

Have your steak and eat it too: contests over knowledge of meat production.

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There's a divide between food consumption and production. Marx theorized this break in the flow of social and material resources as the "metabolic rift."¹ As divisions of labor endemic to capitalism took hold, material cycles between town and country (consumers and producers) ruptured, causing social and environmental damage: "[c]apitalist production ... only develops the technique and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker."² Mindi Schneider and Philip McMichael elaborate on the notion and propose that what has emerged from the rift in social and material pathways is a secondary rift in knowledge of agricultural production. "Not only is the metabolic rift a material transformation of production, with spatial and ecological consequences, but also it involves an epistemological break,"³ whereby knowledges of production specific to place and product leave the community and further enable depletion of social and natural resources.

As the epistemological break unfolds, questions about food change. "How much?" - referring to either cost or availability - has more recently turned to "how was it made?" The anxious curiosity is justifiable, since the food systems we've come to rely on suddenly seem strange and ugly, unrecognizable even, when compared to the common imaginaries of red barns in green pastures with wholesome farmers in overalls. Whenever something like 'mad cow disease' decimates

¹ Foster, John Bellamy. "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology." *American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 2 (September 1, 1999): 366–405. doi:10.1086/210315.

² quoted in *ibid.*, 379; Marx, Karl. *Capital, Volume I*. New York: Vintage, 1976, 637-638.

³ Schneider, Mindi, and Philip McMichael. "Deepening, and Repairing, the Metabolic Rift." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 37, no. 3 (July 2010): 461–84. doi:10.1080/03066150.2010.494371, 477-478.

British cattle, or salmonella suddenly threatens us through the egg supply-chain, it always comes as a shock and a horror to learn that most of food production is a highly industrialized, factory-style operation. Crop fields are stationary assembly lines worked by moving combines which mow, thresh, sift and bale up to thirty rows at a time.⁴ Tomatoes are bred to be rock hard in order to withstand mechanical handling.⁵ Dairy cows, like a sort of miniature factory, are kept perpetually pregnant to stoke lactation.

With food increasingly perceived as a product of a dangerous and amoral industrial apparatus, the concerned (and privileged) consumer attempts to allay his concerns through knowledge of food's provenance, not just in the geographic, but more crucially, in the processual sense: the 'how' of food's origin. Certain food movements like Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and Farmer's Markets as well as certifications and labels like 'organic', 'fair-trade', 'grass-fed', or 'humanely raised', appear to be consumer driven attempts to bridge this knowledge gap, by offering to put producers and consumers into direct relationships, or by assuring the consumer of particular production methods.

While on the one hand, these movements and concomitant labels bear signs of a 'fresh' and 'wholesome' 'alternative' to the 'defiled' and 'conventional' food system, on the other hand, as political movements they are largely predicated on consumption, which makes their transformative potential suspect. Nevertheless, while Marx saw only the worker as an agent capable of resistance to capitalism, more recent observers have made space for political power in the consumptive act. As David Goodman and Melanie DuPuis argue, "reflexive consumption is an expression of agency, and thus relates to food politically."⁶ While this reflexivity requires knowledge, and since "all food is embedded in a contested discourse of knowledge claims"⁷

⁴ Fitzgerald, Deborah. *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture*. Place of publication not identified: Yale University Press, 2010, 4.

⁵ Rasmussen, Wayne D. 1968. "Advances in American Agriculture: The Mechanical Tomato Harvester as a Case Study." *Technology and Culture* 9 (4): 531. doi:10.2307/3101894.

⁶ Goodman, David, and Melanie DuPuis B. "Knowing Food and Growing Food: Beyond the Production-consumption Debate in the Sociology of Agriculture." *Sociologia Ruralis* 42, no. 1 (January 2002): 5, 18.

