

Athabasca University  Master of Arts - Integrated Studies

HUMAN COSTS OF THE NORTH AMERICAN PORK INDUSTRY

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Integrated Studies Project

submitted to Dr. Constance Blomgren

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts – Integrated Studies

Athabasca, Alberta

March 29, 2013

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Abstract

Although most people in North America regularly consume meat processed in a commercial meat packing plant, most are not aware of the rampant human rights violations perpetrated by these food corporations. This situation is either misunderstood, or oft overlooked by consumers when making everyday food choices. This paper highlights certain particularly egregious violations related to workers' rights, health and safety, and immigration, as well as the spillover effect these violations cause within the surrounding communities; all through the close examination of the leading pork producer, Smithfield Foods, Inc. Using an interdisciplinary approach, some of the various hidden costs of the meat we eat will in part be revealed with a view to sharing information to aid conscious consumers in making more informed food choices.

“There is but scant account kept of cracked heads in back of the yards, for men who have to crack the heads of animals all day seem to get into the habit, and to practice on their friends, and even on their families” (Sinclair, 1906, N.P.).

In recent decades there has been a deepening disconnect between most North Americans and the sources of the food that they eat. The topic of food is a tremendously robust one that can easily open a Pandora’s box of considerations such as environmental issues, animal rights concerns, matters of land degradation, global warming, rising rates of obesity, medical and health care implications, and public health concerns, to cite only a few. As important as these various topics are, for the purposes of this paper, a closer examination of the *human costs* of meat production within the United States will be the focus. Within this, the paper specifically examines one particular organization, Smithfield Foods Inc., the largest pork producer in the world, and at their largest facility in Tar Heel, North Carolina. Smithfield Foods represent from a financial and technological perspective one of the most progressive and successful food production companies in the world,¹ producing the most globally consumed meat in the world - pork. An interdisciplinary approach will be used to address the evolution of the meatpacking industry, matters of corporate ethics, the flagrant disrespect for workers’ rights, the violations of occupational health and safety laws, the use and abuse of culture considerations to create and maintain discord among workers, the societal costs that the meatpacking industry has within the surrounding community, as well as animal welfare matters. The paper concludes by providing possible mechanisms by which worker oppression can be countered through education, communication, and ultimately through consumer advocacy.

Overview of the Meatpacking Industry

Where once our food came primarily from small businesses and small family farms, today, particularly in North America, consumers seek more convenient and cheaper food that can only be created through large scale industrialization. The relationship between human beings and domestic animals has existed throughout the ages and generally, from a food perspective, begins with animal husbandry, or the rearing of animals, and then moves into animal production, also known as meatpacking, which turns live animals into carcasses and eventually into packaged meat for sale. In the last century, the food industry has changed as much as or perhaps more than any other industry as a result of and in response to the industrial revolution and to “changes in American consumption patterns” (Kandal & Parrado, 2005, p.452). “It has only been since the Industrial Revolution and more recently with the pervasiveness of a monetarist trading system and a rising consumer culture that objects we buy and even worse, those we ingest, such as food, have become so commodified” (Barndt, 2008, p.34). Consumers “growing domestic demand for cut and pre-prepared products has also affected ... the meat processing industry ... with an increasing demand for fast and convenient food products” (Kandal & Parrado, 2005, p.453), and consumers’ appetite for meat has only risen. “Worldwide meat production has tripled over the last four decades and increased 20 percent in just the last 10 years. Meanwhile, industrial countries are consuming growing amounts of meat, nearly double the quantity in developing countries ... with pork [being] the most widely consumed meat in the world” (Worldwatch Institute, 2013, N.P.). In order to respond to this demand, “animal production is growing faster than any other agricultural sub-sector” (Ilea, 2009, p.153). From a North American perspective, in Smithfield Foods’ Tar Heel plant alone, “the largest pork production plant in the world ... up to 16 million shoulders a year come down a line ... called a picnic line, which is staffed by

eighteen workers lined up on both sides of a belt, carving meat from bone ... this works out to 32,000 [pigs] a shift, sixty-three a minute, one every seventeen seconds for each worker four and a half hours a day” (Wolfe, 2003, p.183).

Despite the rise in consumption, some critics do note that:

Animal production, especially pork production, is facing growing international criticism. The greatest concerns relate to the environment, the animals’ living conditions, and the occupational diseases ... human and animal conditions are rarely considered together ... the living conditions at work and the emotional bond that inevitably forms between the workers and the animals ... leads to shared suffering. Suffering does spread from the animals to the human beings and can cause workers physical, mental, and also moral suffering, which is all the more harmful due to the fact that it is concealed (Porcher, 2011, p.3).

In the spring of 2008, the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, a commission which “represents diverse backgrounds and perspectives that come from the fields of veterinary medicine, agriculture, public health, business, government, rural advocacy and animal welfare” (PCIFAP, 2006, N.P.), completed a two-year investigation of factory-farming practices in the United States. At the end of its 1,100-page report, the Commission recommended a ten-year timeline for the “termination of the most intensive production techniques ... and concluded that the current animal food industry is quite simply unacceptable due to its effect on humans, the environment, and animals raised for food” (Pluhar, 2010, pp.455-456). That said, world-wide demand for meat has “risen to [its] highest point yet” (p.456), with approximately “56 billion land animals raised and killed worldwide each year for human consumption” (Ilea,

2009, p.153). This number is truly staggering given that the current worldwide human population is “nearing 7 billion” ... with an estimate by The United Nations that by the year 2050 there will be “9 billion humans on the planet” (Pluhar, 2010, p.456). The Pew Commission is of the view that “factory farming is unsustainable and grossly deleterious to humans and nonhumans alike, as well as to the ecosystems that sustain us all” (p.456). Not only that, but the demand for meat is unparalleled, and the highest price to pay is by “those who must work in [the] facilities, including slaughterhouses. The emotional effects of such employment, especially at end stage, are considerable ... [and] it is not unusual for the employees to become sadistic, literally brutalized by what they must do hourly and daily ... and in terms of physical health alone, the consequences are serious. Communities surrounding such operations suffer from pollution and increased disease susceptibility as well” (p.456).

