

The Humane Hoax: Factory Farming vs. Alternative Farming

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“Animal agriculture is a business making money on the bodies of other sentient beings. This can never be free of a fundamental insensitivity towards the victims of the industry’s profits and a deep betrayal to the animals who depend on humans for care. In the same way that one cannot own humans and traffic their bodies for profit in a humane way, it is impossible to humanely profit from the lives and bodies of animals.” — Hope Bohanec, author of *The Ultimate Betrayal: Is There Happy Meat?*

THE EMERGENCE OF THE FACTORY FARMING “ALTERNATIVE”

For most of my adult life, I have been engaging in conversations about animals raised and killed for their meat, milk, and eggs. These conversations haven’t changed much over the last 30 years. I get the same tired questions about protein and desert islands and plants feeling pain.

But recently, something has shifted. In the last few years, people have started to say things like, “Oh, but I buy free-range eggs” or “My meat isn’t from a factory farm, my meat is local.” It’s almost as if all concern about the treatment of animals has been pacified by these new and improved “alternative” animal products. By purchasing these “humane” products people feel absolved from the cruelty inherent in the animal agriculture industry. They feel that there is an alternative now at the farmer’s markets and in the “slow food” movement and if they just pay a little extra money, they can “have their meat and eat it too.” Consumers are being lulled into a complacency where they think the animals are now happy and this new way of farming is actually beneficial to the environment. They have been led to believe that all is well in the mythical world of humane animal agriculture; and that is exactly what the producers of these products want them to believe.

The fact that people are becoming aware of the misery that farmed animals endure and the devastating impact of livestock on the planet is a good thing. A growing number of consumers want to “know where their food comes from” and are willing to pay more money for alternatives to conventional animal products. This is a positive progression away from industrialized food production, so there is a hopeful side to this new industry reaction. However, there is a dark side as well.

IS THE “ALTERNATIVE” ENCOURAGING A RETURN TO MEAT EATING?

The trend is quite popular in my little liberal community of beautiful Sonoma County, California just north of the Golden Gate Bridge. We were lucky enough to have a good size, all-vegetarian natural foods store that has been a haven for vegetarians and vegans since the '70s. It was a joy to shop there and not have to avert your eyes from bloody muscles on display or wince at the pungent odor of dead marine life. Many of us went out of our way and would pass up one or two Whole Foods just to shop there.

Recently, while humming around the store for my organic veggies and vegan ice cream, an enthusiastic employee told me that they were opening a second store. I was thrilled at first, but the excitement soon took an unexpected turn when I learned that there would be a meat counter. How could this be? The fourth word of the market's mission statement was “vegetarian.” I learned that because they were able to source “local, humane” meats, and there was such a high demand for these products, they had changed their mission statement and after almost four decades of vegetarianism, had decided to sell meat. The vegetarian community felt completely betrayed.

But we are not the only ones being betrayed. The farmed animals caught in this changing industry are the true victims. It is not the few differences between alternative production and factory farming that matter, but the startling similarities.

WHAT EXACTLY IS THE ALTERNATIVE TO FACTORY FARMING?

When we see a product with one of these new labels — humane, free-range, grass-fed, sustainable, etc. — there is probably little difference between this operation and a conventional producer. Here's what may be different. The scale of the operation may be smaller and the animals are possibly not in intensive confinement (for example, cages) and some may have access to the outdoors, but all this is certainly not guaranteed. For a more detailed examination and definition of each label, and what they mean for the animals, please read ***The Ultimate Betrayal: Is There Happy Meat?***

Some people think that the companies producing products with alternative labels are heroically defying factory farming norms and are the saviors of our food supply. The disheartening truth is that there is little distinction; the similarities far outweigh the differences. Most of the horrors farmed animals endure in conventional animal agriculture still apply to these alternative labels—separation of families, painful procedures, and a brutal death at a very young age.

For example, when someone buys eggs labeled “cage-free” or “free-range”, they likely came from hens who aren’t in battery cages, but nevertheless the birds are still overcrowded in miserable, windowless warehouses where the stench of ammonia is overwhelming. They are still painfully debeaked, brutally handled, and they still go to a terrifying slaughter at a young age. It is not cost effective for any egg operation to hatch their own chicks, so the babies still come from the harsh and heartless hatcheries where the male chicks are cruelly killed by the millions soon after hatching as they are considered a waste product of the egg industry.