⁷ *ibid.*

knowing our food becomes a primary weapon in the politics of consumption.⁸ And so, knowledge of production, while having itself become a sort of commodity (just as ‘organic’ has become a kind of super-brand or leased property)⁹, has also become a site of bitter contest between consumers, activists, large scale agro-industry, various types of ‘alternative’ farmers, and governments. In this contest for and over knowledge, and thus for political agency in the food system, players compete to learn, expose, obscure, mis-represent, affirm, or willfully ignore narratives about the origin of our food.

A particular arena where this struggle is most articulated is in meat. As an example, in 2008 a staggering 143 million pounds of beef were recalled by Westland/Hallmark.¹⁰ More remarkable however, is that this recall was prompted not by a rampant pathogen, but by a video, covertly captured by the Humane Society, showing mistreatment of sickly cattle (often by way of shoving and moving incapacitated animals with a forklift), leading to questions of the safety and quality of beef. Such investigative incursions on behalf of the consumer’s right to know, are not uncommon, and have in fact prompted a response from the meat industry in the form of “Ag-gag” and Food Disparagement laws which label investigators as terrorists and hold reporters liable for “economic damage, ... or costs caused by economic disruption”¹¹ due to negative reporting. While the value of production knowledge becomes apparent in such struggles, also evident is a deep fear that animal bodies are inputs to industrial processes.

⁸ The authors readily acknowledge the limitations of this mode of resistance, since “consumption is not a way to overthrow capitalism,” but nevertheless allow consumption a role as “more than just ‘niche marketing opportunity’”(ibid. 18).

⁹ See Guthman, Julie. *Agrarian Dreams : The Paradox of Organic Farming in California*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004., where she makes this case for organic produce and Guthman, Julie. “The Polanyian Way? Voluntary Food Labels as Neoliberal Governance.” *Antipode* 39, no. 3 (2007): 456–78., where she shows that these labels have a neoliberal function as markers of property rights. Also worth noting, is that almost exclusively, alternative labels refer to methods of production: another signal that consumers’ interest is increasingly in discovering food’s provenance. This consumers’ desire for knowledge is arguably why labels, as provenance narrative keys, have become contested property and commodities in themselves.

¹⁰ Martin, Andrew. “Company Orders Largest Recall of Ground Beef.” *The New York Times*, February 18, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/18/business/18recall.html>.

¹¹ *Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act*, 2006.

Of course, framing the issue around knowledge is only one side of the coin. We don't just want to know 'how?', we want to know that the 'how' means that meat is 'good' to eat. Claims made by labels on certain production methods work to clear consumers' conscience by relying on a pre-metabolic rift notion of agriculture that preserves and repairs natural and social cycles. The discursive tensions between narratives of food as nature and food as industrial product deserve some attention, since it is precisely through deployment of these narratives that so much obfuscation of production continues to occur.

Whether ploughing with the help of livestock and iron, milling grain with wind, or grafting apple hybrids, the fact that agriculture is essentially a technological intervention into the landscape has long been acknowledged, though perhaps not always accepted. Still, an agriculture that is industrialized, does not necessarily imply a simple scaling of this process of technologization. Rather, it points to a change in the type of technology and the subsequent relationship between it and concomitant systems. "No single innovation created the [agroindustrial] context; rather, each was located within the matrix of technical, social, and ideological relationships that both created and sustained the change."¹² The industrialized farm's engagement with the market, in other words, is much tighter, more dependent, and with less room for maneuverability.¹³ "Because [the farmer's] tractor would not run on oats as did his horse, he needed a steady source of gasoline or, more likely, kerosene, as well as lubricating oil."¹⁴

Still, it is important to note, that this process of embedding (and indebting) agriculture through technology into what are essentially capitalist modes of resource flows, is not a product of 'late capitalism,' but something that has persisted from the outset of the Industrial Revolution. As early as 1795, food was conceived by Napoleon as just another input to the war machine, when he announced a 12,000 franc prize for the invention of a long term preservation method. What resulted was the tin can, and the subsequent redefinition of food as an industrial input to a

¹² Fitzgerald, Deborah. *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture*. Place of publication not identified: Yale University Press, 2010, 5.

