BRILL

SOCIETY & ANIMALS 26 (2018) 639-643

Animals & Society Institute

brill.com/soan

The Economic Toll of the Nonhuman Animal Agricultural Industry and a Meat Tax to Combat It

David Robinson Simon. *Meatonomics: How the Rigged Economics of Meat and Dairy Make You Consume Too Much—and How to Eat Better, Live Longer, and Spend Smarter*. San Francisco, CA: Conari Press, 2013.

Vegan activists typically position speciesism as a matter of supply and demand, yet elite control over both our food supply and our government makes "voting with your dollar" a relatively impotent tactic. The problem is considerably more structural. In *Meatonomics* (2013), author David Simon illustrates how the "meat"[1] and dairy industries have become hugely subsidized by the American government, and how these industries flex their strength to manifest increasing demands for their products while simultaneously stifling alternatives to them. This distortion is such that, for each dollar a consumer spends on Nonhuman Animal[2] products, an additional $1.70 in external cost is placed on society. In addition to subsidies supported by tax dollars, consumers also absorb the consequences of skyrocketing healthcare costs, environmental damage, and inefficient food production. Nonhuman Animals pay the dearest price of all, as their lives are commodified for corporate gain under the ideological guise of human necessity. Society spends, or rather, *industries save*, over $400 billion each year in outsourced costs as a result.

It is thus problematic to presume that nonvegan consumption is simply a matter of preference, taste, or desire. Sociologists who research food systems support this premise: industry works to *create* desire where there was none before and eliminate the convenience or availability of alternatives (Carolan, 2017; McMichael, 1998). Consumption is coerced. It is not simply low prices that force "meat" and milk on America, but also a sophisticated utilization of government monies and influence to successfully manipulate knowledge production. This is accomplished by infiltrating academic journals and exploiting the USDA's control over nutritional advice. This relationship with the

1 Euphemistic language that obscures the oppression of vulnerable persons is placed in quotations to denote its contested meaning.

2 This term is capitalized to denote their status as a collectively oppressed group.

 | DOI:10.1163/15685306-12341573

government also helps industries to stave off regulations, mask disease and health crises (think "swine flu" turned "H1N1"), and criminalize critics, all of which might otherwise threaten profit. Writes Simon:

> The trifecta of lopsided lawmaking, regulatory failure, and industry doublespeak has America with a set of massive, far-reaching problems in many categories. Americans are caught under the thumb of the supply-driven forces of meatonomics, and our ability to make informed, healthy choices about what we eat is heavily impaired. This combination of misinformation and artificially low prices fosters unnatural and undesirable levels of consumption. (p. 164)

Meatonomics documents what Marxian sociologists have argued for decades: the state exists to support the economy, not public welfare (Oppenheimer, 1914). Federal support not only boosts industry through subsidies and tax breaks, but also by granting it precious credibility and legitimacy.

Meatonomics was published in 2013 with little fanfare in the Nonhuman Animal rights movement. This is unfortunate given its novel and sophisticated contributions. First, as explored above, it challenges the movement's traditional approach of attacking the demand side of speciesism. This demand, Simon emphasizes, is artificially created by industry with the assistance of the state, not necessarily by consumer preference. Desires and tastes are socially constructed and catered to by superficially depressed prices and heavy advertising. Under America's food regime, healthier and ethical foods are simply not given a fair chance.

Second, Simon presents a fourth dimension to the movement's time-honored three-pronged attack by espousing the gravity of this cost analysis. Speciesism is not only an ethical, environmental, and health problem, but also an economic one. In the post-recession era, this fourth argument is well-positioned to resonate.

Third, *Meatonomics* entreats the reader to consider the plight of fishes,[3] both free-living and factory farmed. Two of its ten chapters, in fact, spotlight the suffering of fish species. In a surprising move, fishes, generally ignored in anti-speciesist treatises given popular perception that they are the lowest denominator in human systems of violence, are granted primary coverage over that of the classically highlighted species killed for food, namely cows, pigs,

3 Mass terms, generally used to ideologically support the oppression of vulnerable persons, are corrected here as a disruptive measure.

and chickens. It is possible that Simon strategizes that a reader persuaded to empathize with fish will easily empathize with more familiar species. Perhaps there is also the hope of preventing a pescetarian reader's response to the meatonomics crisis.

The limited reach of *Meatonomics* in the activist community is not just bad luck. In all likelihood, this relates to its direct challenge to status quo-tactics that, first, target the "low hanging fruit" of unnecessary or especially heinous welfare violations, and, second, blame individuals for their consumer support. The traditional focus on violations and individuals absconds industry and state from responsibility. This favored framework dictates that business may continue as usual so long as it is done within the law and consumers continue to support the practice through their purchasing. What constitutes a "violation" is contestable, however, and is often trivial in the grand scheme of systematic mass killing. "Humane" regulations work within the government system and do not interfere with speciesist industries, as they are almost always framed as a means of economic efficiency and increased productivity. They also rely on the state and industries for enforcement.

