

Sustainability and antispeciecism: the missing link in the critic of growth

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Reducing animal products for health and environment

In the current debate on sustainable production and consumption, in particular as regards food politics, the issue of animal products has become increasingly pressing. It is garnering more attention now despite the fact that its ethical, political, and environmental implications have been under consideration for a long time in the vegetarian/vegan movement. Furthermore, voices critical of the industrialized agriculture system and the related energy wastefulness can be traced back to Georgescu-Roegen (1979), and life-cycle studies of food production and consumption have been established since the 90's (cf. Duchin 2005).

According to FAO (2009), between 1980 and 2007 the global animal food production has increased dramatically, exceeding the global human population by almost an order of magnitude. Global meat production has doubled from 136.7 to 285.7 million tons, egg production rose by 150 per cent from 27.4 to 67.8 million tons, and milk production rose from 465 to 671.3 million tons. Water consumption involved in animal food production is enormous, more than 45 per cent of the water used in food production (Steinfeld and Gerber 2006). Furthermore, as of 2000 the livestock sector is estimated to have contributed 63 per cent of reactive nitrogen mobilization (Pelletier and Tyedmers 2010) and consumed 58 per cent of overall directly used human-appropriated biomass (Krausmann et al. 2008).

The „human“ costs of animal food production very high as well, animal protein production having a disproportionate impact with the conversion of plant nutrients to animal food wasting 85 per cent of proteins (Aiking 2011). A third of the world's grain crops and over 90per cent of soy goes to feeding not humans but other animals, bred in order to be used and killed. In intensive breeding 4 kg of grain is needed to produce 1 kg of pork meat and 2 kg of grain to produce 1 kg of chicken meat (poultry represents 33 per cent of meat production, FAO 2010).

FAO estimates that if no counter-measures are undertaken to avoid further growth in the livestock sector, meat production will rise to 465 million tons by 2050 and milk production to 1043 million tons, all due to a growth of global population coupled with an anticipated increase of per capita consumption of animal products (Steinfeld and Gerber 2006). Dietary transitions towards far higher intakes of animal products in developing countries, and emerging markets such as China especially, aggravate the global problems associated with these increases in demand for livestock products (cf. Popkin 2004; cf. Schmindinger 2011).

Regarding the consumption of aquatic animals FAO points out that many fish stocks are currently "overexploited" (Hertwich et al. 2010). In 2010, global aquaculture-originated production (that is, breeding and rearing of fish, shellfish, or plants in ponds, enclosures, or other forms of confinement in fresh or marine waters for the direct harvest of the product) together with fishing reached

approximately 128 million tonnes destined as food and preliminary data for 2011 indicate increased production to 131 million tonnes (FAO 2012). “World per capita food fish supply increased from an average of 9.9 kg (live weight equivalent) in the 1960s to 18.4 kg in 2009, and preliminary estimates for 2010 point to a further increase in fish consumption to 18.6 kg” (FAO 2012, p. 3). Whereas capture fisheries have operated at the same levels for the last few years, aquaculture has been expanding tremendously decade after decade. Industrial fisheries emit high levels of pollutants into air and water. The United Nations anticipates that “aquaculture production to just maintain the current dietary proportion of fish by 2050 will require a 56 per cent increase as well as new alternatives to wild fisheries for the supply of aquaculture feed” (Nelleman et al. 2009, p.6).

Based on that short overview of scientific data regarding the global consumption of animal products we can easily conclude that current levels are far from “sustainable.” Great amounts of water and land resources used, as well high levels of carbon emitted to the atmosphere, require that we dramatically restructure this mode of production. The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) concluded in 2010 that "impacts from agriculture are expected to increase substantially due to population growth, increasing consumption of animal products. Unlike fossil fuels, it is difficult to look for alternatives: people have to eat. A substantial reduction of impacts would only be possible with a substantial worldwide diet change, away from animal products" (Hertwich et al. 2010, p. 82).

There thus emerges a growing “environmental” critique of animal products' consumption in general, and meat consumption in particular. The latter is very often connected to adverse effects on human health. Initiatives have been organized, such as “meat free monday” in the UK, supported by Paul McCartney, and therefore a recipient of much attention. Another notable example is “Veggie Tag” in Germany (on Thursday). Discussions have also been held about special taxes on meat products (for example the campaign of PETA¹). All of this notwithstanding, the vast majority of current patterns of food consumption remains unchallenged.

