



Editorial

Introducing meat studies

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Abstract

A growing, though still loosely connected, body of academic work has started placing meat at the centre of critical discourses regarding climate change and environmental sustainability, human health, economic wellbeing, food futures, and animal and ecological ethics. This special themed issue seeks to bring these multi-disciplinary scholars into direct conversation with one another under the umbrella of ‘Meat Studies’ as an emerging sub-field of study. Indeed, the recent establishment of Vegan Studies (see: Wright, 2015 and

2017) necessitates a parallel effort to better understand meat’s persistent social, economic, political, and cultural status in human societies. By situating meat at the centre of critical analysis, we identify, articulate, and address the challenges that meat poses in the twenty-first century. More generally, Meat Studies allows us to critically re-examine our cultural conventions regarding the ways in which we classify different foods, diets, identities, and culinary practices. The abstract, and all the body text is formatted as style ‘Paragraph’.

Keywords: Meat; meat studies; plant-based; cell-based; protein; socio-cultural dimensions; production; consumption

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Résumé

Un nombre croissant de travaux universitaires, bien qu'encore peu reliés entre eux, ont commencé à placer la viande au centre des discours critiques concernant les changements climatiques et la conservation de l'environnement, la santé humaine, le bien-être économique, l'avenir de l'alimentation et l'éthique animale et écologique. Ce numéro thématique vise à faire dialoguer ces chercheurs et chercheuses multidisciplinaires directement à la table du sous-domaine émergent que pourraient être les « études sur la viande ». En effet, la création récente des études

véganes (voir Wright, 2015 et 2017) nécessite un effort parallèle pour mieux comprendre le statut social, économique, politique et culturel persistant de la viande dans les sociétés humaines. En plaçant la viande au centre de l'analyse critique, nous identifions, articulons et abordons les défis que pose la viande au XXI^e siècle. Plus généralement, les études sur la viande nous permettent de réexaminer de manière critique nos conventions culturelles concernant la manière dont nous classons les différents aliments, régimes, identités et pratiques culinaires.

A summer of meat

The summer of 2022 was our Summer of Meat. Not because either of us purchased, cooked, or consumed a particularly large quantity of animal-based food products, but rather because of the sheer volume of meat-related texts we absorbed (and from which we learned) during this time. Before formally meeting, we were both simultaneously (yet independently) researching “meat” within the social sciences and humanities. Throughout our respective research, we were humbled by the rapidly rising number of likeminded scholars all interrogating meat and its (often contentious) relationship with human societies and cultures. In just the last couple of years, we have seen the publication of hundreds of journal articles and dozens of meat-based books, with titles such as *Changing Meat Cultures*, *Global Meat*, *Meat Planet*, *Meatsplaining*, *The Meat Question*, *Red Meat Republic*, *Meat Makes People*

Powerful, and (the frankly titled) *Meat!*.

Meat, it seems, is now prominently featured on the academic menu. And yet, despite the implicit emergence of a Meat Studies sub-field of scholarship, no one has yet explicitly conceptualized or articulated what Meat Studies *is or could be*. Thus, the field itself remains something of an abstraction and nameless presence. Emerging from our Summer of Meat, we aim to articulate Meat Studies as an identifiable sub-field of critical scholarship and bring together some of the scholars currently working within this area of inquiry. Only by naming and introducing “Meat Studies” can we provide a home base for the myriad (though, until now, loosely connected) scholars interested in critically interrogating “meat”.

Why meat studies now?

We are living through an unprecedented cultural shift regarding our collective relationship with meat. Meat consumption is decreasing in North America yet increasing in other regions of the world. Meat-rejecting lifestyles such as veganism and vegetarianism are entering mainstream discourses and markets, after having long been relegated to the peripheries of culinary and dietary conversations. The COVID-19 pandemic has played an important role in how we came to view industrial meat production. During that time, a series of zoonotic diseases (such as swine fever and avian flu) affected the meat supply and brought to the fore the potential links between industrial animal farming and its role in the emergence of animal-to-animal and animal-to-human transmission of pathogens (Wallace, 2016).

