

Gender and the Globalization of the US

Meatpacking Industry

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Introduction

The past two decades have seen restructuring in the United States meatpacking industry as American corporations struggle to maintain profits within new configurations of global markets. In this regard, meatpacking is like numerous other industries whose profits rely on securing affordable locations, labor and resources as well as a sufficiently balanced ratio of supply and demand. The meatpacking industry also faces unique challenges and asserts an exclusive symbolic presence in American culture as an intersection between nature, food and mass production. From Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, which revealed the morbid world necessary to provide American meat, to the *Rocky* movies, which defined American masculinity in relation to the image of a rugged boxing meatpacker, to more current exposés on American fast food culture,¹ meat and its participation in the United States economy have provided a continuously rich context for the construction of identities of workers, consumers, and business leaders. These identities are racialized, gendered and class-based. As the meatpacking industry has been continually restructured throughout the internal and external circumstances that have shaped it, so too these identities and the many people involved in the meat industry have been continually redefined.

As much as it is a focus of American meanings, the meat industry is like many other industries all over the world in the increasingly open arena of the global capital market, in that it is dependent on international changes in production and consumption. In this paper, I will explore some of the relationships between the uniqueness of the meat production industry and the more generalized pressures saturating global capitalist industries, with particular attention to what these relationships mean to workers. The degree to which meat-processing industries can

¹ See for example Schlosser (2001).

adapt to become more flexible, as is the preferred trend among the most competitive industries in today's economy, is limited by the particularly biologically based nature of the industry.² The meat industry is also the focus of protests and regulations from environmental, health, animal rights, and human rights activists that tend to elicit more popular appeal than impact other industries precisely because of the immediacy meat has in many people's lives.³ These sets of external processes are negotiated by the specific policies of particular companies, in particular the "Big Three" meat corporations of IBP, Cargill and ConAgra, in the relationships that define and shape the presence of the meat industry in the United States and throughout the world.⁴ It is these relationships that create a specific labor demand and thus contribute to constructing the conditions under which people work.

The literature on the meat packing industry is diverse and plentiful, ranging within health, environmental, agricultural, rural studies, women's studies, immigration, and industrial publications, as well as frequently featured within popular media sources. This sampling alone suggests the impact the politics of meat has in many people's lives. To further complicate this area of study, the meat industry is divided geographically and by labor characteristics according to the changes in demand for and the differences in conditions of raising and processing different meat animals. All of these literatures and angles of entry into a study of meatpacking structure the meaning the meat processing industry has for those who work as meat processors. I will

² Flexibility or flexible integration refers to a diverse set of industry practices and strategies that I will examine in greater detail later in the paper.

³ For example, the recent attention the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in Europe has gotten, as well as media attention given to previous E coli outbreaks, suggest the concern mainstream America has with standards of meat safety.

⁴ Gouveia (1994: 127-128) provides a history of the evolution of the US meatpacking industry into the Big Three companies that lead the industry today. In the mid-1980s, these three corporations expanded from the beef industry to also include pork production. (Page, 1997: 139) This paper is intended to be a broad presentation of globalizing changes throughout the meat industry and their impacts on workers. Though there are differences among the production of meat from different animals that I will point to in certain instances, I do not fully differentiate the industries – such a treatment is beyond the scope of this paper.

address each of the literatures on the meat industry at least briefly in this paper, as it is my contention that drawing together the multiple impacts meat production has in our society, as they are recognized within variously positioned scholarly works, will contribute to a greater understanding of the possibilities and problems within the industry.

In this paper, I will discuss how the recent decades of globalization-linked restructuring in the meat industry have contributed to shifting gender relations among meat processing workers. Gender is a significant axis along which to focus this study because gender is a characteristic of workers significant in restructuring industries generally and in the meat industry in particular as a symbolic cultural site. This significance is due to the historic structures of gender that define women as a “vulnerable” labor force and to the historic construction of the meat industry that has increasingly reflected social cleavages in terms of gender, race and class. Though I am highlighting gender, because it is inseparable from race and class as social categories that shape human experiences, each of these categories will feature in this paper. My goal through this paper and future work is to examine the possibilities for increasing social justice within and surrounding the meat industry, and part of my argument is that a gender-critical analytical framework provides a useful conceptual tool for increasing social justice.⁵

Workers’ experiences in meatpacking depend upon the conditions of the industry. In order to understand the relationships between the changing meat industry and gendered experiences, in subsequent sections of this paper I will discuss: 1) the globalization of the American meat industry, 2) the response of the industry in terms of worker relations, and 3) issues of identity construction and social justice for workers in the wake of these changes.

