

A Talk with Peter Singer

27 Apr 09 - [Slow Talk](#)

Professor Singer, it's almost 20 years since your influential book *Animal Factories* was published. Could you summarize briefly if, given the sensation caused by the book, there have been any significant changes in farming systems? If not, what are the main reasons why there hasn't been a radical change in consciousness?

I'm very pleased to say that there have been a lot of changes, especially in Europe, but also some in the US and other countries. In Europe, all the worst and most abusive forms of factory farming are being modified. New laws are being phased in that require giving veal calves and pregnant sows room to move a little and turn around, at least. Hens will get more space, and have a nesting box to lay their eggs in. These laws will bring improvements for hundreds of millions of animals across the entire European Union. In the US and Canada, the biggest pig producers have agreed to phase out individual stalls for sows, and in Florida and Arizona, citizens have voted to ban sow stalls. There has also been a big change in consciousness, with consumers becoming much more aware of factory farms and many more of them buying organically produced animal products instead.

In the introductory chapter, and in other parts of the book, you and James Mason highlighted that in Europe there is a greater awareness of food choices than in United States. Could you recapitulate the main signs of this increased awareness.

As I just mentioned, consumers have increasingly turned to organically produced foods. In England, the consumer movement against eggs from caged hens is overwhelming and some major supermarket chains no longer sell such eggs at all.

We believe that it is very important to emphasize that low-cost food, for example that bought at the Wal Mart chain, does not actually offer a real possibility to reduce expenses. Could you give us an example of the major "hidden" costs of a foodstuff, from environmental to social problems?

Food can be cheap, at the supermarket checkout, but very expensive because the real costs are passed on to others. For example, a factory farm may pollute rivers, and so people can no longer catch fish in the rivers, but the loss to the people who used to catch fish is not part of the price that the consumers pay. Other costs can be to neighbours, who have to endure dreadful smells, and to the entire world, because factory farm products incorporate a lot of fossil fuel, and so contribute to climate change.

Reading your book, it seems that the only truly ethical conclusion is the vegan diet. Indeed, for those who choose to follow this choice, difficulties are still lower than a few years ago but, however, according to your opinion, what is the most common attitude towards vegans?

The vegan diet, especially buying organically produced plant foods, does solve more of the ethical problems about eating than any other. But I admit that it is not for everyone, and it will take a long time before it becomes widespread. So I don't want to give the impression that it is the only thing one can do to eat ethically. Just avoiding factory farmed products is a big step in the right direction, even if you continue to eat a moderate quantity of organically produced, pasture raised, animal products.

Could you sum up briefly, what are the ethical benefits of "eat local" and what, on the other hand, the potential "deceits"?

Eating local strengthens relationships between consumers and farmers, and helps to preserve family farms. It can also reduce carbon emissions, because the food does not have to travel so far. But if, say, tomatoes were produced in a heated greenhouse in a cold climate, when they could have been brought in from a warmer place where they could have been grown without heat, then there may be more fossil fuel used in the local product than the imported one. It will all depend on the particular circumstances.

What are the key benefits of fair trade?

Fair trade helps to ensure that small producers in developing countries can stay in business, and receive a price for their product that enables them to feed, clothe and educate their families. It also strengthens communities, because in most cases part of the money goes to the community or cooperative that the growers form.

In your opinion, is it possible to adopt ethical choices that do not lead us at the same time to food obsession? Is there the right formula for respecting animals, the environment and workers' rights without becoming fanatics? If yes, what is it?

It is absolutely possible! The thing to remember is that the world is imperfect, and we want to make it better, so any changes in the right direction help, and the more we do, the better it is. But this is not a religion, it is not a question of personal purity, so we do not have to worry about our own moral perfection. We just have to do our best to minimize the adverse impact we are having on animals, the environment, and workers. And then, enjoy our food!

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