Peering Into the Blackbox of the Industrial Meat Complex

SUM4035: Past, Present and Future Meat Cultures in a Local and Global Context

Candidate No.: 403508
Word Count: 3240

University of Oslo
Center for Development and Environment

Submission Date: March 31, 2023

Table of Contents

I. Introduction....1
II. Spatial Alienation: Fragmentation in Industrial Meat Production....3
III. Social and Cultural Alienation: Estrangement from the Animal Origin of Meat....10
IV. Conclusion....17
Reference List....20

I. Introduction

How can we love our pets, care about the polar bears, enjoy the song of birds, but also consume high—and rising—amounts of industrially produced meat? The numbers of animals killed for food is "the highest it has ever been in history," states Karen Lykke and Kristian Bjørkdahl in their recently published Live, Die, Buy Eat, and yet, "many of us appear to be averting our gaze" (2003, 8). Psychologists have dubbed the evolution of "our psychological ability to love animals and love their meat at the same time" as 'the meat paradox' (Bjørkdahl and Lykke 2023, 8). French anthropologist, Noelie Vailles, offers a metaphor:

> "It is very much as if the initial separation between killing and meat had triggered a process of repeated fissions forming a kind of spiral of avoidance of a reality and a meaning that are too raw, the centre of the spiral and the force behind it being the very thing that it is trying to avoid - forever unsuccessfully, and for good reason" (1994, 32).

This metaphor—the center of a spiral, with a great force behind it—is the 'blackbox' of consuming animals produced in the 'industrial meat complex,' a term taken from Arve Hansen et al. to describe the highly industrialized, globally interconnected food regime that entails present-day meat production and consumption (2021, 35). This 'blackbox' represents the psychological discomfort and the environmental and health consequences of consuming animals in the 'industrial meat complex' (Jakobsen and Hansen 2020, 95). Through various processes of de-animalization, or as Lykke and Bjørkdahl write, "mechanisms of denial" (2023, 275), the 'blackbox' is obscured, diverted, and alienated from workers in industrial meat production and consumers in present-day meat consumption.

This essay peers into the forbidden 'blackbox' to show how the 'industrial meat complex' is implicated in strategies of de-animalization, or 'mechanisms of denial,' that contribute to soaring global meat consumption. Part I examines de-animalization on the production side, looking at the 'industrial ideal' and its various fragmentations that obscure animal lives and death from public view, primarily along the axis of spatial alienation. Part II turns to the consumption side, focusing on the social and culture aspects of deanimalization that influence meat-eating and estrangement from the animal origin of meat. Ultimately, this essay takes the three axes of alienation (spatial, social, and cultural) offered by Lykke and Bjørkdahl (2003, 11-12) to examine processes of deanimalization in the 'industrial meat complex'.

I. Spatial Alienation: Fragmentation in Industrial Meat Production

To illustrate processes of de-animalization, I begin with a story put forth by William Cronon, in his 1991 book Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West. The bison were once so plentiful on the

High Plains located west of Chicago, that they were described as "a robe that clothed the prairies in all directions to the horizon" (Cronon 1991, 215). Yet, once the great herds became "an object of trade" (216), they began to be "slaughtered without sense or discretion" (Cronon 1991, 215). Cronon describes this as a "disaster" the hunters failed to learn from (217), that nevertheless beckoned other animals onto the land—horses, sheep, and the long-horned cattle (1991, 218)—animals that were, in turn, disarticulated from the same land through the techniques of industrial meat production. The disappearance of the bison was "a prelude to complicated changes in Great Plains ecology and economy" to come (218)—changes that gave way to the rise of the corporate meatpacking industry in Chicago, an early example of the meat industry attempting to 'control nature,' or as Cronon writes: "to systematize the market in animal flesh—to liberate it from nature and geography" (1991, 259). Canadian geographer Tony Weis aptly articulates this deanimalization process: "the industrialization of agriculture means physically disarticulating animals from land and mixed farming systems and concentrating them in dense enclosures" (Weis 2015, 298). The rise of Chicago's meatpacking industry is one story among many of an emerging industrial logic that would come to define industrial meat production.