When someone buys dairy products with an “organic” or “humane” label, the cows are still artificially inseminated, kept pregnant their entire short life, and are milked well beyond what was ever intended for their bodies naturally. Her calf is still taken away soon after birth, never to nuzzle her mother, drink from her udder, or frolic in a field. If the calf is male, he is worthless to the dairy industry and is sold at auction to be killed for veal or meat. If the operation is certified organic, sick and diseased cows linger untreated so the milk is not “tainted” with needed medications. The only minimal improvement with an alternative label is that the cows were perhaps able to go outside for some of their life, but this slight amendment is outweighed by a brief lifetime of misery and a frightening slaughter.

Animals raised for meat with a feel-good label have a similar story with overcrowding and painful body manipulations: debeaking, tail cutting, ear notching, tooth filing, castration, de-horning, all without pain medications. They are sent to a sickening slaughter at a very young age.

Here in Sonoma County, I have witnessed the supposedly “best of the best” operations with a range of pacifying labels and websites proclaiming theirs are the “happiest” animals. At these same farms I have seen dairy cows in manure and muck up to their bellies staring out over a fence at green grass where they will never graze. I have seen the sterile rows of calf hutches where the baby females with wobbly legs are taken from their mothers, separated and chained to what look like rows of white dog houses, frightened, sad, and alone. I have seen over-crowded, debeaked chickens on “free-range” farms standing in a mud hole with green grass just over the fence out of reach. All these animals have a death sentence that will come much too soon.

No matter the label, no matter the scale, commercially farming an animal for her meat, milk, or eggs is factory farming. If an animal is hatched into this world in a sterile metal drawer without the comfort of her mother and a soft nest—that is factory farming. If a calf is ripped from his mother at birth, and kept separate from her and other cows, alone and frightened, chained and unloved—that is factory farming. If an animal has her beak burned off, her tail cut off, his genitals ripped out—that is factory farming. If an animal is hung upside down with his throat slit open—that is factory farming.

Indeed, I would encourage the animal activist community not to use the term “factory farming” anymore because it implies that there is some “humane” farming alternative that counters the large-scale, industrial operations. By using the term “factory farming,” animal activists have inadvertently contributed to a demand for “alternative” animal products. This is what we have been hearing in the shifting rhetoric of apologists for the animal agricultural industry when they say “I only buy organic, humane, cage-free, etc.”

There are inherent cruelties in any kind of animal agriculture that cannot be eliminated with feel-good labels or descriptions of joyful animals that are supposedly happy till that one-bad-day. It is an industry-wide lie. Small or large-scale, the animals are never happy to be killed. There is no such thing as “happy meat.”

IS ANTI FACTORY FARMING REALLY PRO ENVIRONMENT?

In the last few years, when people are talking about alternative labeling, I have also heard people say, “but it’s better for the environment” or “it’s more sustainable.” People believe that a smaller operation or an animal having a little more living space is somehow better for the planet. However, this is a case of greenwashing. Greenwashing is labeling a product to make the consumer believe that it’s better for the environment when in fact there is little or no difference from its conventional counterpart. In fact, some cases of alternative labels are even worse.

People choose grass-fed beef because they believe it has a lighter ecological-footprint, but actually, grass-fed animals can produce 50 to 60% more greenhouse gas emissions than their grain-eating cousins. They can also use more water as their activity level is higher, especially in hot, summer months.

Free-range or pasture-raised animals are no greener. Most free-range situations, especially with chickens, are usually just an open door in a building with thousands of animals to a small, unappealing concrete or muddy patio. The environmental impact is unchanged.

However, when there is a transition to a truly pasture-based system, the same amount of animals will now use several more acres of land. At any given time, there are 100 million cows and 70 million pigs alive in the US. Currently, only about 9% of all farmed animals is pasture raised. How would we ever have the land to pasture raise them all? To give all farmed animals the space they need to have even a semblance of a natural life, we would have to destroy millions more acres of wild areas, forests, prairies, and wetlands to accommodate them. There is not enough land on the planet, or even two planets, to free-range all the billions of pigs, sheep, turkeys, ducks, and chickens. We would need closer to

five planet Earths. It simply cannot be done. Free-ranging animals for food can never be more than a specialty market for a few elite buyers.

We must end the commercialization of animal's bodies, for the health of the planet, our own health, and especially for the sake of the animals. When animals are still enduring such misery and sadness and have their lives taken at a fraction of their lifespan, "a little better" isn't good enough. When animal agriculture is significantly contributing to greenhouse gas emissions, wasting vital fresh water, and polluting what is left. "A little less impact" isn't good enough. No appeasing label will ever make it right to exploit, harm, and deprive animals of their right to live free from human imposed suffering and killing. Let's make it *a lot* better and live vegan.