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Norm Phelps: Science Weighs In at Last:

Campaigns for “Welfarist” Reforms Cause People to Buy Significantly Less Meat

February 2011

Two agricultural economists from prominent American universities have published the results of the first known study of the effects of “welfarist” reforms—or more precisely, the effects of the media attention generated by campaigns for these reforms—on consumer demand for meat. The findings are clear and unequivocal: “As a whole, media attention to animal welfare has significant, negative effects on U.S. meat demand.” (Kansas State University) In other words, publicity regarding the welfare of farmed animals—the preponderance of which is generated by campaigns for “welfarist” reforms—causes the public to buy and eat less meat. And they buy less meat overall; they do not simply switch from one type of meat to another.

“[I]ncreased media attention [to animal welfare issues] caused a reallocation of expenditures to nonmeat food rather than reallocating expenditure across competing meat products.” (Kansas State University)

The Debate

This is the first rigorous scientific look at an issue that has roiled the animal rights movement across North America, Europe and Australia for fifteen years. The debate was kicked off in 1996 when Gary Francione, law professor at Rutgers University in New Jersey in the U.S., published *Rain Without Thunder: The Ideology of the Animal Rights Movement*. In that book, Professor Francione asserted (and continues to assert) that animal rights activists must campaign only for the abolition of the use of animals and must never support so-called “welfarist reforms” that ease their suffering, such as bans on battery cages or gestation crates—even when those campaigns are conducted in conjunction with vegan or other abolitionist advocacy.⁽¹⁾ Professor Francione and his followers proclaim themselves to be “abolitionists” because they uncompromisingly insist that all animal rights campaigns must be for the abolition of a particular form of animal use (i.e. raising chickens for food) and reject measures that fail to meet this test. In fact, they proclaim themselves to be the only abolitionists in the entire animal rights movement—even though they have never abolished any form of animal use anywhere and have shown no visible signs of progress toward

the abolition of any form of animal use. Anyone who has the temerity not to agree with their rigid strategic orthodoxy, they dub “welfarists” or “new welfarists,” the latter being a pejorative coined by Professor Francione, who defines it as the “coupling of rights ends with welfarist means.” (Rain, pg. 35) The “abolitionists” specifically reject the use of campaigns for “welfarist



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the abolitionists specifically reject the use of campaigns for welfarist reforms” as a means for making progress toward abolition in part because they believe doing so is theoretically inelegant and in part because they contend it does not work.

Thus, they dismiss out of hand the argument that these campaigns advance the cause of abolition by sensitizing people to the brutal realities of animal exploitation and forcing the public to think of animals as sentient beings who love life and fear death, long for happiness and dread suffering. Because of their dogmatic insistence that there is only one right way to campaign for animal rights—their way—I have described the “abolitionists” as “one track activists.” (See [“One Track Activism: Animals Pay the Price”](#))

Professor Francione is adamant that campaigns for “welfare reforms”—such as the EU’s ban on battery cages due to come into force next year and the new California law that will ban battery cages and gestation crates (known as Proposition 2)—do not lead to a reduction in animal exploitation.

“Moreover, there is absolutely no proof whatsoever that animal welfare reforms will lead to the end of animal use or significantly reduce animal use.” (“Animal Rights: The Abolitionist Approach”)

This latter claim has now been shown to be unfounded. But Professor Francione has made another, more specific, claim that has also been called into question by the study:

“[L]et us assume that a person does give up eating poultry completely. She may eat more fish or consume more eggs or some other animal products and any offset to suffering will be counterbalanced accordingly. The new welfarist position assumes that for every animal product that is not consumed, those calories will be replaced by plant foods. There is absolutely no reason to assume that.” (“New Welfarism Fails on its Own Terms.”)

And again: Animal welfare reform will not, as some claim, lead to the abolition of exploitation; it will lead to more animal consumption. (“What Battle Are We Winning?”)

Professor Francione specifically applied this principle to Proposition 2, a 2008 ballot initiative in California to ban battery cages and gestation crates, urging activists not to support it because it would actually retard the progress of animal rights:

“[N]ot only will Proposition 2 not provide meaningful protection for animals, it will actually make people feel more comfortable about continuing to exploit animals by misleading them into believing that they can now eat ‘humanely’ produced animal foods.” (“A Losing Proposition”)

This argument is essential to the “abolitionists” case for one-track activism. If it can be demonstrated that “welfarist” reforms—or the publicity that accompanies campaigns for such reforms—do, in fact, lead to a reduction rather than an increase in animal use, then the claim that animal activists must turn their back on reforms and campaign exclusively for abolition collapses. “Abolitionism” will be shown to have been just another elegant, ivory-tower theory that disintegrated upon contact with reality.