Barndt (2008), an interdisciplinary food researcher whose focus has been on ethics of produce production, and specifically on the production and distribution of tomatoes has indicted that:

food has become a powerful code for many who see ... that it can offer an intimate starting point for a critical education about globalization, the environment, equity, and health, among other issues. Part of the problem we are confronting is, in fact, a fragmentation in our thinking and in our acting that limits our view to disciplinary frames and single-issues organizing (p.vii).

As such, and in alignment with the thinking of Brandt, the topic of food production, perhaps above many others, requires an interdisciplinary evaluation for it to be considered in a fulsome manner.

Pork Producer Smithfield Foods

Smithfield Foods, Inc. is the world's largest pork producer. It is located in Bladen County, a rural community in Eastern North Carolina. The approximate population of the region is 32,000, and as cited above, it is interesting to note that *every day the employees of Smithfield Foods kill as many pigs as there are residents in the community*. The company was founded in 1936 by Joseph W. Luter II as a ham curing business in Smithfield, Virginia (Public Citizen, 2003, p.4), now publically traded. Smithfield controls all aspects of production and processing, including feed manufacturing, transportation, packing, sales, and distribution, as well as raising pigs on factory farms. Smithfield processes these pigs on large industrial pig operations, known as confined animal feeding operations, or, what the industry calls CAFOs. "Smithfield generates sales exceeding \$11 billion a year" (Food & Water Watch, 2008, p.1), and packages its products under a plethora of names it has acquired over the years including but not in any way limited to: "Valleydale, John Morrell, Lykes Meat Group, North Side Foods, Moyer, Packerland, Stefano Foods, Farmland, Cumberland Gap, Cook's Armour Eckrich, and the turkey company Butterball. Smithfield then moved into the global market in the late 1990's and has plants in Poland and Romania" (p.2).

Smithfield's slaughterhouse in Tar Heel, North Carolina "is the second largest in the world" (p.5), and supplies about seventy percent of all of the pork in the United States (Calamuci, 2008, p.68). The violations, socially, morally, and legally promulgated by Smithfield Foods are too numerous to cite, but have been the subject of a multitude of legal claims by all manner of judicial and quasi-judicial bodies such as the National Labour Relations Board, civil court actions, human rights actions, immigration and naturalization actions, animal rights charges, and federal court actions for egregious environmental infractions. While many of these

challenges have been successful in court, the monetary damages awarded against Smithfield Foods have been grossly inadequate.

Corporate Ethics

In the United States, according to Nibert (2003), in 1930 there were 7 million farms, and by 1994 there were only 1.9 million farms, of which 125,000 produced the bulk of the food in the United States (p.105). And, upon looking specifically at pork production, Nibert (2003) further noted that in the 1950's the United States was home to some 2.1 million hog farmers, and by 2007, there were only 78,895 hog farmers left in the United States despite the fact hog production and consumption has increased dramatically since the 1950s. "Only a few corporations hold unprecedented market and political control over our food system. For example, the top four meatpacking companies control 80 percent of the market, a percentage that has more than doubled in the past two decades" (Lo & Jacobson, 2011, p.63). All of this represents the fact that now a mere three percent of pig producers provide over one half of all pig meat produced in the United States (p.105).

The evolution of the meatpacking industry is a clear example of the manipulation of the weak by the strong, the "dominance of one class [the bourgeoisie] over another class [the proletariat]" (Torres, 2007, p.28). This very Marxist philosophy of exploitation, of "wholesale thievery", was, to Marx, "a horrible crime perpetuated on the weaker by the stronger" (p.29). Marx, together with other twentieth century sociologists such as C. Wright Mills contends that "our social life determines our consciousness" (p.30) and that our social life is made up of a multitude of components, including how we earn our livings. At both a macro and micro level, Wright Mills (1956) indicates that economy "influences society", wherein he describes a "triad

of social structure, historical change, and biography” (p.30). Our source of economic viability is inexorably linked to our position in society, our self-esteem, our self-interest, and self-preservation. Truly, “if jobs create people, then the corporation is the quintessential contemporary people-producer ... [where] people’s attitudes and behaviors take shape out of the experiences they have in their work” (Kanter, 1977a, p.3). Organizations also deeply understand that they are producers of people for the sake of profit, and capitalize on this given the dependence that people have on them. This system dependence can be very powerful particularly “when people face inescapable situations”, and, where organizations know that over time, employees can “show considerable abilities to adapt” particularly when the people are powerless (Kay & Friesen, 2011, p.361). This sense of powerlessness over disadvantaged peoples, also described as “low-mobility or blocked-mobility situations” ... tend to create “hierarchical systems ...with behavioural consequences of disadvantaged positions ... where people dream of escape ... [and where work] is regarded as a form of daily part-time imprisonment” (Kanter, 1976, pp.415-419). Kanter goes on to describe a study of “male workers in three meat packing plants”, where “work is boring and who seek to leave the organization whenever possible”, and where the “real villain of the piece is a structuralist model ... likely to generate the behavioural consequences of such disadvantaging” (pp.419-427). Many scholars cited herein desire change through higher levels of accountability, and contend that organizations such as those within the meatpacking industry should “bear the burden of change” (p.427).

