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An Unnecessary Evil

The terms *factory* and *farm* may seem incongruous when placed next to each other, but the idea of a farm based off assembly-line principles of output and efficiency has been not only tolerated in the United States over the last fifty years but also encouraged. Livestock have been removed from the rolling green hillsides of the pasture and placed onto massive, flat, vegetationless animal feeding operations, or AFOs. These operations are engineered under the shortsighted idea of maximum profits in minimum time, often at the detriment of the farmed; the farmers; and, consequently, the consumers. Factory farms are inhumane and unhealthy organizations that need to be replaced with environment/animal/human-friendly organic farming.

First, the question for many is the definition of an animal feeding operation. The Environmental Protection Agency of the United States classifies AFOs as “agricultural operations where animals are kept and raised in confined situations. AFOs congregate animals, feed, manure and urine, dead animals, and production operations on a small land area” (United States). All semblance of a family farm with a multitude of different animals grazing along the landscape at their leisure and interacting with their farmer as depicted by pieces of classic Americana such as the paintings of Norman Rockwell or episodes of *Little House on the Prairie* are completely thrown out in favor of cold and uncaring treatment of living organisms which are viewed as nothing more than an inconveniently natural cog in the incessant, churning machine that is industrial agriculture.

The inhumanity of these feeding operations and their practices is without question. In the poultry industry, for example, it is overly common to raise chickens in so-called battery farms, long sheds devoid of sunlight and home to thousands of birds in an unbelievably cramped area. These sheds are so confined that farmers had to find a way to quell the incidents of pecking and scratching within their aviary populations. Their solution was to force the chickens at birth to undergo the obviously painful procedures of severing their beaks and amputating their toes just above the talon. Pigs fare no better. The beloved curly tails popularized in literature and film are removed to prevent biting within relatively tiny pens that are often floored with concrete and leave little room for the pigs to turn their force-fed, swollen bodies, let alone to wander freely. It is this lack of exercise that hinders the ability of their porcine skeletal structure to grow and support their newfound immense weight, causing many animals to shatter leg bones when tasked with the simple act of walking from cage to slaughterhouse (Goodall 71). The gentlest victim of factory farming is the unassuming dairy cow. Cattle are fed an unnatural diet of government-subsidized grains such as corn and soybeans interlaced with bovine growth hormone in order to ensure the largest cow in the shortest amount of time with no regard to the health and comfort of said animal. This growth hormone is responsible for dairy cows producing milk at such a rate that their udders become grotesquely and painfully engorged, forcing the females to waddle and bleat for release. Not only are these cows expected to produce milk at unprecedented proportions, but they are also forced, through artificial insemination, to reproduce young once a year (Goodall 77).

Another major problem with factory farms is the risk to public and consumer health and well-being as well as the health of animals living under these automated conditions. The closed confines of large animal feeding operations create a virulent breeding ground for disease and

filth. Cows stand shoulder to shoulder in these large lots caked in each other's urine; fecal matter; and, oftentimes, blood. Without rotation of grazing areas, the wastes produced by each animal pile up simply where they were left. In some cases, cattle must wade ankle-deep through a swamp of liquid manure. This is wonderful news for bacteria that are transmitted from one host to another through feces, such as *E. coli*. The book *Harvest for Hope: A Guide to Mindful Eating* says that "According to the CDC, reported cases of disease from salmonella and *E. coli* pathogens are ten times greater than they were two decades ago" (Kimbrell 12). This contaminant-enriched environment of factory farming ensures that if one cow carries the disease, every other organism that comes in contact with its waste at the AFO or consumes its meat at the dinner table is at serious risk for infection, especially humans for whom *E. coli* has proven lethal. The health risks associated with factory farming are not secluded to the ends of the food production journey; the meat processors also suffer. Professors Michael J. Broadway and Donald D. Stull state that the most significant illnesses and "injuries in modern meatpacking plants are associated with musculoskeletal disorders, arising from repetitive motions, most notably, carpal tunnel syndrome" (50). This proves that the modern assembly-line-inspired food industry is harmful to all those involved.

Untold centuries of collective human experience with agriculture have proved that the idea of factory farming is not the only way to go about supplying our food needs. A movement skewed toward diverging from industrialized farming has been building since the mid-1960s. The idea of organic farming is not new, nor is it novel. Our ancestors also produced crops and raised livestock without the use of chemicals, hormones, or pesticides. In organic farming, animals are treated with respect and are allowed to graze naturally in pastures and to exercise. Studies have shown that not only is grass-fed beef lower in saturated fats and harmful cholesterol

than an AFO-raised counterpart, but that a natural diet also raises the cow's levels of omega-3 fatty acid, a nutrient most Americans must supplement in their diet with fish oil tablets or other such pills (Daley et al. 13-14).

The story of agriculture has always been one of trial and error. Factory farming and their use of large-scale AFOs are one of those errors. Those who find themselves in power must stop at nothing to return the art of farming back to the way it once was. This is not an essay vehemently disparaging the use of modern technology; it is quite the opposite. The ones at fault for our current policy of monoculture farming and livestock abuse are the farmers and multinational corporations behind this affront to nature, not the technology itself. Advances in agricultural technology should be used to better understand how to work with nature, not against it, to produce the highest quality goods with the least environmental and social impact.

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