Just as disarticulating animals from the land—the mud that pigs like to roll in, the tall grass cattle like to graze on, and the dirt that chickens like to bath in—gave rise to the 'industrial meat complex', the fragmentation of animal bodies, systems of production, and labor processes maintain it. The process of fragmentation are, according to author Deborah Fitzgerald, an outcome of 'the industrial ideal' that came to dominate agriculture, or in her particular exposé, American industrial agriculture (2003, 10). The 'industrial ideal' started as "a logic of production" (12) and was heavily influenced by 'Taylorism', an ideology of scientific management (Fitzgerald 2003, 2). 'Taylorism' came to describe processes that "increase[d] the efficiency of factory production by standardizing and routinizing all tasks and processes" (Fitzgerald 2003, 27).

Fitzgerald reminds us that fragmentation is key to the industrializing process: "Nearly every industrializing process happened because someone thought outside of the artisanal logic and broke down complicated processes into multiple, discrete, isolated actions" (Fitzgerald 2003, 24). When a process is fragmented, the de-skilling of labor occurs. Processes became genericized so that "less skilled or unskilled workers" can perform a single action from the overall process (Fitzgerald 2003, 25). Thus, through the industrialization of the textile industry, the concept of the artisan vanishes (Fitzgerald 2003, 25), and likewise, through the industrialization of the meat industry, the concept of the animal vanishes. Vialles discusses how animals become edible through slaughterhouses, which she calls 'a place that is no place'. Vialles maps the spatial alienation that has occurred through the relocation of slaughterhouse facilities from the center of communities to the peripheries (1994, 10). Not only is animal's death obscured from the purchasing consumer through spatial alienation, but the butcher too is increasingly obscured from the

animal's death. Prior to the relocation of slaughterhouses, it was common for butchers to "slaughter animals in the middle of town, sometimes right beside the stall from which the meat was sold" (Vialles 1994, 15). In one to-one slaughter, a link is preserved between the individual animal and the individual butcher (Vialles 1994, 31). The de-animalization process occurs when the individual animal is instead slaughtered on a "massive, industrial scale" by several unskilled labors, rather than a single skilled butcher. Vialles calls this the 'dissociation of slaughtering and butchery': "the separation of butchery and slaughter, of meat and the killing of animals" (1994, 27). Butchers, no longer obligated to slaughter animals themselves, were morally 'cleared' and made to look 'innocent'—which, Vailles argues, led to new public sensibilities among the newly "cleaned up streets" in which the "images of death and blood" were transferred to the slaughterhouses and those who worked in them (1994, 17). Farmers too were increasingly separated from slaughter of the animals they raised. In modern chicken production, the 'industrial ideal' has led to a system of fragmentation in which the task of chicken rearing was divided from the task of chicken killing (Bjørkdahl and Lykke 2023, 85). Lykke and Bjørkdahl recount how one industrial chicken farmer "did not know how his chickens were killed" (2023, 275). This spatial and social alienation from the holistic lifecycle of meat production—from living, breathing animal to dead, edible flesh—contributes to the process of de-animalization.

Similarly, the early technology of reliable refrigeration led to a spatial and social alienation from animal slaughter. The effect of ice trade had a "revolutionary" impact on the city's beef market (Cronon 1991, 232). Prior to refrigeration, live cattle travelled in railroad cards directly to Chicago's stockyards, but with reliable refrigeration, cattle were now slaughtered prior to rail travel (Cronon 1991, 236). A de-animalization process occurred: the live animal became 'dressed beef' for a longer part of its lifecycle. As Cronon described: "dressed beef presented few of the problems that afflicted shippers of live animals" (Cronon 1991, 236). The rise of the 'dressed beef' market contributed further to the fragmentation of systems of provision and labor processes through diving "local slaughterhouses and butchers out of business" (Cronon 1991, 244), the same consequences observed by Vialles in France. Another clear example of fragmentation brought on by the 'industrial ideal' is the rise of the by-products industry and the animal feedlot system. In Chicago, recognizing that industrial waste from meat production produced pollution, meat packers found new uses for the non-edible parts of animal bodies (Cronon 1991, 52). The animal body was fragmented into smaller portions—hide, collage, gelatine, fat, hair (Fairlie 2010, 24)—and transformed into buttons, fertilizer, glue, brushes, combs, etc. (Cronon 1991, 52). The meat packers "turned what had been a single creature—a hog or a steer—into dozens and hundreds of commodities" (Cronon 1991, 250).