Smithfield Foods must be held accountable to ethical business practices, to sustainable models of development, and to matters of corporate social responsibility. No organization functions in a vacuous state, but instead, produces some product or service that impacts society at large. Economic decision making cannot be based solely on matters of supply and demand,

because when this happens, “a variety of market failures demonstrate the problems of relying on the economic growth model to attain even market-defined social goals ... the disconnect between individual and social goals” as laid out herein, “show that markets alone are an unreliable means to social goals” (DesJardins & Diedrich, 2003, p.33). Businesses “should be judged by the degree to which they are economically, ethically, and ecologically sustainable” (p.33), and by their “governing structure and the social responsibility for the individual consequences of organization membership” (Kanter, 1977a, p.7). Financial success cannot and must not be the sole determinant of business success.

Workers’ Rights

There is scant a better example of a capitalist system that is historically-dependant on the power imbalance of the “exploited groups and those that exploit them” (Torres, 2007, p.29) than the meat packing industry. And, “while slaughterhouse work has always been dangerous, bloody, and occasionally life-threatening work, with long hours, low wages and sometimes brutal treatment”, and despite the fact that until the 1980’s “meat packing work [was] one of the better low-skilled manufacturing jobs in the United States” (Calamuci, 2008, p.67), it is no longer. Of the approximately half million meatpacking and meat processing workers in the United States ... about 120,000 of those work in beef and pork production” where in 2008, “annual salaries average around \$22,000 per year, much lower than manufacturing workers nationwide” (pp.68-69). In absolute dollars, meat slaughter wages have decreased dramatically. In 1980, the average hourly rate for a slaughterhouse worker was \$18.96, but in 2003 it was \$11.59, a 39% decrease during a time where most worker hourly rates were steadily increasing (p.69). Not only are reduced wages an example of the ongoing disintegration of the rights of workers within slaughterhouses, but so too is the general disdain for the rights of workers to organize. In fact,

many meatpacking managers employ significant efforts, many of which are illegal, in their efforts to depower disadvantaged workers by use of ongoing and aggressive attempts to stave off unionization. These efforts to discourage workers' rights are perhaps the most significant in that the lack of unionization in plants such as these ensures that the employees have no advocates in connection with not only matters of wages, but with egregious occupational health and safety violations. The great lengths that meatpacking organizations will go to avoid unionization are never more strongly evident than in the sixteen-year fight that the employees of Smithfield Foods at Tar Heel went through to finally achieve union representation effective December 11, 2008. The CEO and Chairman of the Board for Smithfield Foods, Joe Luter III, grandson of the company's founder, "believed that if the massive Tar Heel plant went union, there would be a dramatic balance of power shift between the United Food and Commercial Workers and Smithfield. And he was determined to prevent that from happening" (Bruskin, 2010, p.64). Prior to the ratification vote that solidified union representation, Smithfield Foods engaged in "flagrantly illegal acts of misconduct" (p.64) to ensure that the previous votes in 1994 and 1997 were denied by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), and despite the efforts to intimidate the workers over a sixteen year period, the workers persevered and the plant was eventually organized.

The attempt to seek "union representation from the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) [started when] the plant opened" (Compa, 2004, p.94), and during the sixteen year union drive, Smithfield management engaged in an intensive campaign of threats and intimidation, which included confiscating union materials, spying on pro-union workers, and assaulting and causing the arrest of employees in retaliation for workers engaged in union activity. Specifically, according to the research of Compa (2004), the following pattern of abuse

was attributable to Smithfield Foods, as reported by the NLRB, in connection with the attempt of the employees to unionize:

ten workers were fired between 1993 and 1995 for union activity at the Smithfield plant, and five more organizing leaders were fired in 1997 and 1998; Smithfield management opposed workers organizing efforts with interference, intimidation, coercion, threats, and discrimination; Smithfield issued oral and written warnings and suspensions against union supporters; Smithfield threatened to close the plant if a majority of workers voted for the union; Smithfield threatened to deny pay raises if workers chose the union; Smithfield threatened to deny promotions to union supporters; Smithfield threatened to fire workers who supported the union; Smithfield threatened to fire workers if they exercised the right to strike; and Smithfield threatened that workers who went on strike would be blacklisted from employment at other companies (pp.128-133).

All of these, together with an exhaustive list of additional threats as reported and verified by the NLRB were promulgated by Smithfield in its desperate attempt to retain as much power as possible, and to be able to continue to ensure that their workers were powerless.

Smithfield Foods also capitalized on the cultural diversity in the plant as part of its counter-campaign. Examples included:

telling the blacks that they need to work harder to prevent the Latinos from taking their jobs; and telling the Latinos that the black workers wanted them out and couldn't be trusted; the enforcement of a strict point system for tardiness and absences, which made it easier for them to fire union supporters under the pretext of sub-par job performance; [as well as numerous accounts of employees at Smithfield, via the Smithfield company

police] being physically assaulted, falsely arrested, threatened to call immigration services, and firing workers who engaged in protected activity (Bruskin, 2010, p.66).

Despite the reprehensible conduct described above, one of the ways in which the union finally was successful in creating an environment where employees of Smithfield Foods could vote based on what they truly wanted as opposed to voting under fear of reprisal occurred when, in 2006, the union launched an educational campaign in the community entitled *Justice at Smithfield*, based on cross cultural values, and a bringing together of the various ethnicities. It was, in part, through this public campaign, and through public involvement and support that the employees felt empowered to vote for what they wanted. This is, without question, a testament to the power of education and public awareness.