Globalization of the American meat industry

Globalization “can be taken to refer to those spatio-temporal processes of change which underpin a transformation in the organization of human affairs by linking together and expanding human activity across regions and continents.” (Held et al, 1999: 15) This section explores the transformations in the American meat industry as it has been increasingly linked to and expanded throughout the world during these recent decades of globalizing change. The most significant spatio-temporal processes of change affecting the meat industry can be grouped into three categories: consolidation and flexibility in the industry, changes in demand, and changes in the position of the industry within a global market. I will discuss each of these in turn. The aim of this section is to describe the conditions of the industry within a globalized world economy in order to preface the discussion of workers in this industry.

Consolidation and Flexibility

Consolidation refers to the tendency for production to become concentrated within fewer and larger individual firms or corporations. In a report on consolidation in the United States meatpacking industry, researchers with the US Department of Agriculture assert:

U.S. meatpacking has been transformed in the last two decades. Far fewer meatpackers now slaughter livestock, but their plants are must larger. Consolidation toward larger plants led to sharply increased concentration in cattle slaughter and persistent concerns over the future of competition in that industry. Hog slaughter has also consolidated, with important shifts toward larger plants and increased concentration. (MacDonald et al, 2000: iii)

⁵ This paper is intended as a first step toward a larger project on social justice in the meat industry. I focus primarily on gender relations in this paper, though I also draw together other issues in order to generate questions and make reflections for subsequent research.

Consolidation is both an internally driven strategy to increase profit and a reaction to external pressures to maintain competitiveness. The result of consolidation within the meat production industry has meant that the agricultural industry of today differs markedly from the industry of even a few decades ago. Table 1 shows that plants within the largest US Census category (those that employ over 400 workers) have increased their percentage of the total industry value of shipments markedly in the years since 1963. The number of animals plants slaughter per year also defines large plants as a census category. MacDonald et al note that “Notions of ‘large’ can change over time; the [Census] agency did not separately report cattle plants that slaughtered more than a million animals until 1987; by 1997, 14 plants were in that newly established category.” (2000: 9)

Table 1: Share of Industry value of shipments in large plants (> 400 employees)

Year	Cattle	Hogs	Chickens	Turkeys
1963	31	66	*	*
1967	29	63	29	16
1972	32	62	34	15
1977	37	67	45	29
1982	51	67	65	35
1987	58	72	76	64
1992	72	86	88	83

Source: Longitudinal Research Datafile, US Bureau of Census.

* = not available

This process of consolidation has been effected through plant mergers among many smaller independent firms or through plant expansion. (MacDonald et al, 2000: 8) The result is that “[t]oday, four [US] firms handle nearly 80 percent of all steer and heifer slaughter; just two decades ago, concentration was less than half as high.” (MacDonald et al, 2000: 1) These four are the “big three” of IBP, ConAgra and Cargill, plus one, whose actions are most widely

reported on in the literature on meatpacking as well as whose business practices are most often discussed in various media sources.⁶ Deborah Fink remarks that these “new-breed” packers have emerged since 1960 and have “consumed the meat-packing industry and redefined basic principles hammered out over years of struggle.” (1999: 2) Characterizing her former employer, Fink continues, “Taking green and white as its corporate colors because green is the color of money, IBP has come to symbolize, in the midwestern United States, the worst excesses of 1980s corporate arrogance.” (1999: 2) The consolidated US meatpacking industry is dominated, then, by large plants, where a worker is one of at least 400 employees and is likely to be involved in the slaughter of over a million animals a year. I will come back to a discussion of what consolidation means for workers and for social justice issues later in the paper. Now, I will provide a brief discussion of flexibility, which describes a set of practices, at times including consolidation, that increasingly characterize industries within globalization.

In his book describing “the changing landscape of corporate power,” Bennett Harrison asks, “How have business firms coped with the dynamic, incessant, greatly magnified competitive pressures of the new world economic order?” (1994: 127) He then answers his question:

Managers everywhere have responded since the 1970s in various ways – all of which can be characterized as a search within large and small firms alike for greater *flexibility*: through reorganization and technological change, in labor-management relations, and in the reconfiguration of each firm’s (and establishment’s) transactional and longer-term relations to other companies and operating units. In other words, firms are becoming more *integrated* into one another’s orbits. (1994: 127, emphasis in the original)

⁶ For example, see Fink (1998), who wrote her book based on her own short term employment at an IBP plant; Hedges (1996). Also, see “Justice Department Investigating” (2000: 1) on the investigation of a “business-to-business (B2B) Website,” a joint venture of IBP, Cargill and four other meatpacking companies; see Greider (2000) and Bonanno et al (2000) on unjust industry practices.

