks to media events. A first article published in the practical ecology magazine *Les 4 saisons du jardin bio* and written by a journalist who fasted with them in late 1990 brought the first retreat

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<sup>3</sup> Translator’s note: The term *soixante-huitard* refers to a participant in or supporter of the demonstrations that took place in France in May 1968, or more generally to a social activist.

<sup>4</sup> Inspired by the 1954 “Swedish march”—eleven Swedish doctors walking from Gothenburg to Stockholm (520 km) while water fasting to raise public awareness about fasting as a therapeutic practice—Christophe Michl took part in protest marches while fasting (the “hunger marches”), particularly for Third World autonomy. In 1984, he organized the first fasting and hiking retreat in Germany.

<sup>5</sup> Suffering with rheumatoid arthritis, he tried fasting, with good results. He opened a first therapy center in 1920, then in 1953 he opened the famous Überlingen clinic by Lake Constance, with his daughter and his son in law.

participants. Ten years later, following the publication of Gisbert Bölling's first work, *Le jeûne* ("Fasting") in 2000 and a promotional article in *Psychologie Magazine*, real demand emerged. Some of their retreats had up to forty-five participants. After another decade, in 2011, the broadcasting of Sylvie Gilman and Thierry de Lestrade's documentary *Le jeûne, une nouvelle thérapie?* ("Fasting: A New Therapy?") on the French television channel *Arte* marked great enthusiasm for the practice. Today, the number of people who fast in France is estimated at eight to ten thousand per year (according to the promoters whom we interviewed). Although demand seems to have significantly increased, the offer has also diversified considerably during this period: more than a hundred centers organizing fasting and hiking retreats can be inventoried online, across three main networks.

The first, in terms of both age and the number of members, is the Fédération Française de Jeûne et Randonnée (FFJR) (French Fasting and Hiking Federation), founded by its president Gisbert Bölling to bring together retreat organizers and promote this practice. Very quickly, dissenting voices emerged, including Eric Ledun, a former consulting firm manager who discovered fasting on a retreat and instantly saw an opportunity. He wanted to democratize this practice by dismantling its "hippie" image and emphasizing wellness rather than the concept of "therapy" or "treatment." The aim was both to avoid criticism for sectarianism<sup>6</sup> and to defend against accusations of illegally practicing medicine. By diversifying the offer (via personalization in terms of duration, practices, and support) and by modernizing it (through the addition of wellness treatments and comfortable facilities), this network wanted to make fasting part of a more traditional personal development program offer. In 2008, he therefore created the Jeûne et bien-être (Fasting and Wellness) network, which he franchised. The eponymous magazine that complements this network can be analyzed to demonstrate the reframing. A third and more recent network emerged in 2010, in the form of a non-profit organization called VitaDetox. There are around fifteen centers organizing fasting in this network.

## 1.2. The fasting web

Thanks to our research, we identified over a hundred centers with an online presence, the vast majority of which are approved by one of the three networks described above. After first smoothing our sample, we decided to focus on the first sixty websites in order to map the offer. Table 5.1 presents their main characteristics. Although prices vary widely (from €350 to €1300 per person for a one-week retreat, including accommodation) and the facilities and comfort levels of the centers vary considerably, we can observe a certain homogeneity in terms of the schedule and organization. Each retreat lasts a week, is preceded by a week of "food descent" (during which the participant progressively removes food groups from their diet at home, until they are eating only fruit and vegetables the day before the retreat) and followed by a week of "food reintroduction" (progressively adding food groups back into their diet in reverse order), with the first meal prepared and eaten together on the last day of the retreat. A typical day is organized as follows: 1) drinking organic fruit juice together for breakfast, an opportunity for participants to talk and reflect about their sensations; 2) waking up the body (yoga, qigong, daoyin) and/or meditation/sophrology; 3) hiking (for two to four hours); 4) free time in the afternoon, with access to the facilities (swimming pool, jacuzzi, "bol d'air Jacquier" oxygenation treatment, etc.) and to treatments (massages, reflexology); 5) eating an organic clear broth together for dinner, an opportunity for further discussion; and finally 6) a seminar and/or workshop (nutrition, naturopathy).

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<sup>6</sup> Until 2009, fasting and hiking retreats were monitored by Miviludes (a French government agency that monitors sectarian movements) for risk of "sectarianism."