Occupational Health and Safety

“Meatpacking is the most dangerous factory job in America” (Tanger, 2006, p.68), with “the rate of illness and injuries for workers ... over twice as high as the national average, and the rate of illnesses alone [at] about ten times the national average” (Lo & Jacobson, 2011, p.67). In the past decade, at least thirty-six percent of meatpacking workers are injured each year, according to official records. The titles of the accident reports filed by the Occupational Health and Safety Board give a sense of the problems inside America’s meat packing plants, a few of which include: “Employee’s arm amputated in Meat Auger; Employee killed when arm caught in meat grinder; Employee decapitated by chain of hide puller machine; Employee killed when head crushed by conveyor; and Caught and killed by gut-cooker machine” (Calamuci, 2008, p.69). These accidents highlight the danger of the work, and the disregard for occupational health and safety considerations.

The Tar Heel plant of Smithfield boasts one of the country's more atrocious worker injury rates. "In 2006, 663 injuries were reported at the Tar Heel plant, 64% more than the total of 421 for the previous year and over 200% more than in 2003 ... and in no other plant has the injury rate maintained an upward trend during that three year period" (RAA, 2007, p.1). This meant that there were an average of 2.5 worker injuries per day, primarily related to repetitive strain injury and tendonitis, slips and falls on wet floors, employees hit by moving items and by other co-workers, blunt trauma due to close working conditions, hearing loss, broken bones, strains and sprains, burns, infections as well as "cuts, punctures, lacerations, and avulsions (partial amputations)", many of which occurred due to overcrowding of the workers within the plant and excessive line speeds (p.2). According to over 100 interviews of Tar Heel employees and former employees that were conducted by Research Associates of America, it was a regular occurrence that "supervisors would not allow [employees] to go to the [medical] clinic after getting hurt on the job; large numbers of injuries were never reported; and employees were actively discouraged from filing for workers' compensation benefits" (p.3). In addition, and despite the fact that the company owns and operates its own medical clinic, the Smithfield Family Medical Clinic, it is "primarily staffed by nurses, and few-if-any of them speak Spanish", thereby not being able to properly service many of their clientele (p.4). The clinic is also known to regularly "misdiagnose injuries, ignore complaints of pain related to an initial report of injury, and refuse to give a referral to a specialist for follow-up care" (p.4).

Fatalities have also occurred at Tar Heel. One such incident took the life of a young worker on November 20, 2003. The man was 25 years of age, and was responsible for cleaning a rendering tank. The man entered the tank, and "was quickly overcome with toxic fumes and killed by asphyxiation ... his body was found shortly thereafter" (p.7). The incident was

investigated by occupational health and safety representatives who found that the accident was due to improper training, supervision, and the tank was not properly labelled. The company was fined only \$4,323. A second fatality occurred at Tar Heel in November 2004, where a 44-year-old man was killed in the warehouse “pinned between a tractor-trailer and the building. Smithfield was not fined for the incident” (p.8).

Face-to-face interviews were also conducted by Gail Eisnitz and reported in her book *Slaughterhouse*. One such interview was with a Tar Heel employee named Carol Reynolds who described to Eisnitz the working conditions within the plant, and in particular the fact that “acid from the hogs’ intestines splashed and burned permanent holes in her skin: how any intestines, even human intestines have acid” (p.261). Reynolds went on to describe that “there’s still feces in the hogs’ intestines ... [and that] nine out of ten those hogs [*sic*] have roundworms as long as the table here. And they curl up ... my boss would bring big handfuls of worms and they would be stringing like spaghetti. He’d say, ‘See, Carol. If you just touch them, you’ll be over your fear’” (p.261). Two other Smithfield workers, Betty Jane Stephens and her daughter Alcie were interviewed in their house. Betty Jane worked at Smithfield assembling boxes, and Alcie worked cutting up meat, but previously worked in chitlins. Alcie shared that “for starters, they exploit Hispanic workers because they can’t really speak out. They hire a lot of illegals, too” (p.261). Mary Jane went on to share that:

some are just children – twelve or thirteen, maybe fourteen years old ... one little boy couldn’t speak English ... they gave him a smock big enough for a six-foot tall man. He couldn’t work with his hands in the sleeves so I rolled them up and put rubber bands on them. His little arms were about this big (she made a circle with her thumb and forefinger the size of a silver dollar). They don’t report their injuries, they don’t have any recourse if

they get hurt or fired, they don't unionize, and they're willing to work for low wages (p.262).

Alcie also shared that when she worked in chitlins, "you're working in manure all day ... you're piping the manure out of the gut ... my arm swelled up every day for eight months until they transferred me out. Some days it would be swelled up from the tips of my fingers all the way up to my shoulder" (p.262). Mary Jane also added that when she worked on the cut floor, "they gave us knives to use, but didn't give us any instructions in how to use them to keep our hands from gettin' [*sic*] sore ... now I have to sleep every night (with splints) ... first the numbness kicks in around midnight, then the pain gets so bad I have to get up no matter what time it is ... acceptin' [*sic*] that job was the worst mistake I ever made" (p.264). Additional interviews described pigs "running across the table or floor" (p.265) when they were not stunned properly; messages by supervisors to "hang hogs alive" (p.265) in order to keep their job; descriptions that "if the government's not around, which they're not, employees can get to beating that hog all they want to ... the supervisor will not say anything to the person ... because I have seen supervisors taking pipes and whatever they can to hit the hogs and throw them down"; and supervisors yelling "bump that human but keep killing hogs" to ensure that the line does not stop, even at the expense of the safety of an employee (p.267). While it must be noted that personal interviews usually involve some concern regarding the matter of accuracy and reliability, Eisnitz indicated that "before leaving Bladen County [she] conducted more interviews ... and had [the] claims corroborated by a very reliable source at the USDA" (p.267). A report by Human Rights Watch cited a Smithfield Foods worker who had been injured at work. The worker indicated that "my supervisor wouldn't let me go to the clinic. He said there was too much work and I couldn't leave the line. I woke up the next day and couldn't move. When I