The import of the efforts undertaken to reduce the consumption of animal products as such cannot be denied; they comprise an important step towards establishing alternative ways of conceiving human relations with other forms of life, and of relating more respectfully to nature as a whole. Lamentably, the motivation behind the promotion of this issue come down to concern over human health, environmental pollution, and ecosystemic degradation – all revolving around human well-being. The vast majority of such criticism suffers from anthropocentrism.

There is a curious observation to be made about this standard critique of growth. It refers not only to the need of restructuring economic life and recognizing material limits. It also involves a striving to embrace a different normative conception of the human relation to the Earth and so to nature. It thus points to the human responsibility in utilizing and preserving geo-chemical processes (cf., among others, Georgescu-Roegen 1971).

In the rest of the paper I will argue that if the degrowth movement wants to efficaciously and convincingly promote a deep critique of the notion of progress, and thus of the myth of growth currently promoted by neoliberalism/capitalism, it has to overcome its anthropocentrism and embrace antispeciesism.

1 <http://www.peta.org/features/tax-meat.aspx>

Hidden speciesism and the promotion of “sustainable” animal food production

Until now the critique undertaken by the degrowth movement with regard the production and consumption of animal derived foods has largely been confined issues of environmental and social impact. Degrowth primarily indicates the intentional redirection of economies away from the pursuit of growth. It also generally includes ecological considerations, since growth is traditionally associated with resource use that exceeds an ecosystem's reproductive capacity. Moreover, it refers back to social dimensions through the promotion of well-being and of justice (cf. Georgescu-Roegen 1979; Latouche 2011; Ariès 2010). There is, however, no direct mention not attention to the interests of nonhuman animals.

Interesting is the example offered by Slow Food, one of the partners of this conference--and one of the main actors in the degrowth food discourse. Slow Food is a movement committed to a shift in dietary norms away from high-processed, ecologically destructive, unhealthy food, and back to the enjoyment of preparation, cooking, and eating of what they call “good, clean, and fair food”². It embraces a politics which promotes the protection of human interests and ecological balance, but it fails to no mention nonhuman animals' interests. The food should be good, intended as „a fresh and flavorsome seasonal diet that satisfies the senses and is part of our local culture”, clean „through production methods that don't harm the environment, animal welfare or our health," and fair, that is available through „accessible prices for consumers and fair compensation for producers.”³. On some occasions, Slow Food opts for listing other less-consumed animal species and even promotes their consumption (see the Slow Fish project⁴) or explicitly recommends the consumption of cheese derived, for example, from raw cow milk. In both these campaigns there is a telling lack of reference to the problem of the way in which animals are treated at all stages of life, and an exclusive focus on defending small-scale producers who opt for alternative production methods. Interestingly enough, the standards of fishing goods production promoted by Slow Food are even lower than for other animals. The Slow Fish criterion of “clean” is described as referring to methods which respect the environment and human health.⁵ This followed by a reference to the social and environmental impact (intactness of ecosystems and preservation of human local communities). On the contrary, we know that fishes are sentient beings; they can experience fear-like states and they avoid situations similar to the ones in which they have experienced adverse conditions (Chandroo et al. 2004; Huntingford 2006). Since Slow Fish largely ignores that, it runs the risk of promoting particularly brutal killing methods in the name of preserving “artisanal fishing practices”, such as the defence of the “traditional tuna fishing in the Mediterranean” which includes *Tonnara*, whose brutality is very well documented and recently exposed in an uncover investigation by the animal right organisation Animal Equality⁶.

In the model of so-called “sustainable” animal breeding, there are general calls for respect of animal needs under the label of “animal welfare”; more space for the animals, less drugs and antibiotics. Following the EU example, organic animal farming is based on the idea that the so called farm

² http://www.slowfood.com/international/9/what-we-do?-session=query_session:8D3434A1163e81ADBDxk68228ACA

³ <http://www.slowfood.com/international/2/our-philosophy/>

⁴ Significantly, in the introduction to the campaign, the option of avoiding fish consumption is mentioned but not further elaborated. Immediately attention is diverted to the real interests of Slow Food: the promotion of a “conscious, delicious and responsible” consumption of fish”. See <http://www.slowfood.com/slowfish/>

⁵ http://www.slowfood.com/slowfish/pagine/eng/pagina.lasso?-id_pg=56.