Retreat offer online		
Centers (n=60)	Profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fasting and hiking sites (n=30)</li> <li>- Naturopathy sites (n=12)</li> <li>- Wellness centers (n=9)</li> <li>- <i>Gîtes</i> (vacation rentals) and unusual accommodation (n=5)</li> <li>- Yoga associations (n=4)</li> </ul>
	Affiliation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- FFJR (n=32)</li> <li>- Jeûne et bien-être (n=11)</li> <li>- VitaDetox (n=10)</li> <li>- None (n=7)</li> </ul>
	Price	€680 on average (from €350 to €1300) for a one-week, all-inclusive retreat (support and accommodation based on one person in a double room, treatments not included)
	Presence of medical personnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- General practitioner (n=6)</li> <li>- Nurse (n=3)</li> <li>- Nutritionist (n=1)</li> <li>- Pharmacist (n=1)</li> <li>- None (n=49)</li> </ul>
	Location	Retreats all over rural France, but a particularly high number in Brittany, Provence, and the French Basque Country.
Organization	Phases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- One week of “food descent” (progressively and chronologically removing meat and fish, followed by tea, coffee, and chocolate, then carbohydrates, so that the participant is eating only fruit and vegetables on the day before the retreat)</li> <li>- Six-/seven-day retreat</li> <li>- One week of “food reintroduction” (progressively and chronologically adding food groups back into the diet in reverse order)</li> </ul>
	Typical day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Drinking organic fruit juice together, discussion</li> <li>- Waking up the body (yoga, daoyin, etc.) and/or meditation/sophrology</li> <li>- Hiking (for two to four hours)</li> <li>- Free time, with access to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Facilities (swimming pool, jacuzzi, “bol d’air Jacquier” oxygenation treatment, etc.)</li> <li>o Treatments (massages, reflexology, etc.) (not included in the price)</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Eating an organic clear broth together, discussion</li> <li>- Seminars and/or workshops (nutrition, naturopathy)</li> </ul>

Table 5.1. Analysis of websites (n=60)

### 1.3. A triple rhetoric

By analyzing the websites, we can identify three major rhetorical trends in the promotion of fasting and hiking retreats in France: a critique of (dietary) “modernity,” an emphasis on the value of (human) nature, and an invitation to take a (transformative) break.

#### *The critique of (dietary) modernity*

Fasting is presented as a chance for a person to (re)gain control over their diet, their body, and their everyday life, at a time when “modernity” is accused of all evils. “[Fasting is] an intense bodily repair and cleansing session, [. . .] a process that can be seen as a way to rebalance in the face of our dietary excesses, our Western lifestyle, and all the resulting problems” (Jeûne in Landes website, accessed February 19, 2022).<sup>7</sup> The premise is that we eat too much, badly, and out of habit. A fasting and hiking retreat is therefore seen as a way of escaping this insipid “modernity” and giving new value to what we eat and new meaning to our lives. However, a retreat in which participants do not eat for a week and attend daily nutrition seminars seems a long way from the “French dietary model” with its focus on the gustatory, hedonic, and

<sup>7</sup> Translator’s note: Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign-language material in this chapter are our own.

convivial dimensions (Mathé, Tavoularis, and Pilorin 2009; Poulain et al. 2010). This emphasis is particularly embodied by the recent inclusion of the “Gastronomic meal of the French” on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list. It therefore seems necessary to examine what lies behind this promise and whom it targets. We might hypothesize that these retreats are the reflection of a *nutritionalization* process (Poulain 2009; Scrinis 2013) and of increased dietary reflexivity, given that the demands of the healthy and sustainable consumer are highly influential for contemporary diets (Dubuisson-Quellier 2016). Permeability to these demands is nevertheless socially determined (Fournier 2014). The budget required (at least €350 per person for a week) creates an initial social sorting effect. Paying to go without food for a week is part of a distinctive phenomenon (Bourdieu 1996) that is particularly active in our time of overabundant food supplies. Beyond the solely economic aspect, these fasting and hiking retreats explicitly target people who are already aware of the effects of diet on health, well-being, and the body, with a critical perspective on “dietary modernity”: “After fasting for a few days, you feel light and full of energy, all your senses are sharpened, and your brain is working much better” (Jeûner pour sa santé website, accessed April 2018).