If the byproduct industry fragmented the animal body after death, then the animal feedlot system fragmented the animal body during life. In Norwegian agriculture, the relation of dairy cows to their land

was “radically altered” (92) when they were moved inside, away from traditional mountain dairies or ‘shielings’, and fed concentrated grain-feed (Bjørkdahl and Lykke 2023, 94-95). Argentina’s Las Pampas region is also a poignant example of the how the feedlot system has changed animal lives. Free-range cattle have moved from grazing in open fields into indoor confinement brought by the industrial animal feedlot system (Stølen 2021, 59). Nearly 100 percent of Argentina’s beef cattle were grass-fed in 1990, but today, between sixty-five and seventy percent come from feedlots (Stølen 2021, 73). Anthropologist Kristi Anne Stølen attributes the rise of feedlots in Argentina to larger changes in the global food system such as the introduction of international market incentives, genetically modified soybeans, and pro-soybean expansion public policy (Stølen 2021, 59). Argentina’s “export-oriented soy boom” driving cattle into feedlots, away from the land, is tied to—or implicated in—the ‘industrial grain-oilseed-livestock complex’, termed by Weis to describe the “islands of concentrated animals within oceans of corn, soy, and other monoculture crops” (Weis 2015, 298). This globally, interconnected system of animals eating feed from land across the world entails its own fragmentation: the work of feeding animals is splintered off into its own specialized animal-feed industry. Scholars have begun referring to this complex, capital-driven globalization of the food regime as “the emergence of evolving ‘polycentrism’ or ‘multicentrim’” in the geography of world agriculture (Jakobsen and Arve Hansen 2020, 95).

The poultry industry has perhaps entailed the harshest global fragmentation processes. Industrial poultry production has entailed a separation of egg production and broiler chicken production (Bjørkdahl and Lykke 2023, 86). One animal—the chicken—has been fragmented into two distinct commodities: egg and meat. This split means that hens are now used solely for egg production, and once no longer useful, they are “destroyed” and used in non-edible products such as concrete (Bjørkdahl and Lykke 2023, 86). The chicken has gone from being a presence on Norwegian farms, often walking around outdoors and feeding on the land, to being “hardly seen as animals” but instead “seen as tiny machines” that “transform feed, water, light, and heat into eggs, meat, and concrete” (Lykke and Bjørkdahl 2023, 87).

II. Social and Cultural Alienation: Estrangement from the Animal Origin of Meat

In present-day meat consumption, processes of de-animalization have caused “ordinary people [to] shy away from the fact that meat comes from dead animals” (3), avoiding the ‘inconvenient truth’ of how animals become meat (Lykke and Bjørkdahl 2023, 15). Lykke and Bjørkdahl contend that in the 20th century “the meat industry entered into an implicit historical alliance with both government and meat-consuming citizens in order to make meat a mystery” thus estranging the consumers from the animal origin of meat (2023, 15). Weis articulates this estrangement as “a pervasive unconsciousness that surrounds the dominant agri-food system” (Weis 2015, 297). Simply put, most consumers remain ignorant of industrialized meat production—they do not know about the animals’ life or death before it became

food. In the transition from "self-sufficiency and subsistence agriculture to agri-business based on trade," the human-animal relationship was severed. In pre-industrialized Norwegian farms, humans and animals lived physically close together (Lykke and Bjørkdahl 2023, 39). Up until the mid 1800s, life on the farm "was marked by deep interdependency between humans and the animals they kept" (Bjørkdahl and Lykke 2023, 43). Some farmers ever considered animals, such as the pig, as part of their family, an individual to be played with and cuddled with (Bjørkdahl and Lykke 2023, 48). With animals so closely integrated into the family, the role of rituals was central to animal slaughter: "the killing of animals involved parting with a sentient creature with which one had lived and cared for over some time" (Bjørkdahl and Lykke 2023, 109). Rituals provide a "symbolic transition" that allowed Norwegians, as well as other cultures of old, "cope with the transition from caretaking to life taking" (Bjørkdahl and Lykke 2023, 111). Today, we are closer than ever to certain animals, like pets or "mediatized wild animals," but the animals we eat have largely "vanished" from our culture" (Lykke and Bjørkdahl 2023, 275). The 'vanishing' of the animal and the loss of traditional rituals means that the responsibility of animal death has transitioned from the individual animal caretaker to legal frameworks, ordinances, and regulations (111). Similarly, the institutionalization of animal welfare has shifted the responsibility of care and wellbeing to authorities and legislation. The moral responsibility in animal life and death—once burdened by the farmer or local consumers—has been "'outsourced' to laws and regulations" (Lykke and Bjørkdahl 2023, 11).

