

Mass Murder: The Politics and Economics of Factory Farming  
Dajahi Wiley

In the 1920s, it was discovered that animals did not require exercise and sunlight if vitamins A and D were added to feed. After this discovery, large automated factory farms were built by companies in which hundreds and thousands of animals were slaughtered using assembly line techniques (“Facts: Factory Farming”). Today, factory farming is an essential part of our economic and social order. People often overlook it when considering ways to alter society. It does, after all, enable the consumption of one billion chickens each year at Kentucky Fried Chicken (“Why KFC?”). Actions that would be considered animal abuse outside of factories, such as immersing birds in “tanks of scalding-hot water” or shackling birds upside down, are part and parcel of corporate policy and methods (“Take Action”). However, there are serious costs to factory farming, both for animals and humans.

Animal activist and scholar Bob Torres notes that “We happily buy iPods, steaks, books, computers, and other goods without thinking about all of the complex relations of production that are behind them” (Torres 15). Our society is one of blind consumption caused and intensified by individual isolation and social disintegration. As a result, a hardworking mother of two may not have the time to think about where the deli meat in the supermarket comes from and how it was produced when she buys it. The simple fact is that it is convenient to purchase meat produced in factory farms. Although some vegetarian, hard-line animal rights activists will blame the mother in this situation, her critics overlook the social and economic forces that prevent her from learning about the problem and taking action against it.

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Factory farming entails a devotion to profit maximization, as respected scholar and law professor at Rutgers University, Gary L. Francione, notes in his book Introduction to Animal Rights: Your Child or the Dog?:

The most numerically significant use of animals by Americans – more than 8 billion of them annually – is for food. Most animals used for food are bred, raised, and killed on enormous mechanized farms that specialize in one species and house hundreds and thousands of animals at a time. This practice is known as “factory farming” and is defined by *The Agricultural Dictionary* as a “type of farming which is usually operated on a large scale according to modern business efficiency standards, solely for monetary profit, as contrasted to a so-called family farm, or farming as a way of life.” Factory farms are usually owned by large corporations and are operated on economies of scale. They are highly automated and fully enclosed, and the concepts of profit and efficiency that drive them require that animals be viewed as nothing more than economic commodities. (10)

Factory farming is therefore no different than other industries and business models in terms of maximizing efficiency and profit. The familiar results, environmental degradation and worker abuse, occur here, too. A 2006 United Nations report condemned the meat industry, stating that it is “one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global” (“Meat and the Environment”). Two of the most precious resources,

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water and land, are not spared by factory farming. About half of all water used in the United States goes to raising animals for meat. Producing one pound of meat requires 5,000 gallons of water, whereas growing one pound of wheat requires only 25 gallons. (“Wasted Resources – Water”). Pound for pound, wheat requires just 0.5% the amount of water meat does. If this water and the crops used to feed livestock were instead used for human need, world hunger could be eliminated (“Meat and World Hunger”). Moreover, world hunger is exacerbated by factory farming:

Because the industrial world is exporting grain to developing countries and importing the meat that is produced with it, farmers who are trying to feed themselves are being driven off their land. Their efficient, plant-based agricultural model is being replaced with intensive livestock rearing, which also pollutes the air and water and renders the once-fertile land dead and barren. (“Meat and World Hunger”)

Factory farms also breed disease and pollution. Among the ailments induced by the presence of factory farms are “neurological disorders, respiratory diseases, miscarriages, bacterial infections, diarrhea, and stomach ailments” (“Destroying the Heartland”). One of the most memorable outbreaks of disease caused by factory farming occurred in 2003 when Mad Cow Disease was discovered in the United States. The disease inflicts healthy cows when they are fed dead cows. After humans eat these cows, they develop Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease, or CJD, which causes a form of dementia as brain tissue degenerates (“Farm Sanctuary”). Beyond these diseases, humans may also be affected by the dozens of “growth-promoting hormones, appetite stimulants and

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pesticides, fertilizers, herbicides and aflatoxins that collect in the animals' tissues and milk" ("Facts: Factory Farming").

The factory farming industry is one of the most dangerous industries for workers. One in three workers in American slaughterhouses suffers from injury or disease annually (US Department of Labor qtd. in "Killing for a Living"). Companies refuse to adopt workplace reforms to lower the occurrence of injury, such as slowing down slaughter lines and providing workers and fitting machines with the necessary safety gear ("Killing for a Living"). According to a January 2005 Human Rights Watch exposé, "These are not occasional lapses by employers paying insufficient attention to modern human resources management policies. These are systematic human rights violations embedded in meat and poultry industry employment" ("Blood, Sweat, and Fear"). Just as animals are considered commodities, so too are workers. Factory owners, "concerned primarily about the 'bottom line' of profit, may regard the workers as economic commodities" (Francione 90). The establishment of factories in the most impoverished areas of the United States, where many workers are undereducated, poor, and unable to speak English, is deliberate on the part of companies ("Killing for a Living"). Clearly, the human costs of factory farming are immense, illustrating the intersection between human rights and animal rights.

The animals that are slaughtered by the billions in factory farms – pigs, chickens, cows, sheep, turkeys, and other animals – are living, sentient beings. Chickens, in their natural environment, form social groupings of around thirty individuals that forage and

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rest together (“About Chickens”). This is impossible when the chickens are forced into wire cages and allotted a mere 67 to 86 square inches of space, a space smaller than a small book. In that amount of space, a bird cannot spread its wings or behave in other natural ways (Torres 41). Pigs have intelligence comparable to that of dogs and, when living among humans, can learn their names within two to three weeks. Pigs are also capable of recognizing up to thirty other pigs and assigning characteristics, such as aggression, to each (“About Pigs”). All of these animals are packed tightly together in factory farms, many of them genetically engineered to weigh more than they would naturally or overproduce milk or eggs. Caging, preventing animals from undertaking activities and behaving as they naturally would, “allows animals to be confined and stocked in densities that are profitable to the producer, but completely alienating, distressing, and torturous” to the animals. It is unacceptable to subjugate the free and natural behaviors of animals.

To deal with factory farming, the trajectory of human development and interaction must be altered. Most importantly, we must alter our patterns of social and economic relations to reflect our better tendencies of mutual respect and appreciation of life. Labor standards can no longer be discounted by companies seeking to rake in super profits. The environment and the health of communities can no longer be put on the backburner. A more scientific and humane understanding of the effects of factory farming must be forged, one that considers disease, pollution, hunger, the pain inflicted on animals and the devastation of societies. We must all be more aware and

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thoughtful of how what we eat is produced and its effects on our health. Factory farming is a practice that puts human workers and animals on the level of commodities and disregards the needs of individuals and communities. No living organism is a commodity. All living organisms deserve respect.

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