Three Sociological Paradoxes of Eating Animals

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Abstract

The practice of eating has both personal and social components that are inextricably connected. Eating animal products presents patterned human behavior in a particularly striking light. This paper discusses how three paradoxes become inherently manifest within the practice of eating meat. These are: (1) while meat eating is often associated with being "civilized," it actually is related to the destruction of civilizations, (2) the speciesism which enables humans to farm nonhuman animals with impunity ends up hurting ourselves, and (3) while "humane" approaches to animal agriculture may seem like ways to combat the ills of factory farming, they actually strengthen the factory farming system. I assert that only through a vegan perspective could these paradoxes be challenged in a way that might ethically address them.

Keywords: civilization; human farming; speciesism; sociology of food; critical animal studies

1. INTRODUCTION

Food and the action of eating are multidimensional and the choices we make about what (or who) we eat are shaped by multiple variables. While the choices people make are often personal, how an individual arrives at a particular choice is influenced by their social environment. Not only are our food choices impacted by society, but the consequences of these decisions are also driven by social factors. This paper focuses on three broad social aspects of eating animals: violence, speciesism, and alternative farming practices.

While what we eat and how it is prepared are shaped by culture, consuming food is a largely social process. From family dinners to banquet receptions, food is nearly always a component of social events. Thus, there is much sociology can offer to the study of food, particularly when it comes to the study of animal products in current food systems. Sociologist Kay Peggs (2012:3) encourages the use of the sociological imagination in order to "question and criticize conventional understandings of what sociology is." To that end, this paper takes an interest in the human dimension of animal farming and consumption, as any problems that arise from eating animals ultimately have to do with human behavior. Both people and animals are affected though, and so leaving either side out paints an incomplete picture.

As an example of sociological implications in food choices and their social impacts, consider the experience of "fine dining" as detailed by Guptill, Copelton, and Lucal (2013). For most people, this is a special occasion and often celebratory. Meat is often considered the quintessential fine dining component, as the consumption of animal flesh has been closely linked with status through the history of human societies (Nibert 2013). The clothes worn, anticipation, and stories retold afterwards can all convey a sense of prestige or entitlement. The choice of clothes establishes presentation as a member of the "upper class," and relaying the experience to others can be a way to "fit in" or "keep up" with people who have had similar experiences. There is also much invisible labor behind the scenes of the experience of fine dining. Valets, busboys, wait staff, and chefs all work hard in order to serve the customer to their satisfaction. In the food procurement process, both humans and nonhumans participate in this undertaking, although some do so more willingly and purposefully than others.

The above discussion exemplifies "the hard work of leisure" given all the work and worry that goes on for someone to enjoy a good meal. It is an example of how the sociological study of food can be viewed through the optic of paradox (Guptill, Copelton and Lucal 2013). This paper presents three further paradoxes of eating animals, particularly those of violence, speciesism and "humane" farming. To do so, I take what I consider to be a vegan perspective of farming animals and eating animal products. Instead of a misguided attempt to reduce veganism to only a diet (Dutkiewicz and Dickstein 2021)—a stance that flies in the face, and overrides the voices, of many vegans of color—I take veganism to be "more than a diet" (Giraud 2021). While veganism should focus on nonhuman animals (Feliz [Brueck] 2017:3-6), it must necessarily include all social justice issues if it is to be effective in its fundamental goal of abstaining from all animal exploitation as far as is practicable. This more radical stance is known as "consistent anti-oppression" (Feliz and McNeill 2020). With this understanding of veganism, the remainder of this essay interrogates paradoxes of animal farming and animal product consumption.

2. VIOLENCE: THE BARBARITY OF "CIVILITY"

To look at violence associated with consuming animal products, it is useful to briefly look at different forms of violence. Johan Galtung (1969) distinguishes between what he calls personal (or direct) and structural (or indirect) violence. The distinction is based on the presence or absence of an agential subject. Specifically, *personal* violence is "where there is an actor that commits the violence" and "violence where there is no such actor" is referred to as *structural* (Galtung 1969:170). On structural violence, Galtung (1969:170-1) elaborates: "The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances." To this, Dinesh Wadiwel adds a third type of violence termed *epistemic*. Epistemic violence "determines the terms by which the subject can know itself, and speak about its own position" (Wadiwel 2015:33). Whereas structural violence is part of social structures, epistemic violence is built into the collective consciousness and is ideological. Epistemic violence is a knowledge system that reifies hierarchy and subsequent domination through the understanding that one group is intrinsically "better" than another. Epistemic violence lends itself to dualistic thinking and separating, and hence, racism, speciesism, sexism, etc., constitute forms of epistemic violence.