### *Emphasizing the value of (human) nature*

Through his experimentation underpinning the work *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, Henri David Thoreau (1854) wanted to reconnect with nature to find *his* nature. This double level is perfectly identifiable in the rhetoric of the websites analyzed. Some arguments follow the theme “Be revitalized by nature’s abundance” (Les sentiers buissonniers website, accessed February 19, 2022), while others claim that “Fasting is our true nature” (Jeûner côté mer website, accessed February 19, 2022). The rhetorical goal is to reconcile nature and human nature by presenting the causal link between them. Immersion in a rural setting and hiking, combined with experimenting with hunger, purportedly help participants to develop greater everyday attention to the body and mind, and to “find themselves” or even (re)discover themselves. Moreover, the idea is to surrender to “nature,” because it is always seen as beneficial (Lepiller 2013), whereas artifice is seen as disturbing, particularly when it comes to food (Fournier and Lepiller 2019). “I invite you to do nothing for once and just surrender” (Jeûne et détox en Auvergne website, accessed April 2018). Nature and human nature are entangled and amalgamated here, and fasting and hiking retreats are presented as ways to reconnect with this nature.

### *A break as a gateway to transformation*

The third type of rhetoric used is that of a break. It is omnipresent on the websites, on two temporal levels. On one level, it is the break itself that is emphasized, as a lived experience, or even an indescribable one: “Those who have fasted before know it, first-timers will discover it, and I almost envy them! The first fast is undoubtedly the most unbelievable, because the experience is so powerful. . . Despite this fabulous promise, some people still hesitate.”<sup>8</sup> It is made possible by participants being away from home: this is a retreat. It is a shared experience and the organization is delegated, but it takes place away from the hustle and bustle, obligations, and habits of everyday life. The “fasting and hiking” retreat is like a form of self-experimentation, supervised and advised by expert fasters. This particular space-time, which has its own rhythm, rituals (consuming broth together in the evening), and challenges,

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<sup>8</sup> First sentence of the editorial in the magazine *Jeûne et bien-être*, signed by the editor in chief: Christine Bory-Huyghens, “Alors, prêt à jeûner?” *Jeûne et bien-être*, no. 3, January 2018, 3. Available at: <https://www.flipsnack.com/jeuneetbienetre/magazine-je-ne-bien-tre-2018.html>.

particularly the physiological challenges of the “ketonic phase”<sup>9</sup> (Gueguen et al. 2014) on around the fifth day of fasting, is said to help participants discover new sensations and emotions: “Our body’s adaptability is an extraordinary thing, which we don’t notice in normal times” (Jeûne et détox en Auvergne website, accessed April 2018). On the second level, the break allows a fresh start and works like a gateway back to willpower. It is seen as the trigger required to change “unhealthy” practices with the possibility of “cleansing” everything to start from scratch: “fasting is a simple way to completely cleanse the body, wipe the slate clean, and make a fresh and positive start” (Jeûne Vitalité website, accessed April 2018). The idea is to relearn how to eat and live differently. The fasting break is therefore a time of experimentation, allowing subsequent better regulation of one’s appetite and improved control over one’s way of life.

## **2. Fasting as a way of rewilding the self**

### **2.1. Animals as a model**

Animals, particularly mammals, regularly feature in the contemporary discourse of those promoting fasting. In the strictly French context, the works of Yvon Le Maho, ecophysiologicalist at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) (French National Centre for Scientific Research) are regularly used to substantiate this animal-based argument. His works helped to demonstrate that the remarkable fasting capacities of penguins were shared in the animal kingdom, including by human beings. Therefore, the scientific marketing used by promoters of fasting regularly states that any person in good health can fast for around forty days. This emphasis on inter-species biology as a way of rediscovering our otherness, a source of biomimicry, is a metaphorical invitation to rewild ourselves. Fasting is therefore an experience, a scientific self-experiment, a biotechnological intervention “with bare hands” allowing the individual to optimize their body by reactivating their “true nature”: “I invite you to try the extraordinary experience of fasting, to rediscover this innate capacity that lies dormant in every one of us. Fasting is our true nature” (Jeûner côté mer website, accessed April 2018). The construction of fasting as a scientific object and a way of exploring one’s physiological capacities is strengthened by the recurring mobilization of research fronts, particularly the work of Valter Longo, professor of gerontology at the University of Southern California, made famous by his publications on calorie restriction. In the 2000s, he demonstrated that reducing the food intake of laboratory mice improved their health and increased their lifespan. Moreover, he is at the origin of hopes about the possibility of fighting cancer or the side effects of drugs by fasting. His most recent publications concern experiments on humans, which aim to prove the efficacy of a particular fasting cycle (five days a month for three months) in combating chronic conditions associated with aging. Valter Longo makes fasting a universally available tool for biological regeneration, meaning that it rides on the back of the flourishing anti-aging promise (Dalgalarondo and Hauray 2015). Here, the animal model serves as an ideal and practical horizon, allowing promoters of fasting to trace the path that “impaired,” “degenerate” humans must follow.