At the same time, the current cultural juncture is forcing us to categorically rethink and refine our conventional understandings of what meat *is*—a phenomenon instigated by the recent developments of plant-based meats, the perennial promises of lab-grown meat technologies, the explorations of alternative meats and proteins (such as mycelium meat and insect protein), and a growing number of legal challenges brought forth by traditional meat industries. More generally, we are beginning to reveal and critically interrogate meat’s inherent (though often invisible) ambiguity as a cultural form: How do Indigenous hunting and fishing traditions differ from more colonial understandings of meat and animal agriculture? Why are some animals considered “meat” and others “not meat”? What are the socio-political implications of these categorical distinctions? What are the ethical, cultural, and symbolic boundaries between what is considered edible and what is not? And finally, what can meat consumption or its negation inform us

about biopolitics?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, meat has also become a focal topic of analysis for a growing number of scholars in the social sciences and humanities over the past two decades. Recent projects, for example, have investigated consumer perceptions of prototypical meat-eaters (Oleschuk, Johnston, and Bauman, 2019); the role of ‘fake meats’ as transitional foods towards more plant-based diets (Mehta et al., 2020); consumer attitudes towards lab-grown meat (Bryant & Dillard, 2019); and the rhetorical strategies used by animal agriculture industries (Hannan, 2020). Meat’s many materialities have also started being interrogated at an increasing rate, including the connections between meat and bodies (whether human or non-human) (e.g., Adams, 2010; Adams, 2018; Sergentanis et al., 2021); the various political economic dimensions of meat and animal agriculture (Simon, 2013; Warren, 2018; Wurgaft, 2019; Specht, 2019); and the cases for (Katz-Rosene & Martin, 2020) and against (Kevany, 2020) meat’s potential role in future sustainable agricultures. Given meat’s ubiquity across time and space in human cultures, in conjunction with the rising scholarly attention being paid to meat, our aim with this edited volume is to identify, articulate, and conceptualize a new sub-field of critical food scholarship: “Meat Studies”.

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Indeed, the recent establishment of Vegan Studies (see: Wright, 2015 and 2017) necessitates a parallel effort to better understand meat's persistent social, economic, political, and cultural status in human societies. By situating meat at the centre of critical analysis, we identify, articulate, and address the challenges that meat poses in the twenty-first century. More generally, Meat Studies allows us to critically re-examine our cultural conventions regarding the ways in which we classify different foods, diets, identities, and culinary practices.

The socio-cultural and socio-economic dimensions of meat feature prominently in Bourdieu's critical works, which we treat as a sort of proto-meat studies. Bourdieu's approach to meat has been expanded upon by a number of contemporary scholars (e.g., Kamphuis et al., 2015; Oleschuk et al., 2019). The study of meat itself, however, remains less of a comprehensive sub-discipline and more of a topic or area of focus in food studies, cultural studies, sociology, science and technology studies (STS), and critical consumer studies. Given the significant amount of recent works devoted to studying and critically analyzing meat in human cultures (e.g. Zaraska, 2016; Sexton, 2016; Warren, 2018; Buscemi, 2018; Wurgaft, 2019; Oleschuk et al., 2019), we conceptualize "Meat Studies" as a specified sub-discipline of food studies. Generally speaking, we argue that meat studies ought to be understood as a sub-discipline within the social sciences and humanities wherein meat and human cultures, economics, and politics intersect. While vegan studies already exist as an established sub-discipline (see Wright, 2015), it does not always ground itself in the epistemological and ontological questions of meat's persistent cultural significances. In other words, vegan studies often fall short of interrogating what we mean by "meat". Our conceptualization of Meat Studies is thus a theoretical intervention informed by the commonalities in topical focus, critical insights (reflecting a continuation of

Bourdieu's earlier cultural analyses and criticisms), and philosophical contemplations throughout the works of various (loosely) connected critical authors. Hence, we may ask (as some authors have done), "who is meat?", which brings into focus the wider array of ontological and ethical issues associated with what and who constitutes sources of meat (Chatterjee et al., 2021). This [critical turn?] challenges established notions of what or who qualifies as meat and asks us to reevaluate our relationship with the many living beings that are involved into meat production.