The violence of animal agriculture stretches far beyond the farm or our plates. Widespread, unnecessary and relentless violence might be the only thing that distinguishes humans from other animals. Our violence is essentially nondiscriminatory, has defined our species' history, and is escalating (Goldhagen 2010). Yet, the domestication of animals generally, and for food in particular, has often been touted as the crowning achievement of civilization. This is because animal domestication allowed populations to grow, societies and economies to form and cities to be built. But with these developments also came disease (Hurn 2012:62), hierarchy in the form of social stratification (Bookchin 1982), and warfare (Nibert 2013). It has been said that without the domestication of animals for food that "the European conquest of the Americas very likely could not have occurred—and even if it had, there would not have been the relentless expansion for grazing areas that caused so much conflict" (Nibert 2013:67). A very similar remark has been made about the ancient Middle East: "An Islam that banned camel flesh would never have become a great world religion. It would have been unable to conquer the Arabian heartlands, to launch its attack against the Byzantine and Persian empires, and to cross the Sahara into the Sahel and West Africa" (Harris 1985:75).

The violence involved in animal agriculture ranges through many forms such as creating or contributing to "damage from the need to expropriate the land and water necessary to maintain large groups of animals, the amassing of military power resulting from animal exploitation, and the pursuit of economic benefit from the use or sale of animals" (Nibert 2013:5). When new land is acquired, military power exerted and economic boons enjoyed, the insatiable thirst for resources is not quenched. Instead these effects contribute toward perpetuating violence in an endless cycle (Nibert 2013:68). Indeed, Nibert asserts that the acquiring of resources for domesticated animals was the impetus for much of the violence in the Americas and Africa (Nibert 2013:67, 154).

In the United States, violence due to expanding range lands and acquiring resources was not confined to only farmed animals; it:

> not only necessitated wars on Mexico, Native Americans, and buffalo but also led to the killing, in large numbers, of any free-living animals perceived as having the potential to decrease ranchers' profits. Among these animals, the wolf was seen as the greatest threat (Nibert 2013:109).

Wolves are still perceived as a major threat to "livestock" and ranching profits and several states have tried to have them de-listed from the endangered species list in order to make it legal to kill them in large numbers. In the late nineteenth century in Australia, the same violent outcomes arose from the same sources:

> Kangaroos were hunted and killed so extensively that they became endangered, and several subspecies were completely lost. Dingoes were baited and poisoned in large numbers. These destructive patterns continued throughout the nineteenth century as the ranching industry, based on oppressing captive sheep and cows, exterminating and displacing indigenous people, and killing other 'pest' animals, continued to profit from providing animal skin, hair, and flesh to the British market. (Nibert 2013:136)

These examples provoke a curious paradox in the form of a link between civility and barbarism. Rachel Carson (1962/1994:99) noticed this apparent contradiction more than fifty years ago and bravely put this irony out in the open by asking the question as to "whether any civilization can wage relentless war on life without destroying itself, and without losing the right to be called civilized." While Carson was more concerned with the irresponsible spraying of pesticides, her question is relevant and applicable in light of the above examples regarding animal farming. Furthermore, her question and implication applies to the violence aimed at both humans and nonhumans. In reference to this shared victimization, Pedersen and Stanescu (2014:272) observe that "humanity [is] at war not only with other species, but also with our own."

The violence inherently contained in eating animals thus has paradoxically been both the foundation of many "great" civilizations, but also introduced some of civilization's greatest impediments to progress, and may also lead to its ruin.

3. SPECIESISM: FALLING ON OUR OWN SWORDS

A means by which violence is frequently justified is speciesism, an ideology of socially sanctioned violence toward (primarily) nonhumans. Speciesism was coined in 1970 by Richard Ryder to refer to harming nonhuman animals because they are not human and therefore less worthy of consideration (Hopster 2019:see fn 1). Embedded within this ideology which proclaims that humans are automatically superior to nonhumans based on our species membership, is an irony that exposes the hollowness of the speciesist claim.

Speciesism creates a social arena where prejudice, discrimination, and oppression are allowed to be played out. Speciesism is itself an act of epistemic violence. It allows for violent organizations such as slaughterhouses to be constructed by virtue of their justification as natural, humane or even a non-event. Such formations provide a place where both structural and personal acts of violence can be carried out essentially unquestioned. Nibert (2002:8) makes a distinction between ideologies and prejudice, with ideologies being "socially shared beliefs," whereas prejudice applies to an "individual predisposition." Ideologies, in turn, arise from a given or desired social order that privileges certain groups. Members of those groups construct ideologies to legitimate their status (Nibert 2002). With this understanding, Nibert asserts that "various types of prejudice and discrimination are outgrowths [of ideologies that] are created to protect privilege" (Nibert 2002:9). What is curious here is that (individual) prejudice is not the cause of an (institutional) ideology. Instead, the implication lies in the reverse direction. That is, ideologies give rise to prejudice which serve to reinforce an overarching belief system. As an example, individual food choices are largely influenced by the widely held and socially shared belief that humans are more important than animals, reinforcing speciesism.