⁶ <http://www.animalequality.net/news/403/animal-equality-documents-brutal-slaughter-tunas-italy>

animals require good-quality food, good living conditions and good healthcare⁷. A prevalent assumption is that ethical standards in production are not only good for the environment and the animals, but also for the consumers: "what is good for nature is good for you" (European Commission's organic farming label's slogan)⁸. However, in some cases, this assumption has been challenged. Recent research suggests, for example, that intensive (housed) poultry production can have a lesser impact on the environment and global warming than organic or free-range production (FAO 2010). Furthermore, the protection of animal welfare at the political level is permanently negotiated with other issues, such as productivity and consumer preferences. The "ethics" in the treatment of the so called farm animals is just another issue alongside other economic and political concerns.

This kind of "concern" for animal welfare carries a very powerful, but deeply contradictory and brutal message: it is possible at the same time to care for animals and to use and breed them in order to render them productive for the human being. It is possible to treat them "ethically" and – at the same time – to kill them. It is no surprise at all that the parameters chosen for ensuring "animal welfare" are those which refer to the animal parts important to production: the focus lies on husbandry and health. Some facts of significant import are left out: that even in organic farming the animals' natural sexual life is repressed since these animals are reproduced through in-vitro fertilization, that there is no respect of maternal and parental relationships (in order to produce milk, even organic milk, calves have to be separated from their mothers, with cows living in permanent, perpetually renewed pregnancy). Not to mention the fact that the so called farm animals are not free, since they are confined in order to be used. What counts under the logic of "sustainable animal production" is that the productive parts of the animal-machines can still work, or better, that they can even work more efficiently. Under this logic, the material appropriation of animal life is narrated with a powerful rhetoric as something we should wish for and ethically support, from the moment the animal is conceived to its premature death.

Eating no longer is, or better yet, never has been a properly private matter, confined merely to responsible consumerism. Eating animal products today in parts of the world where alternatives are readily available is not only irresponsible towards the environment, the health of the individual and to people suffering from hunger. It is *first and foremost* an act which presupposes that nonhuman animals are exploitable resources, that they are there simply at humans' disposal. Perpetuating the logic which legitimizes the consumption of animal products instead of implementing strong counter-measures designed move away from human dependence on other animals is clearly expressive of animal oppression. The institutionalized exploitation of nonhuman sentient beings represents a bastion of the (neo)colonialist logic which is based on the idea of domination of nature and the animal other. This dimension of the problematic has been entirely neglected by the degrowth movement.

Antispeciecism: Animal liberation is human liberation

Every hour, every minute of every day sensitive, intelligent beings with full emotional lives are being killed in the thousands of millions. All this in perpetuation of a system that not only damages human health and exploits environmental resources, but promotes a commodifying and alienating

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/organic/animal-welfare_en

⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/organic/animal-welfare_en

logic, making the human being turn her back on the very essence of ethical and political commitment, that is, on the capacity to care for sentient life.

As has been becoming increasingly evident since Darwin, and especially with recent proliferation of research on animal behaviour, it is no longer possible to believe in an ontological divide between the human being and the rest of the animal world. The human being is part of the animal realm. The differences and similarities between humans and the other animals are a matter of degree and not of kind. All animals, including humans, are part of nature. Nature is not only the environment conceived as biotopes and the ecosystems which make any life on Earth possible. It is more than that: life in its incredibly varied richness has a quality, the capacity of sentience, which constitutes the basis for developing social feelings, practices of care, and thus values. The ethical and political spheres of human activity do not make much sense without the existence of a more primary capacity to experience pain (physical and psychological) and pleasure, of having experiences as such.