The idea of a "Meat Studies" sub-discipline is new, yet warranted given the significant increase in scholarly attention to meat's cultural significance over the last two decades. Rifkin's (1993) *Beyond Beef* serves as a sort of proto-meat studies work, in the same sense that Adams' (1990) *Sexual Politics of Meat* serves as an early-entry point into what eventually became vegan studies, thus bringing a feminist examination of power dynamics and patriarchal constructs surrounding meat consumption. Zaraska's (2016) *Meatbooked* offers a generalized and accessible exposé of humanity's persistent relationship with meat, beginning with the bio-social evolution of our meat-based diets and concluding with current trends in meat consumption. Buscemi's (2018) *From Body Fuel to Universal Poison* delves into the bio-semiotics of meat's cultural history, showcasing and theorizing the symbolic significances of meat in Western cultures from 1900 to the present. Finally, Johnston's many project collaborations over the past decade have produced foundational groundwork in investigating the cultural sociology of meat in the twenty-first century, with a recurring emphasis on the relationships between meat consumption and social status. Indeed, while Zaraska and Buscemi implicitly engage with Bourdieu's cultural criticisms of meat consumption, Johnston's ongoing research on the cultural sociology of meat is a more direct

(and often explicitly stated) continuation of Bourdieu's earlier work on class-based dimensions of meat. Meat studies as a sub-discipline can thus be characterized by engagements with—and expansions on—Bourdieu's culturally-situated analyses of meat consumption. Each of these authors' works (in addition to the myriad other articles, chapters, and texts from the past several years), when taken together, suggest the existence of a meat studies sub-discipline (in practice, if not yet in name). The goal of this special themed issue, then, is to articulate meat studies as a sub-discipline and bring likeminded scholars into conversation with one another. Interest in Meat Studies enables scholars to critically inquire about the changing nature of norms, practices and ideologies surrounding both conventional meat and alternative meats in the contexts of evolving dietary preferences, cultural shifts, political movements, and ecological pressures. It seeks to have real-world relevance and impact, addressing pressing social, environmental, and ethical issues. Scholars in the field aim to bridge the gap between academia and broader public discourse, contributing to policy discussions, activism, and public awareness efforts.

Meat Studies holds significant importance in terms of interdisciplinary research. The articles included in this special issue all address different aspects of the production, distribution, consumption, and societal, ethical, and environmental implications of "meat". The articles vary in their contribution to the formation of Meat Studies yet each offers a unique Canadian perspective, thus also contributing to Canadian Food Studies scholarship more broadly. Considering the significance of meat production, distribution, consumption, and its symbolic representations, the different articles bring together a variety of perspectives and novel approaches to the study of meat.

The personal politics of food and eating can be contentious, particularly when meat enters the

discussion. Meat's production, consumption, and regulation intersect with complex social, economic, environmental, and ethical considerations that shape public perceptions and behaviours. Thus, in no small undertaking do Kennedy et al. ask: "To what extent do Canadians across the political spectrum agree that meat is a problem? Where is there overlap and where is there disagreement?". Their analysis identifies points of divergence and convergence along political lines, and provides a constructive means of initiating discussions around policy aimed at reducing meat consumption. Their study focusses on analyzing survey data about the meat-eating practices, preferences, and perceptions of Canadians as they relate to political ideology, providing a comparative gauge of liberals' and conservatives' attitudes towards meat consumption. By identifying some areas of attitudinal consensus about meat production and consumption that transcend the liberal/conservative spectrum, the authors are able to generate Canada-specific data that might prove useful for policymakers working in food policy.

Through the widespread use and cultural adoption of euphemistic language, we increasingly find individual animals being made purposefully absent—what Adams (2018) calls the absent referent—from discussions about meat production and consumption. Katie McDonald's article critically interrogates the substitutionism, appropriationism, and nutritionism at work in the industrial production of hog meat, wherein "protein" comes to serve as a stand-in for "hog meat" (which itself serves to rhetorically separate the practice of converting an individual animal's flesh into food). Using a content analysis of existing literature and in-person interviews, McDonald identifies the developing cultural juncture in which hog farming (along with other industrial animal agricultural practices) has become a process for "producing protein" rather than "making meat".

Following a similar thread of critical inquiry, Adjemian et al. critique the protein politics at play in the repurposing of metrics in industrial salmon farming. The authors argue that, by spectacularizing the public-facing metrics, calculations, and indicators of efficiency, industrial salmon producers have adopted a fashionable greenwashing logic in alignment with other industrial meat producers. Furthermore, and perhaps more insidious, they argue that industrial salmon farming's preoccupation with the rhetorics of quantification (expressed most commonly as "sustainable protein") perpetuates what Daggett (2019) calls the logic of energy—a phenomenon that has exploded over the past decade.