went to the clinic, they told me I got hurt at home ... I quit because the pain was so bad. Nobody paid my medical bills, neither the company insurance nor workers' comp" (Human Rights Watch, 2004, p.42). It is extremely important to note that the above describes only reported infractions. "Those who are employed illegally rarely report injuries out of fear of retaliation or loss of employment if they are injured and cannot perform their work" (Tanger, 2006, p.71). Failing to recognize claims, delaying claims, denying claims, and threatening and taking reprisals against workers who file for compensation for workplace injuries are commonplace.

Culture and Ethnicity of Workers

According to Gabriel (2006), in the last decade, the [meatpacking] industry has become almost completely reliant on Latino immigration workers, and of these, the majority are illegal (p.342). "Until fifteen or twenty years ago, the meatpacking workforce in the United States was unionized, virtually all white, and highly paid, earning about eighteen dollars per hour, adjusted for inflation" (Tanger, 2006, p.69). Since that time, the U.S. meat packing industry has changed traditionally good jobs into ones that are very difficult, highly repetitive in nature, dangerous, low paying, with very poor working conditions. In fact, undocumented workers have become "the only way to ensure that the most difficult and lowest-paid work gets done" (p.62). Another enabler of these injustices is the conflict between labour legislation and immigration legislation. While labour legislation seeks to ensure that working conditions are safe and that organizations adhere to occupational health and safety protocols, immigration laws "refuse to award labor protections to undocumented employees", which allows corporations like Smithfield to "exploit [undocumented workers] with impunity, [and which] has a chilling effect upon the rights of all workers" (p.62).

The recruitment of undocumented workers is also an important consideration for Smithfield Foods, since, due to their own egregious working conditions, their annual turnover rate is 100%; at Tar Heel, “five thousand quit, and five thousand are hired each year” (Wolfe, 2003, p.184). In order to stay in business, they rely on a steady supply of people willing to perform one of the most dangerous jobs in the country, for the lowest wage. As such, employers including Smithfield Foods hire recruitment staff to travel “outside the U.S. border to secure these workers” (Gabriel, 2006, p.341), where “hiring of legal and illegal Hispanic workers has become a cornerstone” (Mohl, 2012, p.35) of their labour strategy. These recruitment staff personnel are often referred to as *immigrant smugglers* or *coyotes*, and are paid by the meatpacking plants to “knowingly hire illegal workers ... [through] advertising on the radio in Mexico, distributing leaflets, and showing videos” (Saucedo, 2005, pp.309-310). The videos shown to Latino peoples south of the American border portray “an air-conditioned plant with people in clean white coats”, suggesting a clean and sanitary work environment, which is certainly far from the reality of the job. This aggressive recruitment strategy “thrives on a docile, disempowered work force ... and is the direct result of a conscious survival strategy undertaken by a key United States industry” (Tanger, 2006, p.70). It is most interesting to note that in the year 1990, in the state of North Carolina the U.S. census showed a Hispanic population of 76,745; in the year 2000, this number had risen to 378,963. This demonstrates a growth of 393.8% in that time period alone. (Mohl, 2012, p.38).

Companies like Smithfield Foods do not stop there in their exploitation of defenceless workers. Their entire social construction has been designed to “maintain power relationships ... where employers valorize their own productive work by devaluing the work of their employees” (Griffith, 2011, p.107). The practice of *tokenism*, or generalizations based on certain

characteristics is a practice that has been mastered by Smithfield Foods. They create and foster “power structures ... based on persons-of-one-kind and persons-of-another-kind ... and create “status as a symbol of one’s kind ... as part of control ... and polarization or exaggeration of differences” (Kanter, 1977b, p.971). In these environments “there are two ways by which tokens can demonstrate loyalty and qualify for closer relationships with dominants. First, they can let slide or even participate in statements prejudicial to other members of their category ... or by allowing themselves and their category to provide a source of humor for the group” (p.979). This type of polarizing behaviour is fostered, not only condoned at Smithfield Foods, and further allows Smithfield to engage in “segmented assimilation” (Griffith, 2011, p.108), a practice where a social hierarchy is created to maintain an ethnic divide within the workplace, and by extension, within the communities in which they live. The typical work segregation patterns created by organizations like Smithfield Foods include: female Latino workers, male Latino workers, native blacks, white males, American Indians, and so on; and the company does whatever it can to maintain high levels of ethnic conflict. Ethnically based issues have emerged at Smithfield and within the surrounding area including situations where “blacks resented Hispanic job competition and blamed the newcomers for lowered wage rates. Smithfield’s Hispanic workers – who make up 60 percent of the plant’s work force – had resentments and suspicions of their own. Verbal and physical confrontations between the two groups became commonplace ... the workers see competition in skin-tones ... and the enmity spills out into the towns” (Mohl, 2012, p.47). In Smithfield Foods at Tar Heel, “whites, blacks, American Indians and Mexicans, they all have their separate stations ... the few whites on the payroll tend to be mechanics or supervisors ... the lockers are segregated ... and so is the cafeteria ... along Interstate 95 there are four tumbledown bars, one for each colour: white, black, red and brown” (Wolfe, 2003, p.184). Job assignment is

primarily based on colour: “it is mostly the blacks who work the kill floor ... the cut floor is opposite to the kill floor in nearly every way and the workers are mostly brown – Mexican – not black ... the black women go to the chitterlings room where they scrape feces and worms from intestines ... the Indians are given jobs making boxes ... everything about the factory cuts people off from one another” (p.187). After a day at work, one Latino female worker when interviewed indicated that “she and her husband never lingered in the parking lot at shift change. That is when the anger of a long day comes seeping out. Cars get kicked and faces slapped over parking spots or fender benders. The traffic is a serpent ... a lot of the scuffling is between black and Mexican” (p.190).

