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Book Review

Farmageddon: The True Cost of Cheap Meat

Philip Lymbery and Isabel Oakeshott

Penguin Canada, 2014: 448 pages

Review by Rita Hansen Sterne (University of Guelph)

Food systems include many issues interconnected through complex relationships. Some writers examine one part of the food system in depth but—from my perspective as a management student—a strength of *Farmageddon: The True Cost of Cheap Meat* is that it examines food systems by systematically connecting a broad set of issues in its analysis of the widespread adoption of the industrial farming model. This model, the authors argue, requires vast tracts of arable land, makes broad and lifelong use of antibiotics in farm animals to minimize disease and encourage rapid growth, and promotes an increasing use of grain for animal feed rather than for human consumption. Throughout the book, the authors share evidence in an effort to encourage consumers to reflect on the implications of the system we support when purchasing our meat cheaply. The authors have written this book from their experiences as animal welfare activists for a broad audience, but focus their attention on costs that have been unaccounted for in the industrial food system.

The book is divided into sections about the natural environment, public health, animal “muck” (effluent or waste), and land and sea resource scarcity. The authors pull together their arguments by discussing industrial farming with respect to genetically-modified food, the nature of power in the market system that controls most food globally, and by discussing food ingredients and food waste in a surprisingly short chapter. The book closes with a roadmap of how consumer power of those with compassion could make choices that would subvert the dominant model of animal farming, and the authors share advice about how to navigate labelling language and avoid purchasing factory farmed meat. The book is directed at US, EU and UK consumers, in particular, although the authors offer examples from other countries in the book.

Strengths of the book include the approachable writing style, the compelling stories told by the authors about their past experiences, and the authors' ability to connect complex issues so the reader understands the interconnectedness of many elements of a food system. One discussion that may leave readers with a question is in the final chapter when the authors discuss environmentally friendly farms. They ask if an environmentally friendly model could be scaled up—and provide the opinion that scaling up tenfold (336) is possible. This suggests that scale is desirable, despite earlier insistence that low animal welfare potential is a direct and integral part of larger scale systems (123). They elsewhere suggest that production of livestock at scale is problematic because it requires a large amount of land to feed and house a large number of animals on one site, requires significant quantities of water, produces large amounts of animal waste, and leads to the widespread use of antibiotics. They introduce a large gray area when they fail to define environmentally friendly scaling up with precision, relying instead on the observation “there’s big and there’s global” (336).

The authors suggest three principles to guide consumer decision-making to subvert the industrial model: putting people first, reducing food waste, and farming like tomorrow matters. However, what the authors mean by the words ‘like tomorrow matters’ is never completely clear, and the reader must make assumptions. It appears that the authors assume that industrial scale farmers are compelled to conduct their business without concern for the future and that all of these farmers have similar values. This principle could have been made more understandable to readers by directly referring to the concept of sustainability for future generations (Brundtland, 1987), and the need to keep a balance in our economic, social and natural settings when farming animals.

In their closing chapter, the authors remind readers that issues raised in the book echo those raised 50 years ago by *Silent Spring* (Carson, 1994). Why did we not learn lessons from the past? How could we not have understood what industrial farming models would mean to our health and to the physical environment? The authors also note Albert Schweitzer’s lament that humans have lost the ability to foresee or forestall and suggest that we need these skills to avoid a catastrophe. Some would argue it is doubtful that we ever had an ability to *foresee* the long term impact of our decisions; in fact, humans often fail miserably when making decisions, as the authors point out in various examples throughout the book (for example, Mao’s war on a grain-eating birds in China that decimated the sparrow population). Management scholars learn that, when faced with an overwhelmingly complex problem with implications that are not immediate or with a time shortage, the human brain tends to simplify problems, erroneously frame issues (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), or take short-cuts and use decision making rules. These decision heuristics and biases—that are part of our brains—undoubtedly underpin our failure to forestall and our failure to foresee.

The authors, however, present hope for healthier animal farming from a surprising source. Based on conversations with business leaders, for-profit organizations are presented as actors that can affect change because they can move more quickly than governments and they have power in existing market structures. The authors quote a retiring farmer who argues that

farming should be seen as an “art and a responsibility” (229) . It is interesting to note the similarity of this comment to those who challenge traditional approaches to business management and compare managers to artists (Adler, 2006; Mintzberg, 2013) who practice a craft. By suggesting that we question our roles, be it in corporations, as animal activists, as consumers, or as farmers, the authors have reminded readers that we must solve complex problems as a creative team—even when we understand problems from different points of view.

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