A Chicken in Every Pot: Meat as Our Manifest Destiny
by Brian West

Brian West is a Marketing major from Owasso, Oklahoma. He wrote this essay in the “Bioethics and the Politics of Life” course taught by Matthias Rudolf.

During the 1928 Presidential campaign, Herbert Hoover won the public’s support with his slogan “A chicken in every pot, and car in every garage” (“Hoover Information”). Hoover led us to an era in which we no longer consider cars and meat luxuries, but rights — a part of our Manifest Destiny. The vast majority of Americans no longer have to consider how their cars get into their garages, or how their chickens get into their pots. For a while, we’ve pretended that these things appear magically. In recent years, we’ve come to realize that the infinite availability of our cars cannot last, well, infinitely. As gas prices and emissions regulations climb ever higher and become ever stricter, many are looking for other ways to get around.

But we see meat differently. There are no ever-climbing “grill prices” (at least none that we can see), and so if we want more meat, we simply raise more cows, pigs, and chickens. I contend, though, that our consumption of meat is just as unsustainable as our reliance on cars, and its price is just as high. I am not asking that we give up all meat, but simply that we consider the price of having a chicken in every pot and the sustainability of such an idea in the future. Most Americans have grown to accept that we need to change our behavior in order to stop the deterioration of our environment. As we already know, cars, SUVs, and trucks are major contributors to this phenomenon, and many people are moving toward more efficient alternatives. But in all of the hoopla about the cars we drive, the meat industries have been ignored, all the while quietly polluting more each year than all the world’s transportation industries combined.

Yes, that’s right. More than the transportation industries. A 2006 report by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization found that, in addition to the land and water degradation it causes, meat production is the biggest source of greenhouse gases — even bigger than transportation (“Livestock a Major Threat to Environment”). But in addition to being worse for the environment than transportation by itself, the meat industry also utilizes the transportation industry for every step of production, from factory to plate. Trucks transport the animals to the factories, dispose of their excrement,

A researcher for the US Agricultural Research Service works to streamline USDA inspection methods.
transport food to the animals, transport the animals to the slaughterhouse, and then take the meat to distributors around the globe. Many people are becoming environmentally conscious and switching (some, albeit, grudgingly) to more efficient cars, such as the Toyota Prius, but those championing a more responsible consumption of meat by simply eating slightly less are often ridiculed.

But mockers beware, because the meat industry's greenhouse gases are more harmful than those from the transportation industry. According to an article in the Huffington Post, the chief pollutant of transportation is carbon dioxide, which takes about a century to naturally cycle out of the environment. This means that if we stopped driving cars today, the effects from yesterday would take one hundred years to go away. With meat, however, the chief pollutants are methane gas and nitrous oxide, which are 23 and 296 times worse, respectively, for the environment — in terms of warming effect as a greenhouse gas (Freston).

This puts our planet's average temperature at risk. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), twenty to thirty percent of all plant and animal species will be at risk for extinction if the global average temperature rises more than 1.5°C (Adger 11). This danger is especially evident in the shrinking polar ice caps (15). 1.5°C might not seem like a large enough change to make a difference, but NASA reported that from 1980 to 2005, the global average surface temperature rose by nearly 0.6°C (“GISS: Surface Temperature Analysis”). Some regions have already experienced an increase of 3.5°C. If current trends continue, thirty percent of all wildlife will face extinction. A third of the animals on Earth will simply vanish.

Given the meat industries’ potential impact on the environment, we should all be concerned by how much meat we consume. As it stands now, Chinese meat consumption levels per capita will soon rival those of America, and, when they do, the Chinese government will need to find an extra 68 million acres of farmland to grow an extra 277 million tons of grain — an amount that does not exist anywhere in the world (Bond 17).

Today, the meat industry alone accounts for eight percent of the entire (developed and undeveloped) world's water usage (Bond 19). As this meat consumption rises, the meat industry will have to invade natural ecosystems to make room to grow animal feed.

Why is this bad? Because of what experts call externalities, which are simply things not paid for as a part of the natural production of a good. For example, let's consider the environmental costs of supplying our meat demands: the production of only a single half-pound beef patty has the same environmental impact of driving a three-thousand pound car ten miles (Fiala). However, driving my car costs much more than eating my hamburger, because the government taxes transportation to make the cost of driving reflect the long term damage it causes to our planet. Meat production, however, isn't taxed this way, even though it's responsible for even more externalities than driving a car is. Michael Bond, writing for Engineering & Technology, reveals that the meat industry is responsible for fifty-five percent of the soil erosion in the United States, in addition to thirty-two percent and thirty-three percent of respective nitrogen and phosphorus levels in freshwater (19). And all of this pollution is escaping our notice, hidden by the relatively low price of meat.