Many of the Latino workers in particular fear immigration consequences, and as such, within the workplace, and outside of the workplace, do not assert their rights. “Threats of deportation by crew chiefs and plant managers keep illegal workers in line, despite work hazards. Hispanic workers, the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration reported in 2001, faced a 20 percent greater risk of being killed on the job than black and white workers combined” (Mohl, 2012, p.45).

The reality is that American workers are not always willing to work in meatpacking plants, but American consumers still want the jobs done, they still want to consume their bacon, and they want to be able to do so at a minimal cost. Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) in the United States “estimates that twenty-five percent of Midwestern meatpacking workers are not authorized to work in this country (the U.S.) ... but when the government did deport illegal workers following meatpacking plant raids ... it outraged food companies who complained of disruptions ... and had a crippling effect on the nation’s food industry” (Tanger, 2006, p.70). If this scrutiny were to continue, the meatpacking plants would have to raise wages,

improve working conditions, and charge more for the meat. As such, the INS now turns a blind eye. Americans do not want to have to pay the real cost for the food they consume, despite the fact that doing so would protect workers within Smithfield Foods and other similar meatpacking plants, despite the fact that it would create more local jobs, despite the fact that it would decrease the use of undocumented workers, and despite the fact that it would dramatically increase the safety of the working conditions within these facilities.

Societal Costs

Slaughterhouse work does not stay in the slaughterhouse. It follows the workers to their homes and into their communities in many different ways. One of the most prolific and perhaps most costly is the impact to the surrounding society. “The anger and alienation that follows these workers home often manifests itself as violence against families and against the communities where they live” (Torres, 2007, p.49). These slaughterhouse workers “experience, on a daily basis, large-scale violence and death that most of the American population will never have to encounter” (Dillard, 2008, p.391). The industrialization of the food system is, in part to blame. “Between 1982 and 1997, the number of hogs raised in the U.S. quintupled, while the number of hog farms plummeted from over 11,000 to approximately 3,000 ... and, as of 2004, four companies controlled 59% of the pork market”, with Smithfield Foods being the largest. These pigs must be slaughtered, and slaughtered quickly to keep up with consumer demand, and the demands of Smithfield as they seek to gain more and more market share. In understanding this, it must also be understood that “the animals killed in American slaughterhouse do not experience a painless death, and the slaughterhouse workers watch – and are implicit in – the gruesome deaths of thousands of animals each week ... ranging from brutal prodding and handling to the skinning and boiling of fully conscious individuals” (p.395). Despite the fact that in North American

culture, we are socialized to believe that “taking pleasure in the cruel death of a helpless animal is an antisocial and potentially psychotic characteristic” (p.396), there are countless stories, some of which are articulated in Eisnitz’s book, but also elsewhere, of slaughterhouse workers inflicting unnecessary pain on the animals as a form of amusement, indicating that the “nature of the slaughterhouse work may have caused psychological damage to the employees because the employees’ actions certainly rise to the level of abnormal cruelty that would cause concern among the general public” (p.396). One particularly relevant study regarding the social impact of slaughterhouse workers using 1994-2002 data from a total of 581 nonmetropolitan counties in the United States analysed the impact of slaughterhouses on the surrounding communities. The study sought to test what the authors characterized as the Sinclair Hypothesis (named for Upton Sinclair’s book, *The Jungle*) wherein “the propensity for violent crimes is increased by work that involves the routine slaughter of other animals” (Fitzgerald et al, 2009, p. 2). The Fitzgerald et al (2009) study found, among other effects, that:

slaughterhouses occupy a contradictory position within society; the work of industrial animal slaughter ... has a different effect on local communities than other forms of industrial work; slaughterhouse employment has significant effects on arrests for rape and arrests for sex offenses; slaughterhouse employment is a significant predictor of two variables: total arrests and violent arrests; and, the effect of slaughterhouse employment on offenses against the family was significant and negative for the analysis of the entire time period (p.16).

Further, “many of the offenses [were] perpetrated against those with less power” ... and are interpreted “as evidence that the work done within slaughterhouses might spillover to violence against other less powerful groups, such as women and children” (p.17). It is important

to note that the researchers also clearly stated that the results “demonstrate significant and unique effects of slaughterhouse employment on several crime variables. These effects are not found in the comparison industries, and they cannot be explained by unemployment, social disorganization, and demographic variables” (p.17). This study, perhaps above all others, truly demonstrates the very high cost, both to the individual workers and to members of the community in allowing organizations like Smithfield Foods to continue to carry out business in the way that they do without consequence and without accountability.