¹³ Ploeg, Jan Douwe Van Der. *Peasants and the Art of Farming: A Chayanovian Manifesto*. Winnipeg, N.S: Fernwood Books Ltd, 2013.

¹⁴ Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory*., 5.

canning factory. Perhaps not surprisingly, large scale ‘food scares’ and recalls were soon to follow. In 1849, 111,000 lbs of canned meat purchased by the British Navy was condemned as rotten¹⁵ with British ships across the empire throwing cans of putrid meat overboard.¹⁶

Despite the historical development of food as an essentially industrial, manufactured product, persistently and somewhat repressively, the idea of the small, good and ‘natural’ farm has stayed. Thomas Jefferson’s American nation-building project placed the farmer front and center. “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God,...Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example.”¹⁷ For Jefferson and contemporaries, the owner operated farm embodied a revolutionary break away from the feudalism of Europe. Thus, the idea of the small, family owned and operated farm, was from the beginning loaded with notions of independence, virtue, loyalty to nation, and most importantly that these qualities emerged from the farmer’s labor and his very close relationship with the earth. “Artificing,” as Jefferson referred to non-agricultural production like blacksmithing, was not for him the way to build the nation. This image persisted through the 19th century, even as towards its end, European demand for wheat and meat pushed American agriculture westward towards larger and more heavily industrialized family farms.¹⁸ The advent of railroads and refrigerated cross-Atlantic shipping, opened up European markets to American mid-western producers encouraging further growth and mechanization.¹⁹

As regional systems of agriculture dissolve and coalesce into agroindustrial trans-national supply chains, reactionary narratives also gain amplitude. Notions about meat, have a particular history.

¹⁵ Perren, Richard. *Taste Trade And Technology: The Development of the International Meat Industry Since 1840*. Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub Co, 2006, 41.

¹⁶ Geoghegan, Tom. “The Story of How the Tin Can Nearly Wasn’t.” *BBC News*, April 21, 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21689069>.

¹⁷ quoted in: Jager, Ronald. *The Fate of Family Farming: Variations on an American Idea*. Hanover: UPNE, 2004, 12.

¹⁸ in Friedmann, Harriet. “World Market, State, and Family Farm: Social Bases of Household Production in the Era of Wage Labor.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 20, no. 4 (October 1, 1978): 545–86., 565 Friedman notes that the steam thresher was developed as early as 1830.

¹⁹ Perren, *Taste Trade And Technology*.

It is significant to note the concurrence between the emergence of vegetarianism as a formalized, modern movement in the middle of the 19th century in England and the firm establishment of the capitalist meat industry, just as meat itself had become an essential part of the British diet.²⁰ Such anti-establishment reactions to meat are put in relief when we note that it is during the 19th century that the massive and streamlined abattoir established itself as a major fixture on the periphery of European and American cities which were undergoing rapid industrial development.^{21 22 23} What these highly-efficient factories for processing of meat replaced was an unregulated network of neighborhood butcher shops. Located throughout the city, butchers usually operated right in the streets, causing the 18th century Parisian writer Louis-Sébastien Mercier to remark: "What can be more revolting and distasteful than the butchering of animals and the dismantling of their bodies in public view?"^{24 25} Pressured by urban growth, butchers in major cities like Paris, London, and Chicago, formed conglomerates and consolidated their slaughter into single, isolated locations, typically on the city's outskirts, granting them access to rail transport, as well as space to operate out of sight and at a massive scale. While in the 1850's Chicago could only claim about 20,000 hogs slaughtered annually, with the famous Union Stock Yard slaughtering plant in full swing by the 1870's, that annual toll was greater than three million.²⁶ Thus, by moving the neighborhood butcher out of the neighborhood, awareness of meat processing was obscured, making eating meat more palatable and selling it, by way of consolidation, more profitable.

²⁰ *ibid.* 189.