Participants of current debates posit different explanations of the origins of speciesism and so different ways of defending (and even different notions of) antispeciesism. In this short piece I will embrace antispeciesism as a theoretical position that firmly rejects speciesism defined as 1) “the unjustified disadvantageous consideration or treatment of those who are not classified as belonging to one or more particular species” (Horta 2010, p. 248), and as 2) constituting a set of shared beliefs that legitimate the oppression of beings not belonging to the human species (what Nibert calls an “ideology”: Nibert 1953). Disadvantageous treatment is not the same as differential treatment. Speciesism should not be confused with the (obvious) acknowledgement of the fact that members of different species have different needs. Genuine commitment of antispeciesism relies on the condemnation of unjust forms of exploitation, that is of violations of basic rights of those who are not classified as belonging to one or more particular species. In antispeciesism, exploitation and violation of fundamental rights are related to the fundamental capability of sentience. By definition, sentient beings experience, and thus have desirable and undesirable experiences and accounts for the emergence of needs (cf. Dunayer 2004). Beings with experiences and needs can be subjected to justice and enter the ethical and political realm.

Antispeciesism has to be conceived of as a philosophy which transcends explicit efforts at the liberation of nonhuman animals from oppression. It thus shows ways in which our relationship with nature can be reconfigured, starting with a different notion of humans as materially based fragile and sentient beings, united in their fragility by the possibility of feeling compassion and kinship with other life forms, most of all other sentient beings. Antispeciesism is a historically embedded and sensitive category. It analyses patterns of oppression of other species through time, indicating that the human is herself the first victim of speciesism and that she should put an end to it for her own sake and that of other animals' (cf. Maurizi 2011). Indeed, human social systems are not established atemporally, but are changeable and correlated with shifts in socio-economic, political and cultural entanglements. As extensively elaborated by Nibert in his theory of oppression (1953), there exists a circular and mutually reinforcing relationship between 1) economically and elite-driven exploitation of the so-called “other”, 2) social arrangements based on oppressive treatments, and 3) cultivation of prejudices and “naturalization” (or metaphysical explanation) of oppression. All three elements come together in the defense of the status quo. Indeed, in our culture we have erected many barriers which prevent us from acknowledging these entanglements of oppression and thus enable defending human supremacy. This defense proceeds through social

institutions and cultural traditions (Noske 1991), and political institutions, such as legal status of other animals as human property (Francione 2008). Nonhuman animals can be bought and sold, human beings cannot.

It should by now have become obvious that antispeciesism stands for more than a contestation of animal products' consumption. It is more than mere promotion of veganism, pertaining rather to a different conception of the relationships among natural beings and, relatedly, to all practical domains of social life. However, food consumption remains a core issue not only because of its cultural and historical importance, but also on account of its profound biological meaning; to paraphrase Feuerbach, we are what we eat, since the material conditions of human life are paramount to our existence.

The most outstanding issue in food production is the deep entanglement of the oppression of human and nonhuman animals on the one hand, and hunger on the other (cf. Winders and Nibert 1981). As already noted, although the rise in the demand for animal products is recognized as a huge ecological problem, until now it has not perceived to be an economic and political issue; all major institutional reports still keep on arguing importance of animal protein and the need for technological innovation respond to rising demand (FAO 2009; cf. Schlazer 2010). Therefore, scientific programs to increase farmed animals' productivity and responsiveness to consumer demand through genetic engineering find broad support. Hence transgenic pigs that produce a less polluting manure (the so called "Enviro-pigs") (Golovan et al. 2008), transgenic salmon that grow at twice the rate (Van Eenennaam & Muir 2011), transgenic cows producing "human" milk (Yang et al. 2011) as just some examples of this trend (cf. Twine 2010; Ferrari et al. 2010).

Fairness and justice cannot exist in a system structured around exploitation (systematic infliction of suffering and killing) of the majority of sentient beings. The exploitation of nonhuman animals is institutionalized and, although sometimes perceived as an "ecological" problem, is nowadays defended on economic and political grounds. The exploitation of unprivileged human beings – the ones who cannot afford food, who live in areas that are climatically sensitive and economically dependent on global economic powers has been problematized in official documents, but permanently in a framework which pushes for an increase in the volume of animal food production in order to satisfy growing consumer demand (and a growing human population). The example of fish production for human consumption is really interesting: On the one hand FAO (2012) recognizes that in low-income food-deficit countries fish is an important source of protein; on the other hand, it points out that fish consumption these countries despite its constant growth is significantly lower than in the so called developed countries (in Africa it is at the lowest), since significant proportion of fish captured in these countries is destined to export to the richer ones, with the United States and Japan at the top. Nevertheless, FAO (2012) states that "there will be no green economy without sustainable growth in agriculture (including fisheries) and that improved management and efficiencies throughout the food value chain can increase food security while using fewer natural resources" (p. 17).