In his most recent book, *The Animal Rights Debate: Abolition or Regulation?* co-authored with Robert Garner, Professor Francione stated that: “The problem with the new welfarist position is that there is absolutely no empirical evidence to support it.” (pg. 49)

Of course, this was also the problem with the abolitionist position. But even

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Factory farms are the most rapidly increasing system of meat production. Photo credit: Socially Responsible Agriculture Project

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1-13 [>](#)

when the book was being written (presumably 2009; it was published in 2010), Professor Francione's claim—which he had made numerous times before—was open to dispute. In fact, it had already been disputed by Austrian physicist and philosopher Martin Balluch, co-founder and president of the Verein Gegen Tierfabriken (VGT, Association Against Animal Factories), who claimed in a 2008 article that Austria's ban on battery cages had reduced the number of laying hens in Austria by 35%. ("Abolitionism vs. Reformism") Professor Francione countered with his own claim that the number of laying hens had actually risen by 3% following the ban and repeated his assertion that "As a practical matter, animal welfare simply does not work." ("A 'Very New Approach'")

Doctor Balluch defended his original assertion, pointing out that the numbers on which Professor Francione relied in making his estimate came from Statistics Austria, the statistical agency of the Austrian government, and included numerous egg-producing facilities that had, in fact, closed following the battery cage ban. Doctor Balluch's numbers came directly from the Austrian egg producers' association and took the closings into account. ("Comment: Abolitionism vs. Reformism")

The Study

There the issue rested until the publication of the American study that I spoke of in the first paragraph, which was conducted by agricultural economists Glynn T. Tonsor of Kansas State University and Nicole J. Olynk of Perdue University. Using the so-called "Rotterdam model," a differential statistical analysis technique employed by economists to estimate consumer demand for specific products, and to isolate the effect that individual variables have on demand, Professors Tonsor and Olynk were able to estimate the degree to which negative stories in the media about the treatment of farmed animals affected consumer demand for beef, pork and poultry during the period covered by the study (1982 through 2008). (Tonsor and Olynk, pg. 3)

Their findings were that:

[M]edia coverage of animal well-being and welfare has (i) reduced US pork and poultry demand and (ii) largely reallocated expenditure to non-meat food rather than across competing meats. . . . Therefore, . . . the beef, pork and poultry industries all stand to lose as meat expenditure is reallocated to non-meat food expenditure. (Tonsor and Olynk, pg. 5)

Nor is this negative impact merely a short-term blip: Results . . . suggest that long-run demand for both pork and poultry is hampered by increasing media press on animal welfare issues. Moreover, this lost demand is found to exit the meat complex rather than spillover and enhance demand of competing meats. (Tonsor and Olynk, pg. 6)

In short, the study demonstrates that "welfarist" reforms—or at least the media attention generated by the campaigns leading up to them—do, in fact, cause consumers to buy less meat.

For example, the study revealed that between the first quarter of 1999 and the fourth quarter of 2008, an ever-increasing level of animal welfare coverage in the media reduced the demand for pork by 2.65 percent and for poultry by 5.01 percent. (Kansas State University)

During the period of the study, the increase in negative animal welfare stories in the media did not lead to an actual decrease in the consumption of meat. Rather, consumption increased at a lower rate than would have been the case had there been no increase in negative animal welfare stories: 2.65 percent over ten years for pork and 5.01 percent during the same period

2.00 percent over ten years for pork and 0.07 percent during the same period for poultry. The authors are careful to note that while this rate of reduction is relatively small, and is in fact less than the rate of reduction caused by price increases, it is statistically significant and demonstrates that “increasing media attention to animal welfare issues [conveys] notable economic impacts to the U.S. livestock industry.” (Kansas State University)

The authors report that the decline in demand was observed for poultry and pork, but not for beef. (“Impacts of Animal Well-Being,” pp. 4, 6) (Although, significantly, consumers who gave up or reduced their consumption of poultry and pork did not switch to beef.)

They seem puzzled by this, but I think there are two very probable explanations:

- a) beef cows are the least horrifically treated of all factory farmed animals. Their abuse does not generate images with the shock value of battery cages, confinement sheds, and gestation crates. (The exception would be slaughterhouse scenes, but very few of these have appeared in the American media.)
- b) The “welfarist” campaigns that generated the media interest studied by the researchers focused primarily on poultry and pigs, specifically battery cages and gestation crates; they did not, by and large, deal with cows. Although it is true that broiler chickens are not usually kept in battery cages, to the American public a chicken is a chicken; I do not believe that they distinguish clearly between laying hens and broilers.