These processes of flexible integration (Cooke, 1988) are intended to allow firms to maintain profits in the face of growing competition, and include the appropriation of new technologies as well as the manipulation of work tasks, structures of management and worker schedules. The more flexible a company is, the more quickly it can adapt to innovations and other industry changes. According to Harrison, “companies [have] tried to cope with the growing uncertainty, fragmentation, and time compression that characterize so much of contemporary industrial competition ...[through] the creation of *networks* among producers.” (Harrison, 1994: 131) Integration, as exemplified in the efforts of IBP, Cargill and other packers to coordinate marketing efforts and animal breeding standards, increasingly allows these industries to “orchestrate relationships within the entire commodity system – from livestock production through slaughtering, processing, and marketing.” (Page, 1997: 134) Also, and importantly in the case of the meat industry, flexibility involves strategies to cut the costs of labor and to enhance profits.

What Harrison terms wage and numerical flexibility describe some of the tactics meat industries use to flexibilize their production. Wage flexibility includes “various efforts by managers to reintroduce greater competition among individual workers, particularly in those occupations and industries that had become substantially sheltered from direct wage competition during the long post-World War II expansion as a result of unionization and government regulation.” (Harrison, 1994: 129)⁷ Meatpacking was indeed an industry with a highly unionized workforce in the 1950s and 1960s, providing impetus for corporations to use wage flexibility strategies. Unionization has declined in more recent decades, but wage flexibility tactics continue as the increasing diversity of workers can be used to discourage solidarity.⁸

⁷ I will comment more on industry tactics of numerical flexibility below.

⁸ On unionization and company-provoked segregation between workers, see Page (1998) and Fink (1998).

Consolidation and flexibilization within the meatpacking industry have not only been in response to changes in the global economy, but also in response to changes in demand. While practices of consolidation and flexibilization are to some degree particularized within the meat industry, they are also increasingly understood as characteristic of a more generalized form of global corporation. The changes in demand that have also been reshaping the industry in recent years are more specific to meat itself. I will now discuss these demand-side changes.

Demand

US Department of Agriculture researchers note that “[m]eat consumption patterns changed markedly in the last quarter century, shifting from red meats, and particularly beef, to poultry” (MacDonald et. al., 2000: 3) Table 2 below shows this shift in terms of pounds of each animal eaten per capita as an annual average.

Table 2: Changes in US per capita demand by meat animal

	Year (annual average)				
	<u>1971-75</u>	<u>1976-80</u>	<u>1981-85</u>	<u>1986-90</u>	<u>1991-95</u>
US pop.	<i>percentage increase</i>				
Growth	1.04	1.07	0.93	0.94	1.04
Per capita	<i>pounds</i>				
Consumption					
Beef	84.7	85.6	78.1	72.5	66.3
Pork	51.9	50.1	51.8	50.4	52.1
Chicken	36.8	42.8	48.3	55.8	66.4

Source: Putnam and Allshouse, 1997; USDA, ERS, 1995

Implications of this shift in terms of labor are twofold. First, the division of labor in meat processing tends to be divided by gender and class according to the type of meat and the animal involved, thus the shifts overtime have corresponded to changing labor demands.⁹ Second, concurrent with the health-related shift in demand from red meat to poultry and pork has been an emphasis on standards of quality in the meat industry.¹⁰ With the demand for red meat falling, and an increase in the standards consumers require for meat safety and quality, the only way meat processors could ensure continued profit growth was through expanding scales of production, expanding a consumer market or decreasing expenses of labor and location. I have discussed the changes in production scales above and will now turn to examine the expansion of the US meatpacking industry into global markets.

American Meat in the Global Market

In the early 1900s, the United States dominated both domestic and overseas markets in meat production. Even after other regions, particularly Argentina, emerged as cattle producers in the early years of the twentieth century, US corporations still shipped and processed much of the meat. In recent decades, however, as technologies and globalized financial flows have allowed greater circulation of meat and money, “American agro-industrial firms [have been] ... faced with competition from foreign counterparts.” (Page, 1997: 143) However, direct competition

⁹ Deslippe (1993), Fehn (1998) and Fink (1998) discuss the gender division of labor by animal.

¹⁰ Page (1997) discusses the efforts of the pork industry to increase demand for their product, including “the other white meat” media advertisement campaign. Ironically for those with health concerns about meat eating, consumer demands for lower fat meat products have led to an increase in genetic modification and hormone use designed to produce pigs of low body fat and uniform size. Pigs of uniform size streamline and standardize the process of meat production and signal the degree to which animals’ biological characteristics are mediated through the processes of commodification.

from foreign firms is still the exception rather than the rule, as at least Cargill and ConAgra are significantly invested in overseas meat production rather than competing against it.

