

Chapter 18

After Meat

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a future scenario in which humankind abruptly stops eating animals. Its purpose is to explore the impacts of animal agriculture using a fictional device. Several ways, in which the end of meat might happen are suggested, including a virulent global human epidemic originating from the meat supply. The ensuing state of the world is examined along six axes: animals, the environment, human health, the economy, food, and society. Because of the enormous scale of animal agriculture today, a sudden end to meat would cause massive upheavals across all of these domains. However, it is predicted that positive gains would be significant, outweighing negative outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Seven billion humans consume a lot of meat. Most of the animals killed by humans today are killed to be eaten. The intensive factory farming systems in which most of these animals are reared are surely the largest-scale source of animal suffering today. Animal agriculture is also increasingly documented as a major factor in serious/potentially life-threatening environmental and human health concerns (Akhtar, Greger, Ferdowsian, & Frank, 2009). Perhaps because they are awakening to these implications, Americans have reduced their meat consumption by ten percent over the last decade (Larson, 2012a) and an increasing number of them are choosing meat and other animal products sourced from animals raised in more humane conditions.

As yet, however, the US decline in meat consumption is not reflected in overall global patterns. Meat consumption has been rising in some developing nations, and meteorically in China, with a nine-fold increase between 1978 and 2012 (Larson, 2012b). Even though the average Chinese citizen today eats only half as much meat as the average American, China's substantially larger human population translates to double the total volume of meat consumed today than in the United States (Larson, 2012b), accounting for a quarter of the global total (Larson, 2012b).

Nevertheless, to the extent that the United States may be seen as a bellwether to the rest of the world, we may expect meat's American decline to reverberate elsewhere. An August 2014 study from Data

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monitor Consumer involving 25,000 respondents from 25 countries reported that a third of global consumers are cutting back on meat, confirming an April 2014 study by FGI Research that found a growing dietary trend toward flexitarianism (Guyton, 2014; Meatless Monday, 2014). The alternative meat food sector is booming, and Meatless Monday campaigns are established in 35 countries worldwide (Meatless Monday, 2014).

BACKGROUND

Quite aside from how unlikely, or for many how undesirable, it would be for humans to stop eating animals entirely, there is no restriction on asking what might transpire if we did. For this essay I have removed the reins of uncertainty to speculate on such an audacious future. I examine six domains: the animals, the environment, human health, the economy, food, and society.

A SUDDEN END TO MEAT

Possible Scenario(s)

It helps to consider first how an end to meat might come about, because this pertains to how a post-meat world might function. For instance, a gradual fade-out of meat consumption would imply that we stopped eating animals as a matter of choice, whereas a virulent meat-borne zoonosis that forced an end to meat consumption would not be something of our choosing. For this essay, I have chosen the latter scenario, which assumes a more or less decisive end to meat, in which the transition to a vegetarian culture happens almost instantaneously. Here, briefly, is one fictional scenario, one that assumes the viability of an agriculture system totally devoid of animals

The year is 2019. World human population is approaching eight billion. Animal agriculture has become more concentrated and centralized than ever and is now a near monopoly, with just two companies controlling 98% of the American meat supply from hoof to hamburger.

In early October, the United States is slammed by a grave food-borne epidemic. Symptoms are severe and the resulting illness uncompromising. Fever rapidly develops, accompanied by violent nausea. Death usually follows within 24 to 48 hours.

The Centers for Disease Control issues a nation-wide advisory to avoid eating chicken. International embargos are placed on US meat. However it all happens too late. A new strain of bird flu has been incubating in the bodies of consumers for days. And it is extremely contagious in the meat supply, spread by rendered animal tissues used widely in livestock feed. Fish feed derived from terrestrial rendering products has found its way into aquaculture, and from there to wild fish populations. The commercial fishing and aquaculture industries have been exposed.

Within a week, the epidemic has metastasized. It has gone global, infecting 90% of the global meat supply. By November, over 980 million humans have died worldwide, dwarfing the Spanish influenza of 1918 and prompting a new term: 1BP—the 1 Billion Plague. Eating flesh becomes tantamount to playing Russian roulette. Within a week, human meat consumption effectively drops to zero.

Could it happen? Could we be faced with an apocalyptic pandemic transmitted to humans through animal tissues? About 75% of the new infectious diseases affecting humans over the past 10 years were

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