²¹ see Brantz, Dorothee. "Recollecting the Slaughterhouse." *Cabinet*, Fall 2001. <http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/4/slaughterhouse.php>, for profiles of this transformation in Paris and Chicago. "The increasing concentration of people, goods, buildings, streets, and factories required a new spatial order that could support urban growth, foster mobility, heighten industrial production, and improve living standards. The necessity of transforming medieval towns into modern metropolises gave rise to urban planning as well as public hygiene and welfare politics."

²² see Fitzgerald, Amy J. "A Social History of the Slaughterhouse: From Inception to Contemporary Implications." *Human Ecology Review* 17, no. 1 (2010): 58–69, 60., for a brief account of this transition in London.

²³ see Twilley, Nicola. "The Lost Cow Tunnels of New York City." *Gizmodo*. Accessed October 9, 2015. <http://gizmodo.com/the-lost-cow-tunnels-of-new-york-city-1455215193>. for New York's abattoir history.

²⁴ Brantz, "Recollecting the Slaughterhouse."

²⁵ A similar reaction regarding the public display of slaughter is documented in London in 1849, where a man being interviewed about the Smithfield public meat market noted that: "the violence against the animals 'educate[d] the men in the practice of violence and cruelty, so that they seem to have no restraint on the use of it'" in Fitzgerald, "A Social History of the Slaughterhouse," 60.

²⁶ Brantz, "Recollecting the Slaughterhouse."

Early reactions to this obfuscation came from the fledgling vegetarian movement, which had its origins in religious pacifism in Britain. As the movement spread to the U.S., largely led by the Kellogg brothers, it conflated pacifist critiques of slaughter with critiques of industrialized food production.²⁷ Kellogg's tract *Shall We Slay to Eat?*²⁸ (preceding Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* by several years), took direct aim at the meat industry by describing in nauseating detail the kind of microbial infestations that take place at the slaughterhouse.

The latter half of the 20th century, saw more changes in the production and distribution of meat, as large slaughterhouse facilities moved further out of public sight. Amy Fitzgerald identifies three moments which have enabled large conglomerates like Iowa Beef Processors (IBP, purchased by Tyson in 2001) to make this transition. First, development of new technologies like improved refrigeration, and the emergence of 'boxed beef' made distribution cheaper and more efficient, eliminating the expense of shipping and having to sell whole sides of carcasses. Secondly, and enabled by technological improvements, slaughterhouses were able to move to rural, less populated areas, closer to the feedlots. The added benefit of this transition for slaughterhouses was the weakened influence of labor unions, which in the 1970's still maintained influence in urban centers. Thirdly, the establishment of large meat processing facilities in small rural communities with 'right-to-work' laws allowed the meat industry to drive down wages, while hiring an increasingly deskilled workforce, as enabled by further technological improvements.²⁹

This move from urban to rural areas, presents one type of production obfuscation. But in this process, another form emerges. As the structure of meat production became infrastructure (that is, invisible), animal's bodies became abstract. The transition from small, street-side butchers to centralized processing plants in the 19th century eliminated the sight of the animal from public view. Similarly, in the first half of the 20th century, with the emergence of improved

²⁷ Perren, Richard. *Taste Trade And Technology: The Development of the International Meat Industry Since 1840*. Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub Co, 2006, 189-90.

²⁸ Kellogg, John Harvey. *Shall We Slay to Eat?* Good Health Publishing Company, 1899.

²⁹ Fitzgerald, "A Social History of the Slaughterhouse." 62.

refrigeration and massive feedlots located far from urban centers, meat turned into a pre-sliced, pre-packaged good, eliminating whole sides of carcasses from public sight, and an awareness of the animal's body from public consciousness.³⁰ A first generation craft butcher, who makes a point of getting carcasses delivered to his shop in pieces no smaller than a quarter, opined on the issue in the following way:

There is that disconnect when you see meat pre-wrapped in plastic [at the supermarket], ... People often don't even consciously realize it comes from an animal, that it was cut out of it. They see us butchering back there, it sort of shocks them back into their consciousness.³¹