Here too, a little historical perspective demonstrates the continuity of the animal-based argument. In the early twentieth century, Macfadden, one of the emblematic promoters

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<sup>9</sup> The ketonic phase starts on around the fifth day of fasting and can last several weeks depending on the physiology of the individual. Human adaptation to prolonged fasting is characterized by our capacity to save the body’s proteins. Energy substrates are therefore primarily provided by lipolysis (the breakdown of fats) and the ketone bodies produced have the particularity of being able to directly fuel the brain. Many people experience an altered state of consciousness during this stage.



analyzed by R. M. Griffith, regularly evoked animals that fast to convince readers of the universality of this self-healing mechanism and to reassure them. According to this argument, civilized humans needed to rid themselves of all artificiality by using fasting to recover the strength of the wild animal: “‘Civilized man’ needed to throw off the artificial tastes and cultivated habits accrued over time in favor of the practices observable in animals and so-called ‘primitive’ people [. . .] This shift would restore the lost strength and vitality that every man supposedly coveted, enabling him to conquer all that was debilitating and feminizing about modern civilization” (Griffith 2000, 608). Doctor Shelton, another American figure in the history of fasting analyzed by Griffith, devotes an entire chapter to fasting among “lower animals,” in which he draws on the paradigmatic case of illness to normalize fasting and present it as natural. Wild and domestic animals become models, the keepers of a technique forgotten by modern humans: “I need but devote little space to a discussion of what every one [*sic*] already knows; namely, that the sick animal refuses all food. The farmer knows that his ‘foundered’ horse will not eat--is ‘off his feed,’ as he expresses it. [. . .] In fact, all nature obeys this instinct. Thus does nature teach us that the way to feed in acute ‘disease’ is not to do it” (Shelton 1934). Shelton emphasizes the instinctive dimension of fasting and sketches an original history of human biology: “Fasting above all other measures can lay claim to being a strictly natural method. There can be no doubt that it is the oldest of all measures of meeting those crises in the organism called ‘disease.’ It is much older than the human race itself since it is resorted to instinctively by sick and wounded animals” (Shelton 1934). Macfadden also sees wildlife as a source of inspiration and definitive proof: “serious sickness prompts all animals to fast. Wounded deer will retire to some secluded glen and starve for weeks together” (Macfadden and Oswald 1900, 40). Thus, the practice of fasting incorporates an original becoming-animal<sup>10</sup> in the form of an alliance, a new zone of exchange and assemblage with the animal world and its biological potential.

## 2.2. The hunter-gatherer as a model

Fasting is presented as time out, a liberating journey primarily based on renewed attention to the body and the establishment of a “dialogue,” as shown by this representative account:

My experience of facilitating fasting retreats has brought me many surprises myself: when I accompany the hikes, I eat in the morning before leaving and in the evening when I get back. After all, I can’t fast for thirty-five weeks a year. But I do thirty-five weeks of a sort of Ramadan. . . In winter, we finish hiking before dark, at around 3 or 4 p.m. In summer, we sometimes have a long siesta to let the heat pass, and we might even get back after 5 p.m. I had to talk to my body like you might talk to a good friend, to explain the reasons for the delay. But now, I can do anything: whether I eat or not, my body doesn’t even protest. It just trusts me. There are no obligations anymore. I’m free to do as I like.

(Bölling and Bölling 2017, 15)

In some discourses, taken to a deeper level, this dynamic of the journey becomes a real exploration of the self and of one’s capacities to adapt. Promoters of fasting regularly evoke the demands of the human being and of human biological evolution, along with the theme of survival as the way of life of our ancestors. Fasting is therefore described as an experience that allows us to reconnect with Paleolithic humans, who trod lightly on Earth, in harmony with nature. Here, we encounter the thinking seen in evolutionary medicine, evolutionary nutrition, and even evolutionary psychology, scientific fields that theorize the question of

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<sup>10</sup> The concept “becoming-animal” was proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. See the reference list for an English translation of their work: *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (2005).