The impact of pig slaughter may in fact have stronger repercussions than any other type of slaughter, due in part to the fact that the “affinities between pigs and humans are well known. Porcine and human physiology are similar to one another ... and pigs are known to be the most intelligent of all of the animals on the farm” (Mills, 2000, p.107). It is no coincidence that “pigs are very popular in children’s stories, perhaps because their physical appearance enables them easily to be made into pseudo-humans” (p.108). Another example is the book *Charlotte’s Web*, where the character, Wilbur, is “as much as a child as a pig”; also consider the popular children’s movie *Babe*, wherein Babe so desperately seeks to escape from slaughter; and, lastly, the 1945 allegorical novel by George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, where the rulers, Snowball and Squealer are pigs. All are examples of how society has demonstrated respect for pigs through literature, while slaughterhouse workers are expected to brutally slay these animals that have, in many cases, been compared to humans.

In Eisnitz’s book, one of the slaughterhouse workers interviewed on several occasions, and whom she quoted frequently was Ed Van Winkle, who was employed at Smithfield Foods as a hog-sticker, a worker who stabs the pigs to cause them to bleed to death. Mr. Van Winkle was quoted by Eisnitz as saying: “The *worst thing*, worse than the physical danger, is the *emotional*

toll [emphasis added] ... pigs on the kill floor have come up and nuzzled me like a puppy. Two minutes later I had to kill them ... beat them to death with a pipe. I can't care" (p.87).

All of the above demonstrates that slaughterhouse work has both a physical and an emotional cost. Slaughterhouse workers, perhaps above all other workers, pay a high price for their *emotional labour* ... "that requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others ... the worker is forced to become estranged from an aspect of self" (Hochschild, 2003, p. 7). Workers must mentally detach themselves in order to survive, and with that comes the inevitable danger of not being able to reattach. The unbreakable link between the private act and the public act; the connection between the cruel acts at work, and the cruel acts at home; the inability to distinguish between the work-self and the home-self. It becomes one and the same.

Animal Welfare

A consideration of the human costs of the meatpacking industry must also consider the matter of animal welfare as these are intertwined matters, and "perhaps no corporation is more savvy at killing millions of other animals and exploiting devalued humans than Smithfield Foods" (Nibert, 2002, p.113). The exploitation at Smithfield applies equally to all animals that enter their facility, both human and non-human, where all beings are seen as expendable in favour of economic gain. While we have, thus far, reviewed only certain aspects of dehumanization at Smithfield, it is important that some consideration is also given to the treatment of the pigs themselves. My presumption is aligned with the findings of the philosopher, humanitarian, and arguably one of the earliest animal rights proponents, Jeremy Bentham, that the argument that must be made is that "the well-being of everyone capable of experiencing

pleasure and pain must be taken into account as one determines rightness: the greatest good for the greatest number” (Pluhar, 2010, p.458). At Smithfield, “workers skinned animals that were still blinking, kicking ... and shrieking ... management doesn’t care how the hog gets on that line ... whether the hog is stunned or conscious. [Workers describe] taking prods and sticking them into the pigs’ eyes to get them to move, [and] ... using pipes to kill hogs” (Torres, 2007, pp.46-47). The treatment of humans and non-humans are inexorably linked, and cannot be downplayed. Suffering “does spread from animals to human beings and can cause workers physical, mental, and also moral suffering, which is all the more harmful due to the fact that it is concealed” (Porcher, 2011, p.3). We must contemplate matters of violence and mistreatment against both human and non-human animals alike as they inescapably linked.

Prevention through Education

The public does not deeply understand the “psychological trauma inflicted on slaughterhouse workers ... nor the serious physical health hazards ... and large-scale violence and death” (Dillard, 2008, p.391) within slaughterhouses. If this is so, then the question is: if the general public knew, would it affect change? The optimist believes that change is possible through knowledge sharing and education, so, the answer must be *yes*. If other social justice issues are examined, and other matters related to social safety and human injustice are considered, a shift in action is possible. Many examples of societal change and of a change in societal attitude through consumer and individual education can be seen by examining attitudes towards women, towards homosexuality, and towards disabled persons. While change with respect to the foregoing was accomplished through a combination of changing laws and changing attitudes, change is also possible based solely on the latter, or, in certain circumstances the later can drive the former. An excellent example of this is cigarette smoking. While smoking

is still legal generally speaking, yet illegal in certain facilities and under certain circumstances, it has become and continues to be a social taboo. This dramatic shift in social attitude is directly attributable to education and to the sharing of knowledge regarding the dangers of smoking cigarettes, and the impact of second hand smoke. While a more robust examination of the success of social and attitudinal change through education is simply too big a question for this paper, and while it is an excellent topic for a subsequent paper, it is worthy to note that change is very possible through this venue. The hope, of course, is that in the same way as cigarette smoking was once an accepted practice but is no more, so too will the inhumane treatment of humans and animals for the purpose of meat consumption become unacceptable.

Summary and Concluding Discussion

Smithfield Foods Inc. must be held accountable for their flagrant violations of occupational health and safety and workers' compensation legislation, for their direct and blatant violations of human rights legislation, for their disregard of immigration laws, as well as for their egregious violations of a myriad of other bodies of legislation regarding matters of environmental laws, food safety laws, and of being guilty of "ignored animal cruelty" (p.365) laws. That said, to rely solely on legislative matters exclusively would be at "the expense of the inherent value of moral behaviour" (Reynolds & Bowie, 2004, p.276), and would not recognize that the days of failing to "question the way private organizations are run" are over (Cragg & Matten, 2011, p.2). Turning to Immanuel Kant's theory of ethical behaviour, social and corporate ethics programs should be based upon certain imperatives such as:

act as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature; respect for persons; act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or

that of another, always as end and never as a means only; and reciprocity or fairness in human relations (Reynolds & Bowie, 2004, p.277).