Commercial plant-based meat has gained momentum over the past decade, coinciding with the larger expansion of the plant protein market and industries. In their literature review and meta-analysis, Gaudreau et al. explore the efforts undertaken by various organizations to promote plant-based dietary choices and reduce animal-based meat consumption. Through an analysis of press articles from Canada and French-speaking European countries (between 2015-2020), the researchers compile a diverse array of initiatives, interventions, and policies aimed at promoting plant-based proteins. Of particular interest is the examination of the EGalim law in France, which mandates public institutions such as schools, hospitals, and government services to offer vegetarian options. Ultimately, their comprehensive review offers insights into a range of potential initiatives (from educational campaigns to legislative changes) for promoting alternative proteins in Quebec.

On the promotional and consumption side of the current meat-to-protein cultural juncture, Kelsey Speakman expands our understanding of the constitutive positioning of flexitarians (as well as investors in flexitarian and flexitarian-adjacent

companies) as part of the "citizen-consumer hybrid" (Johnston, 2008, p. 229). Drawing from a larger, exploratory project that involves critical discourse analysis of public archives, corporate websites, and various corporate promotional materials, as well as interviews and focus groups with Canadian food retailers and shoppers, Speakman critiques the hegemonizing implications of corporations highlighting greater choices for consumers—rather than appealing to potentially disruptive or revolutionary identities like "hardcore" vegetarians or vegans.

Elizabeth Ann Smythe's article delves into the power dynamics and conflicts surrounding the regulation of growth promoters at the international level (through the lens of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC)), with a particular focus on Canada's significant role as meat producer and exporter. Central to her analysis are the debates involving the development and adoption of global food standards within the CAC, aligning with the interests of key stakeholders such as meat industry producers, processors, and pharmaceutical companies regarding the use of beta agonists and their health impact on both animals and humans. Smythe underscores the importance of these standards in terms of their trade implications and the complex interplay of power dynamics between dominant actors that impact the use of these drugs despite limited scientific data as well as their contested framing of "sound science".

Ryan Katz-Rosene examines the potential of cell-based meat to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions in Canada's agriculture and food industry. He compares the environmental impact of traditional meat production methods with those of cell-based meat using a life cycle assessment (LCA) for various meats consumed by Canadians.

Although cell-based meat production has not reached commercialization, Katz-Rosene considers various hypothetical scenarios that factor in energy use and land use patterns in order to generate Canadian-specific LCA footprint values as a means of contextualizing its potential as a replacement of conventional meat. Considering controversies surrounding the climate-friendliness of both conventional and cellular

meat, including the challenges posed by the limited number of environmental impact studies derived from hypothetical production models, his analysis suggests that cell-based meat could potentially contribute to mitigating climate change, provided certain conditions—that extend beyond the carbon footprint of cell meat—are met within Canada’s larger agri-food sector.

Conclusion

Meat Studies offers a wide array of possible lenses and methodologies that might help us better understand the centrality and relevance of meat as a polysemic object/subject. We strongly believe that the diverse works compiled in this special themed issue are indicative of a larger trend within academic analysis, which interrogates the categorical, (bio)political, institutional, corporeal, environmental, techno-

scientific, and sociocultural aspects of “meat”. As this collection of articles demonstrates, meat can be studied from a variety of approaches and theoretical standpoints. The Canadian focus on Meat Studies shows the richness and vigour of Canadian Food Studies scholarship, as well as demonstrates its heuristic potential as a dynamic field of novel inquiry.

Ryan J. Phillips is a Lecturer in Politics and Public Administration at Toronto Metropolitan University, where he teaches courses related to Canadian politics, public policy, and the politics of technology. His research focuses on advertising and promotional cultures, with specific emphases on the promotional rhetoric of plant-based meat companies and the agenda-setting elements of vegan/vegetarian discourses. Outside of food studies, he also interrogates advertising and audience commodification in Canadian hockey broadcasting.

Elisabeth Abergel is an environmental studies scholar who is currently teaching in the Sociology department and at the Institute for environmental sciences (ISE) at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). She teaches courses in environmental sociology, science and technology studies, the Anthropocene, and sustainable food systems. Elisabeth’s area of expertise is on the politics and science of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). Her research focuses on life technologies and agricultural transformation, technocapitalism and the de/rematerialization of life (from cell to whole organism), food and agriculture biotechnologies and more generally, she studies the relations between promissory economies of technoscientific development, rural futures, and the environmental crisis. She is the research director of GReTA (Research Group on Agricultural Labour) and recently published a report on Quebec’s women farmers and invisible labour for Quebec’s Secrétariat pour la Condition Féminine (SCF). She is currently writing a book about cell-based meat and Anthropocene diets.

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