“mismatch diseases” (MMDs), “disharmony,” or “caveman syndrome.” According to these theories, the modern individual is handicapped, degenerate, and weakened by their inability to live as their innermost nature dictates. The promise of “paleo” diets is based on the same primitivist principle, trying to reconstruct the original environment of the hunter-gatherer and getting as close as possible to their way of subsisting.

This primitivist theme is particularly prominent in the documentary *Le jeûne, une nouvelle thérapie?* (“Fasting: A New Therapy?”), which contributed to the revival of the practice in France. The hypothesis of a growing disconnect between human biology and our environment and modern lifestyle is extensively discussed in the documentary. The situation of abundance is presented as a historical anomaly in the long history of human evolution. Effectively, not fasting is presented as a suboptimum use of the body, or even a pathological state, as suggested in the documentary by Andreas Michalsen, Head of Department at the Charité – Universitätsmedizin hospital in Berlin: “It is not surprising that the body experiences difficulties if it does not fast, when it eats constantly. Our genetic heritage seems less adapted to this situation than to fasting.” Therefore, a fasting retreat is presented as an opportunity for personal *scientific exploration* of a human potential: “Fasting is not a trend, it is a powerful technique that we are rediscovering, but which our body has not forgotten” (Les belles humeurs website, accessed February 19, 2022).

It is interesting to note that this contemporary “mismatch” theory appears, in another form, in the discourse of the fasting promoters analyzed by Griffith. To justify the practice of fasting, they regularly argue that contemporary living causes a loss of vitality. They offer a way of regaining the perfect health of our “ancestors” (a vague concept used to refer to pre-civilization man, the classical figure of the noble, strong savage). Diet is presented as one of the main causes of the “degeneration” of modern humans, the theory being that the organism is burdened by the need to evacuate unhealthy substances, toxins, and above all excesses. According to Macfadden, Americans are “actually eating themselves into their graves [. . .] They eat, not to nourish the body, but merely for the pleasure of gourmandizing. The result is that from two to five times as much food passes through the alimentary canal than is necessary to maintain weight and strength, and mind and body are actually weakened by the strenuous efforts made by the system in endeavoring to rid itself of this excessive amount of food” (Macfadden and Oswald 1900, 82). Modern, urban life is criticized for its pathogenic effects on the body and mind: “Who can doubt that modern living tends to dull the mental powers? Especially our national drug addictions and our almost universal overeating tend to reduce mental abilities” (Shelton 1934). In Shelton’s view, the senses and instinctive reflexes (which include fasting) are also “dulled” by modern civilization. “There can be no doubt that all of man’s special senses are more or less dulled or weakened by civilized life and by his ‘disease’ and degeneracy. In fasting, without the recorded exception of a single case, the senses are remarkably improved” (Shelton 1934). The goal is to regain the supposedly perfect health of our ancestors, to once again be able to fully express our “natural heritage”: “It [the book] will teach you that weakness is a crime—that it is the result of plain, easily avoided causes—that if your body is weak, or diseased, there is not the slightest excuse for remaining so—that health and strength of a high degree is the natural heritage of man and woman” (Macfadden and Oswald 1900, 7). Thus, the idea of instinct is frequently evoked and those who fast are invited to relearn to interpret “the language of your sanitary instincts” (Macfadden and Oswald 1900, 11).

### 3. The politics of self-rewilding

#### 3.1. Asceticism...

Finally, the contemporary practice of fasting can be seen as an original form of resistance to dietary modernity. Analyzing this practice of breaking free from the norm takes us into the infra-political register (Scott 2008). The fasting retreats aim to make participants independent so that they can repeat the experience in the privacy of their own kitchens. The promise of fasting therefore allows each initiate to reproduce a practical criticism of the dietary order, away from the gaze of the state and commerce. This political rewilding of everyday life is primarily based on adopting a temporary but strict asceticism. By practicing and experiencing fasting, participants want to test and improve their self-control. Therefore, fasting is like a limited-term experiment, an escape allowing the participant to begin a reflection on the effects of abundance in our consumer societies. Unsurprisingly, the contemporary promise features the secularized incarnation of this asceticism: the athlete. An embodiment of outdoing and enhancing oneself through rational optimization, according to Peter Sloterdijk (2014) the athlete corresponds to this ideal of advancement through effort. Sloterdijk hypothesizes that we are seeing a powerful return of the practice of asceticism in our secularized societies. Thus, modernity resembles a new anthropotechnic regime that has “secularized and collectivized the practising life by breaking the longstanding asceticisms out of their spiritual contexts and dissolving them in the fluid of modern societies of training, education, and work” (Sloterdijk 2014). The practice of fasting is part of this massification of asceticism. Sport, as a laboratory and experimental context for human optimization, is like the great media *gymnasion* of anthropotechnics: “the methods of mental and physical practising by which humans from the most diverse cultures have attempted to optimise their cosmic and immunological status in the face of vague risks of living and acute certainties of death” (Sloterdijk 2014). The evocation of the emblematic figure of Yannick Noah (a high-profile French tennis player in the 1990s) in the “fasting and hiking” guide published by the FFJR in 2017 falls within this secularization of asceticism, in aid of an opening onto the concept of excellence:

Journalist’s question: You’re starting your seventh day of fasting. Is it a difficult ordeal?  
Answer: Normally, I fast in spring and early autumn. It really does me good. I cleanse myself, I rid myself of the stress from the Davis Cup and the fatigue from traveling. What’s more, I had started smoking and drinking again. I needed to quit completely, and it’s done! The first two days are hard. After that, it gets gradually better, you feel good, all your senses are alert. [. . .] Personally, when I saw it through to the end, it felt like a victory over myself. We know that fasting is linked to spiritual exploration. We see it clearly with Ramadan among Muslims or in other religions. Gandhi, whose hunger strikes are famous, subsequently fasted for one day a week. In short, fasting takes us closer to the core of things and therefore to ourselves, to the inner voice, to the cosmos, you might say.

(Bölling and Bölling 2017, 22)

This high-level athlete presents fasting as an exercise of mastering one’s desires that helps to physically “cleanse” the body, awaken the mind and spirit, regenerate the senses, and cultivate psychological strength. The athlete, who is a secularized embodiment of the ascetic and their “feats,” demonstrates the possibility of self-production through scrupulous practice. This mirroring between spiritual and physical exercise is perfectly described by philosopher Pierre Hadot: “Underlying this conviction is the parallelism between physical and spiritual exercises: just as, by dint of repeated physical exercises, athletes give new form and strength to their bodies, so the philosopher develops his strength of soul, modifies his inner climate, transforms his vision of the world, and, finally, his entire being. The analogy seems all the more self-

evident in that the *gymnasion*, the place where physical exercises were practiced, was the same place where philosophy lessons were given; in other words, it was also the place for training in *spiritual gymnastics*” (Hadot 1995, 102). The presence of the expression: “A healthy mind in a healthy body” (Hygea website, accessed April 2018) on one of the websites analyzed offers a different way of explaining the centrality of the body in the promise and the exploration of new forms of organization between body and mind, with the power of the ancient message and Olympic history: “A highly parasympathetic matter. Fasting, a rest for the body. . . and the mind.”<sup>11</sup>

### 3.2. . . . and its pleasures

Asceticism is closely linked with the concept of pleasure. First, there is the pleasure of the exercise itself, and of a practice that gives an increased feeling of control. However, outside of pathological distortion, represented here by the emblematic figure of the anorexic, asceticism as an exercise has a more elaborate connection with epicureanism than surface appearances might suggest. “Fasting is also a way of reconnecting with your senses, for increased pleasure” (Osez jeûner website, accessed February 19, 2022). The practice of fasting, whatever its aim, has often been seen as a way of rediscovering the simplicity of everyday pleasures, particularly those related to food (Griffith 2000). By this logic, fasting provides an opportunity to escape habits and the numbing of the senses that they can cause. This epicureanism is present in many artistic or literary evocations of the moment when a religious fast is broken. Beyond the pleasure associated with dietary control (Dupuy 2013), the person eating also experiences renewed and deeper pleasure thanks to the voluntary effort made. Fasting therefore provides a way of sharpening the senses again, beginning a new relationship with food in which the search for taste and diversity replaces the “vulgar” pleasures of abundance. We can observe a desire for true products and a gastronomic relationship with food: “Fasting with us is epicurean, gastronomic, and organic” (Bio Alcaline website, accessed February 19, 2022). “Fasting is also a way of reconnecting with your senses, for increased pleasure [. . .] it is also a convivial moment” (Osez jeûner website, accessed February 19, 2022). And fasting is presented as just one stage, a founding moment that helps participants to reconfigure their desires, allowing them an opportunity to rediscover taste, to feel truly hungry again. They therefore undergo the common experience of the thirsty walker who, after many long hours, rediscovers the simple pleasures of water and its thirst quenching powers by a bubbling spring. R. M. Griffith has clearly demonstrated the many facets of this quest for pleasure, particularly sexual pleasure, among nineteenth-century fasting doctors: “indebtedness to Dewey’s influence, many highlighting the fast as an instrument of efficiency that would bestow riches galore. And not only riches: indeed, the faster harnessed the power to obtain practically any desire” (Griffith 2000). This disciplined way of living, in the words of Benjamin Constant cited by these doctors, provides a “power of will.”