Increasingly, issues related to corporate governance are receiving greater attention from society-at-large, and individual consumers are paying greater attention to how companies *do business*. Just having a great product or service is not enough, social responsibility is increasingly a consideration. Former CEO of General Electric, Jack Welch, has counseled that “shareholder value as a strategy is a dumb idea ... your main constituencies are your employees, your customers, and your products” (Cragg & Matten, 2011, p.2). This in the case of Smithfield Foods, given that it employs 5,000 people a year or 50,000 in a decade, and given that it is the largest pork producer in the world this equates to a vast number of constituents. In addition, ethics programs should not simply be directives from the top down, but instead, they should and must be built with employee involvement. For matters of “organizational justice” to be accepted, and to be “perceived as fair”, employees need to participate (Reynolds & Bowie, 2004, p. 283), and when this happens, over time, employees can become partners in business, in community, and in personal success.

In acknowledging that the causes of human oppression are inexorably linked to economic factors, we must also note that the economy is, in large part, based on consumer demand. From a sociological perspective, demand is connected directly to individual morality, and by extension, individual consumer habits. Individual actions have an effect on others, “life is never isolated from others but is always lived with them. Actions do not take place in isolation but always include others” (Coff, 2008, p.23). When we consider ethics, and food ethics in particular, “even if we know nothing about the production practices when we buy the food, we still know that there must be a history and that this history can be cruel and ugly, as in a brutal slaughtering”, as

such, “informed choice is at the core of consumer food ethics because without information, consumers cannot make any choice” (p.26). Increases in grassroots social movements which educate consumers as to the realities of meat production are particularly important. “Several studies have examined the increase in grassroots social movement opposition of many rural communities to mega-hog farms being built in their neighbourhoods ... [where] such resistance takes the form of public meetings, rallies, Farm Aid concerts, legislative appeals, and occasional death threats” (Coppin, 2003, p. 610). These types of movements “also spill over into local media and perhaps gets disseminated to a wider audience than were originally concerned. In a study of twenty daily newspapers in Illinois, ten had significantly more coverage of opposing arguments, while only two newspapers were significantly pro in their coverage of mega-hog farms” (p. 610). Other social movements such as those that are organized by unions in collaboration with “human-rights groups and communities of faith [seek] to call attention to racial discrimination and labor violations that exist in the food sector”, with a view to espousing “the inherent worth and dignity of every person ... throughout the food system” (Lo & Jacobson, 2011, p.79). A number of other social justice organizations such as the Growing Food and Justice for All initiative seek to focus on “dismantling racism ... through local agriculture”, and “raising the wages of those workers” (p.80). And, the predominance of social media has provided an educational avenue so vast that information can be disseminated effortlessly. Through education, we all learn of “the dangerous consequences of factory farming for the environment, human health, and animal well-being, which could obviously be largely avoided by the shift to vegetarianism; vegan diets are fully compatible with this aim” (Pluhar, 2010, p 459).

Another tool is to educate consumers through product labelling. “Label information could address the way pigs are bred or kept, the origin of the feed, and port wrapping material” (Kanis

et al, 2003, p.156). Food labelling should also be verifiable, reliable, and strictly enforced through government agencies, and should not simply be limited to the number of calories, the amount of salt, or the amount of fat in a particular serving. Food labels should be designed in such a way as to empower consumers to make educated decisions about the food they buy. Labels should ensure that food production practices are transparent. Consumers should have easy access to accurate information about “food production practices and their ability to make informed choices about the foodstuffs they purchase and eat” (Coff et al, 2008, p.7). Communication tools to provide for this type of transparency could include mandating that food suppliers provide “information on the ethics of a given product’s production history, which is essential if the buyer is to be able to form an ethical judgement of the supplier”; such information should include matters of “animal welfare, working conditions, the environment and sustainability” (p.8).

Informed food choices can only be made when consumers are aware of the production history of their food. Most people are compassionate, and that if a clear awareness existed regarding the process of the delivery of their food they would not support it. “The humans most directly and most badly affected are those who must work in ... slaughterhouses. The emotional effects of such employment ... are considerable ... it is not unusual for the employees to become sadistic, literally brutalized by what they must do hourly and daily” (Pluhar, 2010, p. 456). Knowing is better than not knowing. Education is power. Educated and purposeful decision making is decision making that is free from pain, subconscious suppression, and the support of oppression. As Marjorie Spiegel (1996) stated:

If we are to succeed in stemming our destructiveness and learning to once again live sustainably and harmoniously with the earth and all its inhabitants, it is the urge to

commit violence that must be addressed – both on a societal level, and, perhaps most importantly, in ourselves as individuals. Ultimately, the true battle against oppression will be waged within each of us, because that is where all violence begins. And that is also the only place where violence – with enough work – can finally, everlastingly, be brought to an end (p.106).

Oppression and domination must never be tolerated. Whether it be based on race, place of origin, socio-economic status, species, or based on any other socially or biologically constructed dividing line. It must be fought in law, economically, politically and in all other venues that drive oppression. Exertion of control over others has immeasurable consequences that are often masked by the drivers of the oppression, but must be transparent to all so that each member of society can be empowered to make day-to-day decisions wherein the impact of these are understood.

Endnotes

¹ Smithfield Foods is the largest pork producer in the world with sales for year ending April 29, 2012 of \$13,094.3 billion; for year ending May 1, 2011 \$12,202.7 billion; and for year ending May 2, 2010 \$11,202.6 billion, representing a year over year increase of approximately 1 billion dollars (Smithfield 2012 Integrated Report).

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