The fact that we eat certain animals can seem like breathing air; it is simply something we have always done. Vialles speaks to the ubiquity of meat: "is a familiar reality, found on our tables, in our kitchens, even on the street" (1994, 3). Yet, this concept of 'meat' and its seamless integration into our diets as well as the linking of particular animals to food on our plate entails its own complex social and culture history. Lykke describes food as "both choice and practice" (Syse 2014, 169). Thus, armed with the lens of social practice theory, we can recognize how food habits are shaped by the three pillars of practice: the material (supermarkets, restaurants, food availability), the social (marketing tactics, cultural values, relationships) and the body (cravings, taste, cooking skills) (Wilhite and Shakian 2014, 27). These three pillars help us understand how historical, social, and cultural forces contribute to the 'meatification of diets' (Weis 2015, 298). Animals did not simply become meat one day; our cravings for juicy steak or fried chicken are the co-evolution of de-animalization processes in industrial meat production. For an animal to become meat, Bjørkdahl and Lykke, "the living, breathing creature must be transformed – not just physically, but symbolically – into inert matter fit for consumption," or as Vialles writes, "the animal must be made edible" (2023, 111). A prime iteration of this is seen in the marketing of meat products. When nineteenth-century meat packers were trying to sell 'dressed beef' to the public, they needed "to overcome consumer resistance to the very thought of purchasing beef that had been butchered a thousand miles away" (Cronon 1991, 235). To do so, the packers worked with butchers on bargain prices (243) and

marketing strategies: introduce a display sample of the beef, cut cosmetically into the most attractive arrangement (237), or more covertly, reconfigure it into a more palpable product like bologna sausage (Cronon 1991, 252- 253). The present-day Norwegian appetite for pølse (sausage) is an example of this (Hansen, 2023). In a recent study, soon to be published in the academic journal, Appetite, Arve Hansen observed that consumer felt it was easier to throw pølse away because it 'wasn't special,' but rather a 'convenience food,' far removed from a real animal (Hansen, 2003). Another example is minced meat, in which the reconfiguration of meat "dispels traces of the animal from which meat derives" and instead becomes tiny, unrecognizable edible pieces in meals (Lykke and Bjørkdahl 2023, 232).

Another covert operation that has played a large role in increasing meat consumption is Opplysningskontoret for kjøtt (the Meat Information Office). The Opplysningskontoret for kjøtt maintains a "powerful position in society," with a budget of over 70 million kroner (78.5 million kroner in 2020) and a widespread popularity amongst Norwegians (in 2010, it already had a Facebook page with 50,000 likes) (Lykke and Bjørkdahl 2023, 266). As the propaganda unit for Norway's meat industry, it is responsible for "deceptive advertising of meat and other animal products" such as "happy egg-laying hens rendered in surroundings that were abandoned almost 100 years ago" or "on-screen dairy cows placed on lush pastures, when they actually spend most of their time cramped indoors" (Lykke and Bjørkdahl 2023, 14). Such tactics can be seen as a perverse 're-animalization' strategy which enables the consumer to remain in denial, separated from the true reality of the animals they eat; it is another such 'mechanism of denial' at play. Their influence continues today through 'MatPrat' (translated as 'FoodTalk')—a powerful brand with a mostly digital presence (website, Facebook, Twitter, electronic cookbooks) that "retains its role as a self-proclaimed educator of the Norwegian public" (Lykke and Bjørkdahl 2023, 267). The influence of the Meat Information Office can be seen as a form of "welfare-washing," a term offered by Lykke and Bjørkdahl to describe "a form of disinformation" in which an organization creates an impression of animal welfare that differs from reality (2023, 7). Through these marketing strategies, amongst other social and cultural conditioning, a collective notion has thus developed around meat consumption: meat is protein, meat is masculine, meat is normal, necessary, natural, nice (Lykke and Bjørkdahl 2023, 17).

This meat-eating mentality has been further reinforced through social, cultural, and spatial changes in how consumes 'meet meat' (Lykke and Bjørkdahl 2023, 169). With the widespread disappearance of traditional butchers and the "supermarketification" of food systems, "the animal origin of meat has increasingly been removed from the purchasing experience (Lykke and Bjørkdahl 2023, 219). Previously, consumers (usually housewives) would go to the butcher shop to buy meat, and this interaction required forms of embodied knowledge about the animal body. In supermarkets, the entire experience of purchasing food changed. With no butcher on site, the consumer had to acquire a new set of skills: a knowledge of brands and a proficiency in reading labels and content declarations (Lykke and

Bjørkdahl 2023, 220). The urban consumer, Vialles wrote, is never "brought face to face with the animal" and in fact, "the origin of that meat is entirely hidden from view" (Vialles 1994, 28).