Such stratification of humans and animals, however, ignores the myriad emotional, psychological, and even spiritual connections humans have to other animals. While these connections are sometimes invoked to justify animal farming practices (Stanescu 2014), they have also been used to construct veganism as anti-exploitation (Cole 2014). Regardless, both sides argue that these connections cannot be adequately severed without the risk of serious consequence. Speciesism functions as a blinder to what might otherwise be considered unethical and damaging. Taya Brooks Pribac (2016:197) remarks that if we

> Allo[w] society, of which we are agent constituents, to attempt to 'protect' our fragile selves by promoting safety based on disguise and denial of what a large majority may intrinsically perceive as ethically deeply compromised principles and practices (which is reflected, for example, in people's resistance to witness procedures in slaughterhouses…), we are not growing safer and stronger, but more fragile and more vulnerable, both as individuals and as a society… .

This quote highlights another paradox, namely the vulnerability of over-protection. In an attempt to shield ourselves from and not acknowledge that which we deem negative, we actually expose ourselves to something worse, a dysfunctional state of social existence. Pribac likens this to insanity (2016:197) because "[t]he weakness that motivates people to conform to societal expectations … is perceived as sanity and strength." On the other hand:

> To deny [an] innate vulnerability and attempt to disguise it even from ourselves by turning a simple and natural phenomenon like group formation … into a system so oppressive to nonhuman animals and so fragile in itself that its very survival relies on most people's inability to look at what underlies it out of fear… is not strength.

Thus, what we think of as safety, sanity and strength could be viewed as none of these, or even as undermining all of these. In fact, one may wonder if such denial may prevent humans from developing emotionally and cognitively in positive ways.

Another version of this paradox is found in the concept of the "Anthropocene." This unofficial but increasingly used term meaning "the age of humans" could suggest hubris. But there is more to it than that. Humanity's faith in itself to innovate continually and technologically has given rise to the modern period of time, roughly since the industrial revolution, of an age where humans' presence has rivaled geological forces. This has manifested itself within the concept of the Anthropocene characterized by the dominance, subordination and mastery of humanity over nature. However, just as Pribac noted above, whatever "security" this provides has actually left us exposed and vulnerable. Following a catastrophe, humans would be one of the most ill-suited species to survive due to how much we have domesticated and separated ourselves from the rest of nature in the pursuit of securing our own survival. Thus, Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2015:510) note that within the concept of the Anthropocene and the human takeover of Earth:

> Lie a number of potent paradoxes... this same belief in human exceptionalism is self-sabotaging.... It also leads us to disavow our own mortal entanglement in the same earth systems we so radically disturb. In other words, it is the fatally flawed belief in human exceptionalism, in the guise of omnipotence and radical nature/culture separatisms that has unhinged us and produced the imbroglio of disorderings that are now being named the Anthropocene.

A side effect of a speciesist Anthropocene is manipulation of animals and rendering their bodies and products as food, supposedly out of humans' "unique" abilities of complex rationality and ingenuity. The responsibility of reason and intelligence cuts two ways; we can reason our way to certain conclusions, but then it stands to reason that we will make informed intelligent choices. If anything, our "higher" capabilities oblige us to step back and refrain from using animals as we do and treat them compassionately instead of constantly violating their realities. If we do not, we fail ourselves and must discard unique abilities as something that makes us exceptional. This, though, would force us to acknowledge that our practice of consuming animals is violent. This would cut to our very core because as Wadiwel (2015) argues, our societies are designed to incorporate animal violence as a way of invisibly reinforcing human privilege. With consequences this high, it is not surprising that the dominant viewpoint does not question the placement of humans in the most privileged position in "the great chain of being."

Speciesism, then, functions as a mechanism to rationalize anthropogenic violence. Human exceptionalism erases doubt and guilt—and much thought—about everyday "harmless" activities. Through speciesism, every act of harm incurred by eating animals is always and already perceived as justified. And veganism would also assert that it is not just meat eating that is a problem, but other animal products also (see Narayanan 2023).