As *Meatonomics* makes clear in its coverage of failed "humane" legislation over the centuries, the state serves industry and industry serves itself. There is an element of futility in relying on inherently oppressive structures to self-regulate. Likewise, the rise of "organic"-style labeling as a means of regulation is shown to be largely impractical. Labels are, in general, void in meaning as industries predictably push for loopholes. The state is not in a position to enforce rigor in its duty to corporate interests. Well-meaning consumers, therefore, simply pay a premium for an essentially similar product. Indeed, industries now embrace the language of welfare as added value to increase sales (Wrenn, 2013).

Contentious as this position may be to the public, industry, and affiliates of the Nonhuman Animal rights movement, Simon presents his arguments in a commendably palatable fashion. The writing style is colloquial yet evidence-based. There is a heavy application of metaphors and analogies that aid in the conceptualization of abstract notions and nearly unfathomable numbers. Just how crowded are conditions for fishes oppressed in "aquaculture?" Picture 27 foot-long trouts crammed into a space the size of a bathtub. Tanks are comprised of many such bathtubs with thousands of fish, and they are highly prone to parasitic invasion and stress-related cannibalism. The generally invisible system of fish flesh production is made excruciatingly palpable. Yet, while some degree of suffering is described, it is minimal, utilitarian, and unlikely to repel the sensitive reader. Its ease of readability and refreshing conciseness presents it as extremely accessible to the uninitiated consumer.

With this general audience in mind, the naysayers are well-anticipated, as Simon carefully considers rationalizations and avoidance techniques. For instance, eating organic, local, or "humane" is addressed and shown to be insufficient. Research compiled in *Meatonomics* demonstrates that producing Nonhuman Animals for food will *always* be polluting and resource intensive; it can never be reasonably sustainable. However, Simon also frames animal exploitation in such a way that normalizes it (employing speciesist language and treating "meat" and dairy consumption as situationally appropriate behaviors, for example), suggesting that his targeted audience is the nonvegan public, not activists. Veganism is championed, but he does not grant much attention to this preferable alternative. This is due in part to his desire for redirecting attention to structural constraints over consumer behavior. The system is prioritized over the individual as the critical target for change.

In any case, Simon denies that his approach is a conservative one. Instead, his proposed solution of a "meat" tax[4] challenges traditional welfare approaches that have been the mainstay of anti-speciesist activism since its inception:

> … the proposed tax: (1) does not support the status quo—rather, it seeks to dismantle and repurpose nearly half of the animal food production system to plant-based foods; (2) would cause a massive change in consumer behavior, namely, a 44 percent drop in consumption of animal foods; (3) would significantly reduce animal food producers' viability, forcing many to exit the business; and (4) would have a major, measurable effect on animal welfare by saving the lives of 26 billion land and marine animals yearly.… this proposal will achieve major changes to the existing system and tangible, significant benefits for animals. (pp. 178-179)

Simon suggests a tax of least 50% which would "… give consumers more accurate price signals and lead to an important shift in consumption patterns" (p. 166). Such a substantial tax may elicit skepticism as to its potentially classist impact in a society where taxes are known to escape the wealthy. *Meatonomics* does not suppose that such a heavy penalty would penalize persons of lower socioeconomic status, however. Simon optimistically hopes that it would instead benefit those in need given that Nonhuman Animal agriculture's outsourced expenses disproportionately hurt poor communities. The "meat" tax proposal thus holds within it an element of human justice. Eliminating animal products from welfare programs would predictably improve the health of

4 Dairy is included in this tax scheme.

America's most vulnerable, while simultaneously freeing up government funds to better support them. As further precaution, he advocates a tax credit to lessen the blow and government funding to support farmers transitioning to new industries as was done for tobacco farmers.

Meatonomics insists that, if a meat tax were instilled in tandem with some reconfiguring of governmental duties (such as stripping the USDA of its nutritional advising role and bringing an end to the government checkoff program), speciesism may finally be disrupted as prices rise to reflect their true cost and false advertising and false nutritional information diminishes. For Simon, becoming vegan is important, but it will not be sufficient. From a sociological perspective, this proposed solution reflects the age-old tension between top-down and bottom-up social change. Relying on elites to accomplish this is a risky tactic for activists given elite allegiances to profit and other elites. The structural shift necessary to alleviate Nonhuman Animal oppression may have to begin from the ground up, but there is no reason to presume that an individual-level shift in consumer behavior is the only means of realizing grassroots activism.

Power is held in the hands of industry and state, and only by dismantling this power nexus will change be forthcoming. Social change cannot sustain without the support of political structures, but political structures cannot reconfigure without public pressure. To absolve this paradox, lobbying for a "meat" tax will be necessary, but the movement's first point of action must be the assembly of a critical mass of vegans to undertake this critical systemic work.

References

Carolan, M. (2017). *No one eats alone: Food as a social enterprise*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

McMichael, P. (1998). Global food politics. *Monthly Review, 50*(3), 97-111.

Oppenheimer, F. (1914). *The state*. Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers.

Wrenn, C. (2013). Nonhuman Animal rights, alternative food systems, and the nonprofit industrial complex. *PhaenEx, 8*(2), 209-242.

Corey Wrenn
Monmouth University
Corey.wrenn@gmail.com