III. Conclusion

This essay peered into the 'blackbox' and refused to look away from the processes of deanimalization it found: the removal of bison by Chicago's meat-packing industry; the 'industrial ideal' that renders animals into commodities; the spatial changes and loss of ritual in animal slaughter; the fragmentation of animal bodies by the byproduct industry; the confinement of animal to indoor feedlots; the disappearance of the animal in products (bologna, pølse, minced meat) and the purchase point ('supermarketification'); and the strategic marketing efforts that use 'welfare washing' to keep consumers in denial. The untouchable 'blackbox' contains our future, and though the trends point towards the growth of the industrial meat industry, there are increasingly efforts, by academic scholars, engaged consumers, and even celebrity chefs, to peer into the 'blackbox': to critically engage with the 'industrial meat complex' and offer tangible ways of 're-animalizing' production and consumption in the global food system.

Reference List

Cronon, William. 1991. *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. New York: Norton & Company.

Fairlie, Simon. 2010. *Meat: a benign extravagance*. East Meon, Hampshire: Permanent Publications.

Fitzgerald, Deborah. 2003. *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture*. Yale: University Press.

Hansen, Arve. (2023). "Meatigation: Meat Consumption and Reduction" [Lecture], SUM4035: Past, present and future meat cultures in a local and global context. University of Oslo. March 24.

Hansen, Arve, Jostein Jakobsen, and Ulrikke Wethal. 2021. " New Geographies of Global

Meatification: *The BRICS in the Industrial Meat Complex."* In *Changing Meat Cultures: Food Practices, Global Capitalism, and the Consumption of Animals*, edited by Arve Hansen and Karen Victoria Lykke Syse, 35-58. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

Hansen, Arve and Karen Lykke Syse. 2021. "New Meat Engagements Cultures, Geographies, Economies". In *Changing meat cultures: food practices, global capitalism, and the consumption of animals*, edited by Arve Hansen and Karen Lykke Syse, 1-16. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

Jakobsen, Jostein and Arve Hansen. 2020. "Geographies of meatification: an emerging Asian meatcomplex." *Globalizations* 17, no. 1: 93-109. https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2019.1614723

Kildal, Charlotte and Karen Lykke Syse. 2017. "Meat and masculinity in the Norwegian Armed Forces." *Appetite* 112: 69-77.

"Om Noah," accessed April 27, 2023, https://www.dyrsrettigheter.no/om-noah/.

"Om Oss," Nettverk for Dyrs Frihet, accessed April 27, 2023, https://www.dyrsfrihet.no/om-oss/.

Sahakian, Marlyne and Harold Wilhite. 2014. "Making practice theory practicable: Towards more sustainable forms of consumption." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 14, no. 1: 25-44.

Smith, Neil. 1984. "Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space." *Progress in Human Geography* 24, no. 2 (2000).

Syse, Karen Lykke. 2015. "Celebrity chefs, ethical food consumption, and the good life." In *Sustainable Consumption and the Good Life: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Karen Lykke Syse and Martin Mueller, 165-182. London: Routledge.

Smith, Neil and Phil O'Keefe. 1980. "Geography, Marx and the Concept of Nature." *Antipode* 12, no. 2 (1980): 30-39. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.1980.tb00647.x. Stølen,

Kristi Anne. 2021. "From Pastures to Feedlots, from Beef to Soybeans: Changing Meat Culture in Argentina." In *Changing Meat Cultures: Food Practices, Global Capitalism, and the Consumption of Animals*, edited by Arve Hansen and Karen Victoria Lykke Syse, 59-78. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

Twine, Richard. 2018. "Materially Constituting a Sustainable Food Transition: The Case of Vegan Eating Practice." *Sociology* 52, no. 1 (2018): 166-81. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038517726647.

Vialles, Noilie. 1994. *Animal to Edible*. Paris: Cambridge University Press.

Weis, Tony. 2015. "Meatification and the Madness of the Doubling Narrative". *Canadian Food Studies* 2, no. 2: 296-303