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Only When Meat Is Stigmatized Will Factory Farms Stop Thriving

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An unfettered demand provides technological, political, and scientific incentives to produce all varieties of meat as efficiently as possible



Humans have never before shown greater intolerance for violence against animals. As Steven Pinker reiterates in his (heroic) new book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, rates of hunting have declined; bullfighting is going the way of bearbaiting; more consumers than ever seek "cruelty-free" products; vegetarians have tripled their numbers in the last twenty years; and scientists who work with animals follow increasingly rigorous welfare standards -- willingly.

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This unprecedented sensitivity to animal welfare manifests itself in less obvious ways as well. The movie industry adheres to stringent guidelines for how animals can be used on movie sets; thousands of vegetarian and vegan bloggers are spreading the message of non-violence through Facebook and Twitter

accounts; and -- hold onto your seat! -- just last week the *New York Times* included a vegan dinner menu on page two of its normally meat-centric "Dining In" section. A breakthrough, if there ever was one.

But -- and there's always a but -- earlier this month we learned that the global production and consumption of meat is skyrocketing. Indeed, according to the [Worldwatch Institute](#), meat production has tripled over the last forty years, growing 20 percent in the last 10 years alone. What's particularly distressing about this recent 20 percent increase is that it's occurred as campaigns against factory farms have reached a fevered pitch. Never before have so many interest groups and so many consumers been so committed in their opposition to factory-farmed meat. Never before have so many consumers become so keenly aware that industrial methods of meat production are unsustainable. Nonetheless, meat consumption continues to rise (and it is doing so in industrial countries more than in developing ones).

So how do we make sense of this contradiction?

One place to start is the Worldwatch Institute's own assessment of the problem. After highlighting the truly horrific environmental and human health costs of our collective and ongoing meat fest, the organization's press release proceeds to instruct consumers to eat "organic, pasture raised livestock" and to support "pastoral farming systems." This advice sounds sensible -- support the production of animals raised outdoors! -- and it certainly fits nicely with the foodie creed that there's a viable alternative for every food preference. But it's fatally flawed. In fact, it's advice that only perpetuates the problem we're trying to solve.

In all my thinking and writing about meat production, there's no point I believe more strongly than this one: As long as we eat meat factory farms will be the dominant mode of production. In other words, as long as humans deem it culturally acceptable to consume animal flesh -- that is, as long as eating meat is an act that's not considered taboo -- factory farms will continue to proliferate. The reason for this strikes me as intuitive: An unfettered demand for meat, in conjunction with basic human choice, provides political, technological, and scientific incentives to produce meat as efficiently as possible. Unless you have a plan to displace capitalism, density of production will rule, billions of animals will suffer, and our health will continue to decline.

Naturally, there will always be the outliers. There will always be a small percentage of consumers who choose to pay more for meat raised according to standards they deem more acceptable -- pasture-fed, free-range, cage-free, grass-fed, what have you. But to think that these consumers will, by the sheer power of consumer choice, convince the mainstream to switch its allegiance to small-scale, organic, pasture-based farms is naive at best. These consumers will always be the exception that proves the rule of factory farming's dominance. Until meat as meat is stigmatized, factory farms will thrive as assuredly as a dropped object falls downwards.

A more troubling problem with the Worldwatch Institute's suggestion to eat from alternative systems of meat production is that the advice essentially ignores the issue that concerns Pinker and, evidently, humanity as a whole: violence against animals. The fact that an animal is raised according to a set of welfare guidelines does not negate the violence of its untimely and unwarranted death -- a death that, had the animal a direct spokesperson, it would vehemently ask us to stop inflicting. This is a reality that supporters of alternative animal farming routinely refuse to confront. The result is a denial both comical

and tragic. I was recently on a [radio program](#) about backyard slaughtering in which the host, who kept and killed his own animals, was so deeply concerned with a pig's welfare that he refused to transport it to a slaughterhouse because he felt the ride over could be too stressful for the beloved animal. When asked by a caller how he killed it, the host explained that he drew an X on its forehead and shot it with a 22. Please, I beg, tell me what I'm missing.

You can dice up the problem of violence until it disappears from view, but it's still there. When we refuse to confront it, when we continually obfuscate it in a fog of rationalization, we are not just damaging the ecosystem and threatening public health. We are doing something much more tragic: we are failing to honor the better angels of our nature. When we allow duplicity, euphemism, and -- perhaps most distressingly -- sloppy thinking to prevent us from reaching our fullest potential as an emotionally-aware species, we quietly perpetuate the violence that, if so many of our compassionate actions are to be believed, we oppose with every ounce of our being.

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