



Social Justice, Sincerity, and Sustenance

by Lisa Kemmerer

Among social justice advocates—including well-known authors on the environment (such as Lester Brown)—there is an increasing tendency to rail against corn-based biofuel. When breezing through articles on corn or world hunger, it is easy to find alarmist commentaries claiming that ethanol production is a serious threat to food distribution, stealing corn from the mouths of the hungry, and driving up food prices—exacerbating poverty and causing yet more starvation.¹ Indeed, the use of ethanol in the U.S. has “increased dramatically from about 1.7 billion gallons in 2001 to about 12.9 billion in 2012.”² And this shift has diverted food staples, especially corn, to produce fuel, a trend that is encouraged by federal incentives.³

Nonetheless, for those genuinely concerned about diverting corn (and other grains) from the mouths of the hungry, animal agriculture ought to be the primary concern. Cattle, pigs, and poultry consume the vast majority of US grains—70% (60% in the EU) are fed to farmed animals.⁴ In the US, 73 million acres (30 million hectares) are devoted to growing corn, 80% of which is fed to farmed animals at home and abroad. Seventy-three million acres are devoted to soybeans, of which not quite half are fed to farmed animals.⁵ It is inefficient and nutritionally wasteful to feed corn (and soy) to farmed animals—and unethical. Consuming animal products (rather than directly eating grains) wastes 80-90% of the protein that grains hold, 90-96%

of grain's calories, and 100% of their carbohydrates and fiber.⁶ If we want to feed the hungry, we need to eat grains directly, and avoid dairy, eggs, and flesh. For those who are genuinely concerned about feeding the 842 million people who suffer from hunger worldwide,⁷ ethanol is not the problem. Consuming animal products is the problem.

World hunger is but one reason to rethink our taste for flesh, dairy, and eggs. There are at least four other serious concerns associated with the consumption of animal products, including environmental degradation. Animal agriculture uses much more fresh water, petroleum, and land than does a plant-based diet, and contributes significantly to climate change, freshwater depletion, deforestation, and the Earth's ever-expanding dead zones. When we buy “beef” for example, we are buying the destruction of rainforests in order to graze cattle and to grow crops to feed cattle and chickens and turkeys and pigs. We are supporting an industry that has become one of the leading contributors to greenhouse gases, and the primary cause of the Earth's water areas that are devoid of oxygen and therefore cannot support life.⁸ Fishing methods are indiscriminate, so those who eat fish also destroy ecosystems and wildlife, and pay for bycatch—incidental deaths such as those of endangered sea turtles and playful dolphins who are drowned in nets of pulled from the water along with target species. Those consuming fish and other sea life pay for the silent collapse of fish populations as well as the destruction of their underwater ecosystems under the weight of trawls.

Human health and healthcare costs provide a third reason to rethink omnivorous inclinations. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the two leading causes of death are heart disease and cancers, both linked to a diet rich in animal products. The third is chronic lower respiratory disease, also linked to diet because animal agriculture releases such things as dust, ammonia, hydrogen sulfide, and smoke into the air, not to mention the burning of fossil fuels and release of methane. The fourth is stroke, also a health problem known to be linked with a diet rich in animal products.⁹ The seventh cause of death is diabetes; obesity is increasingly prevalent