Although there seem to be no hard figures readily available, anecdotally veal consumption in the U.S. appeared to decline sharply during the intense anti-veal campaigns of the 1980s and '90s, and to have begun to rise slowly over the last five years or so. Ignoring the fact that the initial decline was due to reform campaigns, Professor Francione has claimed that the recent apparent increase is due to people feeling good about “humanely” raised veal. (“What Battle Are We Winning?”) It seems to me more likely that with the high-profile veal campaigns now more than a decade in the past, most people have simply put the cruelty of veal out of their minds. I would be amazed if a significant number of consumers—at least in North America, with which I am intimately familiar—are even aware that producers have been changing their confinement systems.

Conclusions

There are, I think, several conclusions to be drawn from this study:

- 1) It fatally undermines the abolitionists’ call for animal activists to boycott campaigns for “welfarist reforms.”
- 2) It directly supports the claim that “single issue campaigns” for reform reduce overall animal consumption by sensitizing the public to the plight of animals and forcing them to think of animals as sentient beings who love life and fear death, long for happiness and dread suffering. When you think of animals this way, it becomes very hard to eat them.
- 3) The report gives us no reason to think that reform campaigns alone would lead to the abolition of animal use. But no one has ever claimed that they would. If we campaign only for reform, we will slowly reduce the demand for meat, but we will never come close to eliminating it. Our reform campaigns must supplement and support a vegan message. As I have said many times before, the animal rights movement needs a two-track strategy: vegan advocacy supplemented by reform campaigns aimed at producers and reduction campaigns aimed at consumers, such as the Meatless Mondays campaign and the Farm Animal Rights Movement’s Great American Meatout, which has now gone international.

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4) The agricultural economics departments of Kansas State and Purdue universities promote the interests of producers. The fact that this study was even conducted shows that agribusiness is worried that reform campaigns are going to make a serious dent in their profits. (The researchers specifically cite the Proposition 2 campaign in California as well as similar campaigns in Florida and Arizona as the primary factor motivating the study. (Tonsor and Olynk, pg. 1) The industry has not shown a similar worry over the vegan campaigns that the “abolitionists” claim should be the only strategy of the movement. In fact, the authors issue what producers will regard as a dark warning and we should see as a ray of bright hope: “Although media attention elasticity estimates are relatively small, it is important not to mistake this for evidence of demand being insensitive to animal welfare media attention.” (“Impacts of Animal Well-Being,” pg. 6) Or, if I may translate this into English: “The impact so far may not be great; but it’s real and it’s significant, and animal welfare campaigns that draw media attention are a serious problem looming on the horizon.” The report is, in fact, a call for the industry to develop strategies to offset the impact of negative stories in the media about animal welfare.

5) In this regard, the authors express some uncertainty (and call for further study) about whether the effects of negative animal welfare publicity can be neutralized by positive media coverage of animal welfare. But that would certainly be an intuitive conclusion. And so it seems almost certain that this study will inspire the industry to launch a campaign to plant positive animal welfare stories in the media. We need to be prepared for this.

6) And most important: the animal rights movement needs to focus heavily on generating and maintaining high-profile negative media coverage of farmed animal welfare issues. Reform campaigns are one of the best ways of doing this.

Some Closing Thoughts

For the sake of the animals whose only advocates we are, we have to put aside the sectarian squabbling that diverts critical time and energy away from the real adversary: animal exploiters.

The vegan advocacy espoused by the abolitionists is essential to the success of the animals’ movement. I support it. And my own advocacy is almost entirely vegan. But I also support reform campaigns. Achieving a vegan society will be a slow, incremental process. Each step forward must become the starting point for the next step forward. We must patiently pursue each individual step, while impatiently fixing our gaze on the goal of a world that is vegan.

Professor Francione is a brilliant, dedicated, and eloquent pioneer for animal rights. And he is certainly sincere in his advocacy. But his condemnation of “new welfarism” and his insistence that animal rights advocates abstain from supporting reform campaigns are distracting and divisive. Each of us should concentrate on the form of advocacy with which we feel most comfortable and in which we believe we can do the most good for animals. And we must respect one another’s choices. To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, we must all hang together or the animals will all suffer and die separately.

(1) Francione generously credits Helen Jones, founder of the International Society for Animal Rights (ISAR) with being the first leader of the animals’ movement (in 1981) to specifically reject “welfarist means” as a way to achieve animal rights. (Rain, pg. 46) But it was Professor Francione who first integrated this idea into a theoretical matrix and turned an idea into a denomination.

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