4. NON-INDUSTRIAL ANIMAL AGRICULTURE: THE INVISIBILITY OF UBIQUITY

In this last section I look at how alternative animal agriculture reinforces speciesism. Although much violence ensues when animals are raised for consumption, humans continue to justify the practice. A common thread of thought is not that the raising of an animal for human consumption is morally repugnant, but that the animal should be allowed to have a good life before their death. If this is accomplished, the consumption of animal flesh is justified. Many people agree that industrial farms are a "bad" thing. But the one argument that seems to underlie such critiques is that industrial animal agriculture treats animals horribly. Thus, alternatives have been proposed as countermeasures to industrial agriculture. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of non-industrial farming practices that aim to improve animal welfare. Concepts like "humane farming," "locavorism," "real food," or "organic meat" have permeated popular media (McWilliams 2015). Yet, alternatives to the industrial approach, as well as the underlying ideology, which I collectively refer to as "humane farming," is a manifestation of a contradiction in terms, for "it is impossible to kill one's way out of anthropocentrism and human chauvinism" (Pedersen and Stanescu 2014:271).

The paradoxes that arise from alternative farming come from the very nature of animal farming. Firstly, most suggestions for alternatively (as in non-industrially) raised animals for meat are based on welfare concerns for the animals involved. However, the underlying assumption is that breeding, confining, and slaughtering sentient beings for meat is benign at worst, and some believe that the animals themselves even consent to this arrangement. Ultimately, alternative farming methods, regardless of how "humane" they are, or how good the animal's welfare supposedly is, view animals as commodities. The sole reason for an animal's existence is to be sold at the most profitable price and consumed. Perplexingly, the goal of improved welfare appears to be premised on the guarantee of continued suffering (Poirier 2022).

While humane farming proclaims improved welfare—and on this point alone it is impossible to argue against—the larger process at work is a further entrenchment of eating animals as a normal practice (Stanescu 2014:14):

> Humane farming … serves the purpose of helping to render the power relations themselves both more normalized and more invisible, a fact that is, in essence, the basis of their continued justification and support. As such, humane farming not only can never mount an adequate critique of the factory farm system, but it in fact primarily serves to defend institutional practices and deflect criticism.

An additional paradox is found in James McWilliams' (2015) book *The Modern Savage* which outlines the inherent contradictions of non-industrial animal agriculture. One of his main points throughout the book is that these alternatives which were created to combat factory farms, actually end up strengthening industrial farms because they introduce a choice between cheap or expensive meat, a choice which will surely make almost everyone choose the cheap (factory farm) option. Indeed, alternatively raised "meat" is markedly more expensive, creating a niche market for those willing and able to pay more, as evidenced by the fact that ninetynine percent of meat continues to be bought from industrial sources (Pedersen and Stanescu 2014:268). As long as eating animals is the goal, the mentality of viewing animals as commodities will remain strong which is the exact principle factory farms are premised and thrive on.

So, eating "humane" does not solve the purported problem but further entrenches it. Pedersen and Stanescu (2014:269) put it thus:

> if the entire 60 billion land animals currently raised and killed could be transferred from CAFOs to local, free range, and 'humane' farms, such a practice would only serve to help render the staggering level of speciesist violence even more naturalized and therefore "invisible."

With all food animal facilities labeled as "humane," we would run a serious risk of experiencing a "cultural spillover" of violence: "The more we harm animals in ways that society deems acceptable, the more likely individuals may be to engage in animal cruelty and the less likely individuals and social institutions may be to seriously sanction it" (Fitzgerald et. al. 2013:299).

Another misconception is that eating local somehow legitimizes murdering innocent lives. With respect to this, "local" is not a well-defined term and says nothing about how the animals are raised or killed, so it may still be the case the animals are obtained from and slaughtered at industrial sites. Besides that,

> Transporting food from the producer to retailer is responsible for only four per cent of all fossil fuels used and all [greenhouse gasses, GHGs] emitted in the entire food production process. Eating a totally local diet reduces GHG emissions per household equivalent to 1,000 miles per year driven, while a nonlocal vegan diet reduces GHG emissions equivalent to 8,100 miles per year driven. (Oppenlander 2013:182)

In other words, while it is in one respect quantitatively better than ignoring locality, eating local is not necessarily qualitatively better overall and equates to going out of the way to change buying and consumption habits for perhaps negligible benefit, especially when vegan alternatives exist that better achieve the purported goal(s). However, there are likely social benefits to eating and shopping local. People may have more options for social encounters at farmer's markets, community gardens, or as part of a community supported agriculture program (Guptill et al. 2013:165-7). However, this could become more about the personal gains that individuals receive instead of taking a stance on environmental, animal welfare or other social justice issues. The same can be said for organic animal products:

> Organic standards do not insist on non-poverty wages for farmers and farmworkers or on practices to combat gender, racial, or ethnic inequality … incomes are determined largely by the market and, as a result, consumers are encouraged to confine their focus to the qualities of the food product itself rather than the web of relationships that creates that product" (Guptill et al. 2013:172).