The reason for this pollution was detailed by Elizabeth Kolbert in The New Yorker. In “Flesh of Your Flesh,” she quotes author Jonathan Foer, explaining:

Animals produce a lot of [waste]. Crowded into “concentrated animal feeding operations,” or CAFOs, they can produce entire cities’ worth...Unlike cities, though, CAFOs have no waste-treatment systems. The shit simply gets dumped in holding ponds. Imagine...if “every man, woman, and
child in every city and town in all of California and all of Texas crapped and pissed in a huge open-air pit for a day. Now imagine that they don’t do this for just a day, but all year round, in perpetuity.” Not surprisingly, the shit in the ponds tends to migrate to nearby streams and rivers, causing algae blooms that kill fish and leave behind aquatic “dead zones.”

Kolbert is right to be concerned. According to recent estimates by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), at least “thirty-five thousand miles of American waterways have been contaminated by animal excrement” (Kolbert). The implication for the environment is that livestock production destroys biodiversity by polluting natural rivers and streams across the globe.

Meat does more to harm the environment than just polluting our water supplies, though. It is also terribly inefficient in terms of energy input versus output. Raising and feeding livestock takes up vast amounts of land that could be used for other things. According to John Gartner, an author for Matter Network (a site devoted to announcements and promotions of sustainable technologies and lifestyles), we would have much more land to grow crops and create fuels such as ethanol if people ate less meat. Meat production requires more resources — water, fertilizer, grain, and land — to produce the same caloric value than the production of non-meat alternatives, such as soy. Meatless Mondays, a website that advocates forgoing meat just one day each week, shows that red meat production requires ten times the amount of water than an equivalent amount of soy production (“The Math Behind Meatless Mondays”). What does this mean for our population of six billion people?

By now you’ve probably picked up on the fact that all of these predictions rely on a big “what if?”: what if meat consumption continues to rise? But are we really eating more meat today than we were yesterday? The answer is yes—despite all the evidence that meat production is bad for the environment, consumption is actually rising. Bond’s Engineering & Technology report showed that meat consumption has doubled per capita since 1960 (Bond 17), and it is expected to double again by 2050. In addition to the rise in the consumption of each person, we also have more “persons” to consume this greater amount. For example, according to the report, “If the Chinese people had consumed the same amount of meat, per person, in 2007 as in 1995, there would have been enough grain left over to support 927 million hungry people for an entire year” (17). So, as we in the prosperous United States of America consume more beef, we are creating hunger in the undeveloped and developing nations around the world by denying grain to starving people so we can it to our cows.

This is the price of having a chicken in every pot, and it is unacceptable. Regardless of our tactics, action must be taken to prevent further harm to ourselves, our future, and our planet. If nothing is done, humanity’s future — the Earth’s future — is at the very least an uncertain one. In order to stop killing our wildlife and our fellow humans, we must stop the murderer: the meat industry. The meat industry causes untold damage to the atmosphere, our ecosystems, and each other — and this damage is easy to stop. However, as an ethical issue, the solution must be practical, otherwise nothing will be done, and many people argue that solutions to fix the meat industry are too impractical. The good news is that whether we can reform the industry itself is not an issue. We are all “ethical agents,” capable of making our own choices. We must be the change we wish to see, as the saying goes.

As individuals, all we need to do is reduce the amount of meat in our diets. If we simply cut out meat one day each week, as the website Meatless Mondays suggests, we would save vast amounts of resources. Lowering your meat consumption by 20% (a little more than one day a week) would do as much for the environment as trading your car in for a Prius (“Livestock’s Long Shadow”) — and
it would be a lot cheaper, too. In fact, the estimated annual energy savings of a “meatless Monday” would be the amount of fuel required to send the entire population of Dallas on solo trips to the moon, with money left over (“The Math Behind Meatless Mondays”). I wouldn’t pack your bags just yet, but that's an astounding fact.

Consider where the chicken in your pot comes from. From the grain it eats, to the waste it creates, to the supermarket where you buy it conveniently packaged and pre-cut, that chicken consumes resources, and we shouldn't just assume that these resources are infinite. The costs are far too great to ignore, and they are easy to reduce. Next Monday, go without meat. I'm not asking for you to give up Sunday, I'm not asking you to give up Tuesday. I am asking you to change — not to give up, but to change — three of your meals during the week to exclude meat. This small adjustment will help to ensure the sustainability of living on this planet.

Works Cited