As the farming and processing of meat has almost completely receded from view, with animal bodies perceived in increasingly abstract ways, public reactions to this type of corporal nullification of animals,³² have also turned increasingly radical. The Humane Society of the United States for instance, has developed a program of implanting undercover investigators in major processing facilities. Videos captured at the facilities and released to the public have led to significant results ranging from bans on products like beef from sickly cattle, to spurring changes in practices like the elimination of gestation crates for pigs.³³

These contests for knowledge of production and their epistemological spoils have led some consumers to abstain from meat altogether. That a conflicted ambivalence towards meat has emerged concurrently with industrialization, namely in the form vegetarianism and other forms of abstinence, is all the more significant when we recognize that the symbolic transfer of power implicit in consuming the flesh of another, has been a central ritual in western culture since at least the advent of agriculture. Many however, rather than rejecting meat as a product of a vile industry, have resorted alternative ways to have their steak and eat it too, by resorting to what Jovian Parry calls a 'New Nostalgia for Meat.'³⁴

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Forrester, Tim. Personal Interview with Tim Forrester, Proprietor of Harlem Shambles Butcher Shop. Recording, April 7, 2015.

³² For a particularly bizarre example see <http://suicidefood.blogspot.com/>

³³ Abels, Caroline. "Going Undercover in the American Factory Farm." *Grist*, November 26, 2012. <http://grist.org/food/going-undercover-in-the-american-factory-farm/>.

³⁴ Parry, Jovian. "Oryx and Crake and the New Nostalgia for Meat." *Society & Animals* 17, no. 3 (June 2009): 241–56. doi:10.1163/156853009X445406.

This culinary trend aligns itself closely with discourses of sustainable and ethical farming, and differentiates its practices of slaughter from large commercial processors by relying on terms like ‘humane’ and ‘animal welfare,’³⁵ citing more ‘traditional’ and thus, more wholesome and most importantly more transparent methods of husbandry. In this value system, the small scale killing is valorized as an act of “nobility [and] unflinching honesty,”³⁶ and through exposure, supposedly closes the final epistemic gap between farmers and eaters.

The paradox is of course, that even at its most ‘humane,’ slaughter is still an act of bodily violence. When I asked the craft butcher mentioned above to what extent he supports consumers ‘knowing their meat,’ his response pointed to this implicit contradiction:

One hand, the more you know, is pretty much always better. ... But you will turn certain people into vegetarians. I had some friends ... who saw animals get processed, and they just went vegetarian, they decided it was not for them.³⁷

This is perhaps where the politics of consumption and the politics of knowledge butt heads. The “nostalgic revalorization of certain kinds of animal agriculture as traditional and thus ‘authentic’ and ‘natural,’”³⁸ combined with a complete abstraction of the animal body have actually enabled consumers to continue supporting factory farming, however conscientiously and implicitly.³⁹ Ultimately, there is no transcendence of the food system in which we are all so deeply embedded, nor is there a way around slaughter. As Adorno put it in his *Jargon of Authenticity*, “self-righteous humanity, in the midst of a general inhumanity, only intensifies the inhuman state of affairs.”⁴⁰

³⁵ See <http://animalwelfareapproved.org/about/> and <http://certifiedhumane.org/>

³⁶ Parry, “Oryx and Crake and the New Nostalgia for Meat.” 249.

³⁷ Forrester, Personal Interview with Tim Forrester, Proprietor of Harlem Shambles Butcher Shop.

³⁸ Parry, “Oryx and Crake and the New Nostalgia for Meat.” 248.

³⁹ Hoogland, Carolien T., Joop de Boer, and Jan J. Boersema. “Transparency of the Meat Chain in the Light of Food Culture and History.” *Appetite* 45, no. 1 (August 2005): 15–23. doi:10.1016/j.appet.2005.01.010.

⁴⁰ Adorno, Theodor. *The Jargon of Authenticity*. 2 edition. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, 67.