### 3.3. A silent revolution

Finally, a fast can be seen as a silent protest, meaning that every individual has the opportunity for domestic resistance. The kitchen, with its cupboards and food supplies, becomes a space where one’s life can be politicized, in the everyday context (Pruvost 2021): “Those familiar with fasting use it to sharpen and focus their mind for important decisions. For example, Lanza del Vasto fasted for forty days before launching the Larzac campaign. Gandhi did the same

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<sup>11</sup> Translated title of the magazine article “Une affaire très parasympathique. Le jeûne, un moment de détente pour le corps. . . et le mental,” *Jeûne et bien-être*, no. 3, January 2018, 10.

before attacking the English in a nonviolent manner. These fasts greatly contributed to media coverage of the campaigns: a public fast always hits the headlines, but fasting also brings lucidity to the faster, which helps them achieve the goal they have set themselves” (Bölling and Bölling 2017, 14). Collective learning of the practice is just one step, as G. Bölling states using the metaphor of the “swimming instructor”: fasting is a technique that is easily learned and is therefore destined to be passed on. It can be used at home, meaning that individuals can regularly demonstrate a desire for “de-growth,” breaking free from the flow, and rising momentarily above contingencies. It is the relationship to overabundance that is politicized here: “For several decades, we have been living in a permanent state of abundance, but our body maintains the ability to ‘store’ excess calories. This is why the ordinary European is almost always overloaded, heavier than their ideal weight, and often even obese. The body must support this unnecessary weight” (Bölling and Bölling 2017, 4). Fasting offers a revolution *in and of* everyday life, a way of deconstructing the feeling of hunger, our habits, and our mental hygiene: “‘Being hungry’ takes on a whole new meaning: It indicates not the immediate need for food, but simply the HABIT of eating” (Bölling and Bölling 2017, 28). Fasting is promoted as a way of combating the harmful lifestyle that is imposed on us every day: “Overabundant, unnatural food and insufficient nocturnal elimination due to decreased sleep time are factors that cause ‘clogging.’ The body, overwhelmed by toxins, becomes weakened. But clogging = slower cellular function = accelerated aging = biological age higher than the real age. The goal is therefore to live not only as long as possible, but also in good health!”<sup>12</sup> Fasting is presented as the catalyst for a time of introspection and reflection, a political questioning of everyday life (Lefebvre 1997). It is seen as a *ruse* in the face of consumer society, an act of “cultural poaching” in the words of Certeau (1990), an anthropotechnic bricolage, a tool for resistance similar to I. Illich’s advocacy of “techno-fasting”: He notes that “asceticism is the old word for training, for repetition. I would say what is required is a word which is difficult to pronounce today—virtue” and that “the certainty that you can do without is one of the most efficacious ways of convincing yourself, no matter where you stand on the intellectual or emotional ladder, that you are free” (Cayley 2005, 228 and 102). Fasting is presented as a momentary escape from the everyday flow, in order to rediscover the liberation of letting go: “Cultivating the art of letting go [. . .] Our retreats help participants to take the step back we need in our lives. For both body and mind, fasting is a momentary escape from the ‘system’ and allows us to regain some autonomy and therefore free will” (Jeûne et bien-être en Vercors website, accessed April 2018). Fasting is therefore seen as a political act, in which stepping back from the world and its pollutions helps to develop a person’s free will. “We fast without food, but also without the pollutants that poison us (tobacco, drugs, medication), in an unpolluted environment [. . .] with no television” (Jeûne in Landes website, accessed February 19, 2022). At its most extreme, this quest for freedom can take the form of “breatharianism.” In this case, the technique of fasting becomes a mystical practice, and its mastery by certain people supposedly allows extraordinary modes of existence:

This subject would not appear in this little guide if there weren’t an Australian woman, Jasmuheen, who has not eaten for years and who travels all over the world to speak about it. Her line of argument is very simple: just as vegetarians might say that we ourselves can eat the plants that feed animals, she claims that we can be sustained directly by the energy, water, and light (prana, chi) that allow plants to grow. Her teaching in Paris convinced me so fully that I started ‘the process’ for eleven weeks, without losing weight. . . In comparison, our one- to three-week retreats seem rather outdated! Incidentally, Marthe Robin lived in Drôme. . . But don’t worry: you come to us to fast. . . (Bölling and Bölling 2017, 25).