Consequently, there is evidence within every non-industrial animal-centric food choice that such alternatives do not challenge the status quo, but instead make it easier to be complicit in the hegemonic practice of meat eating. The individual can continue participating in the dietary norm while feeling good about their decision. This is because they have considered "ethical" alternatives and feel that they have arrived at their decision autonomously. This is an illustration of how being autonomous can actually result in conformity, and also how autonomy is shaped by social forces. Therefore, alternatives to industrial animal agriculture raise questions as to who actually benefits from such industrial substitutions, and what are the impacts on real lives as a consequence, questions sociology is especially well-suited to investigate.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing set of paradoxes, it is concluded that veganism is the best perspective from which to minimize problems associated with such paradoxes. Admittedly, veganism may not be able to resolve these paradoxes, and this may not even be desirable. For instance, if consistent anti-oppression veganism were to become so ubiquitous that it became the norm and unextraordinary—essentially invisible—it would reproduce "the invisibility of ubiquity" paradox but in an arguably positive way. While nonviolence is often part of the motivation and goal for vegans, there is still some violence involved in eating plants such as unintentionally killing insects and bugs in the process. One could also debate the ethics of killing plants (Gaard 2016). However, while this must be acknowledged, all living beings must eat to live and something must cease to exist for us to do so. Gaard (2016) questions whether or not plants are assumed to be an inferior form of life by those who problematize, blur, or work to deconstruct the human-animal boundary. This calls into question a possible blind spot regarding plant-based food when it comes to sociocultural ethics. Nevertheless, veganism is often entered into with an explicitly anti-speciesist orientation and as such, challenges speciesism as it has been discussed in this paper and can include ethical deliberation over plant life. Finally, it is also well known that a vegan diet is the healthiest diet for the environment and human health (Aleksandrowicz et al. 2016).

Given the nature of these paradoxes, it is sometimes difficult to fathom why people would continue to eat animals. But upon closer examination, it should be understood that the individual should not necessarily receive the full blame; given that the animal food processors and producers (Fitzgerald and Taylor 2014), the education system (Pedersen 2019), and family (Asher and Cherry 2015), tend to normalize consuming animal flesh, and dismiss or disparage subversive discourse, it remains difficult for a conscientious citizen to find the honest effects of eating animals in the first place, and then to have the fortitude and ability to resist this omnipresent social pressure. Perhaps, then, the most productive members of a society are those who critique its very values and norms. By the ironies and contradictions of many arguments to continue eating animal products, to unwaveringly stand behind a rationalization that has been shown to be inadequate is a statement of ignorance and/or irresponsibility and is potentially prejudicial. Thus, it may be more productive to critique this practice than to conform to it.

An unwillingness to go against or challenge norms could be referred to as "social inertia," the meaning of this term being derived from the physical property of inertia which is the ability of a body to resist influence from external forces. Extrapolating from inanimate bodies to people, humans tend to be willing to spend a considerable amount of effort resisting the influence of others who advocate for counter-culture lifestyles or practices. This may be due to the power social groups exert on individuals which induces a want of membership for a sense of belonging or because socialization can conflate exploitation with care (Poirier 2021). Social inertia may also result because such suggestions could be viewed as threatening to or an attack on personal identity.

Which animals people eat is influenced by socialization that paradoxically begins in childhood amidst a parallel ethic that says children should learn and care about animals. It is a fascinating paradox indeed how society can inculcate polarized thinking about similar animals (Dhont and Hodson 2020). This is epitomized when humans "split" animals of the same species, such as when pigs are sometimes considered beloved pets of "owners" who eat pork (Korimboccus 2020). Once a person has surpassed childhood (also a socially constructed category), it can become even more difficult to foster an attitude of compassion towards nonhuman animals due to the cumulative effects of socialization (Poirier 2021). This is especially true of opinions regarding farmed animals due to long-term conditioning and an increased awareness of and concern for fitting in.

The overall point of this essay is that a vegan perspective—which includes but is not reducible to a vegan diet—is the best way to expose paradoxes of eating animals, and to minimize structural and epistemic violence and overall harm if and as practiced as part of consistent anti-oppression (Feliz [Brueck] and McNeill 2020). In the current political climate and environmental crises, the scope, scale and richness of the topic of eating animals within the sociology of food combine to make it an interesting time to be a sociologist examining human-animal relations.

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