

II From Global to Local

The global forces propelling the expansion of the meat industry have, on the one hand, increased the world food supply in the sense that there is more meat. On the other hand, however, this increased food supply has not erased hunger and malnourishment, as 821 million people still suffer from hunger (FAO 2018a, 3, fig. 1).¹ Indeed, we argue that the global meat industry contributes to increased vulnerability to food insecurity globally, not to mention increased health problems for approximately another one billion people (see Otero et al. 2018). While the global expansion of the meat industry has increased the supply of food available to some people, it has undermined food security for many in at least three important ways: (1) diverting production in many regions toward profitable exports, (2) reducing access to land in many parts of the world, and (3) reducing wages for workers within the meat industry.

First, the global expansion of meat production goes hand in hand with increased international trade. We have already seen how much meat production and trade have increased over the past twenty-five years. As noted in chapter 1, the global meat trade expanded rapidly from 1998 to 2015, more than doubling from 12.6 MMT to 27 MMT in less than two decades. During this same period, the percentage of global meat production exported also increased, from 6.9 percent in 1998 to 10.5 percent in 2015.² In some instances, the increase in meat exports came in countries where food insecurity was a significant problem. India, for example, is a country that has long faced a chronic problem of food insecurity, with about 17 percent of the population categorized as suffering from hunger between 2011 and 2013. Despite such food insecurity, India was the world's leading beef exporter in 2014, having exported 2 MMT of beef, which surpassed the

exports of Australia, Brazil, or the United States. Following the global food crisis in 2008, both beef production and exports in India increased substantially. Given the increase in exports, in particular, this beef production was not aimed at alleviating hunger in India. Furthermore, the focus on meat production and exports can divert resources, such as land and water, away from the production of food accessible to poorer segments of society (Winders 2017, 101–104).

Second, the global expansion of meat production has also reduced access to land in many parts of the world and inhibited subsistence production in many regions as more land has gone into pasture and feed grain production. This has amounted to a process of dispossession in which peasants and smallholders have lost rights and access to land. Part of the process of the “global land grab” has involved attempts to acquire large tracts of land to accommodate greater meat production (Lavers 2012). In other instances, corn and soybean production has spread to cover more land (Sauer and Leite 2012). Such land grabs are also effectively “water grabs” because expanding meat, corn, and soybean production requires greater amounts of fresh water, which in some regions means a diversion of fresh water from local populations (Rulli, Saviori, and Odorico 2013).

Finally, the global expansion of the meat industry has, at least in part, involved a search for lower production costs. This includes attempts to lower wages for workers in the meat industry. Consequently, many workers in the meat industry, itself, may find themselves in precarious financial positions. In the United States and elsewhere, large corporations in the meat industry, such as Tyson, have worked to squeeze more production out of workers while also developing strategies to reduce workers’ pay (Striffler 2005). This process has included attempts to reduce union representation in the meat processing industry and shifts in the composition of workers, such as relying more heavily on immigrants. In the middle of the twentieth century in the United States, meat processing was unionized and meatpacking workers had won middle-class wages, good benefits, and better working conditions (Stull and Broadway 2004). By the 1980s, however, corporations had developed a number of effective strategies in the struggle with workers and unions, including corporate consolidation, the relocation of processing plants away from urban areas, and a greater reliance on hiring immigrants (Ribas 2015; Striffler 2005). These strategies weakened workers in terms of their ability to demand higher wages, better benefits, and safer working

conditions. One result of this kind of class conflict, where the balance of power has shifted toward large corporations, has been declining wages and job stability for workers. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of food-insecure households for those working in the meat processing industry.

In addition to contributing to food insecurity, the growth of global meat production has also contributed to negative health consequences for many people in at least three ways. First, there is the role that meat plays in the so-called “neoliberal diet,” which has involved increased consumption of sugar, oils, and processed foods and at the same time less fresh fruits, whole grains, and legumes (Otero 2018; Otero et al. 2018). With the oversized growth of meat production, we have seen a dramatic increase in meat consumption, but the types of meat consumed tend to take on class dimensions, with poorer people (including ironically those that work in meat processing plants) consuming more processed and cheaper cuts of meats that are generally higher in fat, salt, or other food additives. In the global north, this has contributed to the obesity-hunger paradox, whereby poorer people are more likely to be obese due to their consumption of more highly processed foods that are generally cheaper and more accessible than fresh foods, including lean cuts of meat (Carolan 2013).

Second, global trade in meat often involves different parts of the animal being shipped around the globe to different locations, with less desirable types of meat often landing in the global south. Gewertz and Errington (2010, 1) offer a good example of this in their discussion of the meat trade in the south Pacific: “Our story is about a fatty, cheap meat eaten by peoples in the Pacific Islands, who are among the most overweight in the world. Lamb or mutton flaps—sheep bellies—are often 50 percent fat. They move from First World pastures and pens in New Zealand and Australia, where white people rarely eat them, to Third World pots and plates in the Pacific Islands, where brown people frequently eat them—and in large amounts.”

A similar tale exists for many countries in the global south, including South Africa, as mentioned in chapter 6 of this volume. While this volume largely focuses on the growth of global meat production, we would be remiss if we did not highlight the dual paradox of the growth of global meat contributing to *both* food insecurity and negative health consequences for people around the world.

The chapters in part II highlight some of these dynamics. Schneider, in chapter 4, reveals the ways in which Chinese farmers either become more

industrial in their own pork production or risk dispossession from their own land. Rudel, in chapter 5, demonstrates how trade liberalization and international trade in meat contributed to the unintended consequence that some farms (generally, owner-occupied) have silvopastoral landscapes that create lower emissions for cattle ranching. Finally, in chapter 6, Freshour shows how corporations in the poultry industry have shifted their hiring practices to increase their control over workers and reduce wages.

Notes

1. This is an increase over the estimated 784 million people suffering from hunger in 2015 and 804 million people in 2016 (FAO 2018a, 3, fig. 1). The increase in world hunger over the past few years is a departure from the long-term decline found in previous years. Some scholars have challenged the accuracy of this long-term decline, which rests on changes in who is categorized as suffering from hunger (Lappe et al. 2013).
2. Calculated using data from USDA FAS n.d.

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