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<sup>12</sup> “Le jeûne, un soin anti-âge,” *Jeûne et bien-être*, July 6, 2021, accessed April 2018, <https://jeune-bienetre-magazine.fr/le-jeune-un-soin-anti-age/>.

Being “sustained by light”: this is the political objective of absolute de-growth taken to its extreme. The evocation of breatharianism reflects the “politico-mystical” anchoring of the practice of fasting, admittedly on the fringes of the discourse of the promise, but in a hyperbolic form conducive to the construction of a hierarchical scale that ranks those who follow these practices according to the degree of “liberation” or “initiation” achieved. Living on energy, water, and light is presented as the ultimate, mystical stage in the rewilding of the self.

### **Conclusion: Fasting as transhumanism “with bare hands”**

The analysis of the contemporary practice of “wellness fasting” provides an archetypal example of a desire to improve one’s body via an intellectual and practical movement of “back to,” a regressive process allowing a person to regain their “original” vitality. This voluntary abstinence corresponds to the possibility of rewilding the self that we describe as “transhumanism with bare hands”: a biotechnological honing, a process of “self-optimization” (Dalgarrondo and Fournier 2019), through the exploration of a “primitive” technique of the body. The hope of the biology of aging is combined here with a desire to reconnect with our “true nature,” with the optimal physiology of the Paleolithic faster-gatherer, and with our spiritual lives. Fasting is seen as an exploration of the self and of our capacities for physiological and political resistance, a momentary liberation from the feeling of hunger with the aim of rediscovering the ways of a frugal, simple, minimalist life. These fasting retreats are like a new consumption of *spiritual exercises*: “The quest for self-realization, final goal of spiritual exercises, is well symbolized by the Plotinian image of sculpting one’s own statue” (Hadot 1995, 102). Fasters shed the excess to discover and perfect themselves (Zask 2010). Professor Andreas Michalsen, in charge of therapeutic fasting at Berlin’s Charité – Universitätsmedizin hospital, expresses it as follows: “we see it as surgery without a scalpel” (Lestrade 2015, 86). It is about more than just following a diet or adopting an aesthetic-moral position. People fast in the hopes that the exercise itself will allow them to experience self-transformation. Fasting is seen as a way to do more with less.

To a large extent, the performativity of this promise comes from its assembled form (Ong and Collier 2008) with its evolving boundaries. This assemblage allows the promise to extend into the public and commercial space by adapting to different audiences. It is an assemblage that operates like a tiled roof, each tile/argument overlapping with those around it: the scientific argument legitimizes the promise and gives it credibility, but this biological science, through its anthropomorphic effect, also helps to fuel and solidify the political dimension of fasting. The body’s return to nature is connected to a political commitment, a challenging of abundance, and fasting becomes a necessary asceticism for better adaptation to our “pathological” societies. This assemblage therefore allows a sliding between different positions. Thus, the alternation between alternative discourse and scientific discourse, identified in all the material collected, makes it possible on the one hand to legitimize alternative practices (the status of fasting and hiking retreats in itself) because they are supported by modern science (even if the publications in question are peripheral or still controversial). On the other hand, it also provides an authorization to discuss physical and/or mental performance (linked to the ideology of optimization), because the words come from an alternative position, which rids them of this ideological load. Finally, in this original assemblage, we can identify a hybrid configuration that echoes the recent works of philosopher Francis Wolff (2017), in which he presents human identity as being caught in a tension between two extremes: the immortality of the gods and the irrationality of animals. Yet he claims that this tension is lessening, with transhumanism bringing us closer to immortality and animal studies showing us the blurring of the boundaries

between humans and animals. The contemporary practice of fasting is also caught up in this tension and allows us to understand the assembled imaginary (Jasanoff and Kim 2015) of the *rewilded being*, at the crossroads between transhumanism (a process of self-enhancement through optimization) and “naturalism” (reconnecting with nature and with *our* nature).

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