A rethinking of the food production system, also due to the enormous food wastefulness – which has reached an annual level of 1.3 billion tons of food, about one third of the global food production (Gustavson et al. 2011) – is urgently needed. As Nibert (2012) has extensively demonstrated, the profitable enterprise of animal food production makes the unspeakable treatment of the so called farm animals acceptable while disguising the resultant chronic diseases and constantly pursuing the growth in the numbers of consumers. Although the degrowth movement is critical toward the myth

of growth and its support of the rapid depletion of resources, it remains reluctant to recognize the entanglements of oppression between human and nonhuman animals. The question of antispeciesism and its commitment to offering a different view of our relationship with nature (of which we are part) allows us to see the problem of world hunger and social injustice in a different light. From an antispeciesist perspective, therefore, animal liberation is human liberation.

Why a radical critique of the current myths of growth and progress must be antispeciesist

For a true and radical critique of exploitation of nature, that is, of the environment and of sentient beings, the rhetoric of reducing meat consumption while promoting “happy meat” and other animal products as “ethical” is not only insufficient, but downright wrong and dangerous. If, as many environmentalists claim, there is no possibility of establishing a firm distinction between the self and the environment (Leopold 1949, Callicott 1989; cf. Fox 1999), then it makes really no sense to uphold a sharp distinction between one's own suffering and death and those of other animals.

It is doubtful whether the degrowth movement has genuinely faced the truth of the assertion that narrow anthropocentric concerns relating to the preservation of an environmental base for human well-being have been used to maintain an unjust system. This system has been based on the idea that nature is a total-sum of resources to be exploited for the benefit of the few. If the degrowth movement keeps fixating on issues regarding reduced consumption and the promotion of nonhuman animal welfare while it justifies the suffering and death inflicted on those animal victims, it will leave untouched the core of what it wants to criticize. There is no overcoming of the growth paradigm viewed as a paradigm for consumption based on unjust distribution of resources, if a general and comprehensive critique to all forms of exploitation is lacking.

The definition of sustainability is a complex matter without apparent consensus. It is typically described as responsible use of natural resources in order to guarantee a life of both present and future generations (the fact that biological systems remain differentiated and productive over time is an important precondition for the well-being of organisms) (cf. The World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). The mention of present and future generations, coupled with an emphasis on environmental resources, are paramount to the idea that the system has to be preserved and that human beings bear particular responsibility. However, a question has to be raised: Which lives are worth sustaining and protection? The referent to nonhuman animals as sentient life disappears in a general and vague stress on environmental resources and an exclusive focus on the human being.

Antispeciesism promotes a non-anthropocentric way of conceiving nature, thus overcoming the deep divide between “us” and “them”, analyzing practices of exploitation throughout history as products of unjust power relationships between some sentient members of the natural community and the rest. If future agriculture wants to be sustainable and fair, it should rely on a mature and liberated conception of nature in which justice is a value permeating all relationships among sentient beings. In other words, there is no real sustainability in a society based on exploitation of innumerable sentient beings precisely because sustainability is a normative concept constructed on the notion of responsibility and justice. And responsibility and justice emerge from the realm of sentience and thus are something which regards all sentient beings.

If the degrowth movement presents itself as marking a passage to a renewed civilization, it needs to reassess its hierarchy of rights and freedoms in consideration of the nonhuman animals. “Unless humanity can devise a social system in which people learn to live sustainably, especially on plant-based diets, and to live peaceably with the other animals of the planet, continued crimes of economic domination will continue to help generate unbearable heat, scarcity, suffering and international violence” (Nibert 2012, p. 58). There is a significant amount of empirical data available regarding the deleterious effects of animal-related production also in terms of killing and suffering. Then there is an extensive and growing body of literature centred on issues of animal exploitation, and a growing awareness of this problematic expressed via movements calling for the abolition of human-animal exploitation. Finally there is the ever-increasing availability of plant-based diets. In view of all these promising developments, the degrowth movement cannot miss its chance to rethink its implicit speciesist normative assumptions and thus embrace an explicitly antispeciesist framework.

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