Reactions to these competitive pressures have varied within the strategies of the “Big Three” companies of IBP, Cargill and ConAgra as they have negotiated globalizing trends. The involvement of Cargill and ConAgra in processing and distribution enterprises in Western Europe, Russia and Australia have helped these two of the Big Three to expand and diversify their markets, thus making up for the decreased in American demand for red meat. IBP has taken different routes in the face of competition from foreign companies, employing tactics of flexibilization, as well as remaining the largest direct exporter of meat and meat products, especially to Japan where consumption patterns create a more diversified demand, in order to maintain profits.¹¹

Health and safety standards, in addition to consumption patterns, also dictate the internationalization practices of the various companies. In particular, the US and the European Union have waged battles involving the World Trade Organization over the EU’s various attempts to ban US beef based on the US practice of feeding growth hormones to cattle. When this issue emerged in the late 1980s, Cargill and ConAgra found ways around the ban by making agreements with French and Australian co-investors to get their beef to Europe. IBP modernized some plants and build new facilities, such as the plant in Lexington, Nebraska, in order to meet European standards. But, in the revised debate of the late 1990s the EU claimed it could not be sure of US certifications and wanted to ban all beef from the US, leaving IBP out of competition.¹² Such issues are continuously negotiated and re-negotiated, and as the recent

¹¹ See Gouveia (1994) and Eisnitz (1997) for commentary on the diversity of Japan as a market; Gouveia on ConAgra, Cargill and IBP’s internationalization strategies.

¹² See Quest (1999) and O’Connell (1999) on the EU-US beef trade disputes, and Gouveia (1994) on corporate internationalization strategies.

outbreak of foot and mouth disease has shown, biological disease is still a threat to the industry. For these reasons, as well as to maintain profits, meat industries must maintain flexibility in production. As I mentioned above, though, the most significant strategies of flexibilization for meat industries in the global market, especially for this paper, concern labor.

Perhaps the biggest impetus toward the internationalization of the meat industry has come from the passage of NAFTA in 1993. Though “[i]t is not without reservations that meat industry groups have supported the North American Free Trade Agreement,” the changes in Mexican agrarian laws as well as looser enforcement of environmental regulations and most importantly access to cheap labor, mean that Mexico “may provide the welcome mat to U.S. meatpackers.” (Gouveia, 1994: 133-134)¹³ In her discussion of the effect of NAFTA on the US meat industry, Gouveia recognizes the likely imbalance of beneficial relationships from the agreement, as well as the limits to which NAFTA will provide a greatly expanded market for US meat producers. Gouveia reports a comment from a US Meat Export Federation official from Mexico City:

The 86 million that NAFTA supporters say will be the Mexican market for beef is not what the market research shows us. We are talking 14-20 million maximum [who eat high quality meat] right now. A person making a minimum wage of \$4.25 a day [or half of the city] is not going to be our market. We are not going after them, but after the upper and middle classes. (1994: 136)

This quote draws attention to a possibility likely within a global meat industry with decreasing wages and increasing pressures on the quality of meat, namely the likelihood of a greater disparity between those who work to produce meat and those who can afford the best quality meat available. I will return to this consideration in a later section. Now, I want to continue the

¹³ The agrarian law changes involve an alteration in the 1917 law that forbid the sale and lease of ejido, or common, lands so that these properties can now be sold. (Gouveia, 1994: 134)

discussion of workers in this increasingly globalized meat industry as I turn to discuss industry strategies in more detail.

Industry Strategies and Worker Relations

As I have described in relation to corporate internationalization strategies above, reactions to globalization-related and demand-oriented competitive pressures have varied by individual corporation. However, “globalization for all these corporations involves serious and conscious attempts to achieve the greatest possible degree of flexibility and synchronization of profit maximizing activities such as sourcing of cheap livestock and labor.” (Gouveia, 1994: 136) This is largely because of the particular biologically based nature of the meat industry. Meatpacking is defined as an industry by a narrow margin of profits between the price of livestock and the finished consumer product – there is only so much value to be added to meat. This means that increased profit relies upon greater scales of production and cheaper livestock, facility and labor costs. The strategies of corporations, including what I refer to as industry politics as well as hiring “vulnerable” laborers, have reflected these conditions. In this section, I discuss these strategies and then present a summary of what globalization means for the conditions of workers in meat production.

Industry politics

In addition to the internationalizing strategies corporations use to flexibilize production in the meat industry, they also adopt targeted locational strategies in the United States. IBP’s tactics to employ wage flexibility strategies “became the industry’s standard.” (Gouveia, 1994: 129) These strategies included locating plants “close to livestock supplies and far from the urban, high-wage, union strongholds where the industry had been traditionally located.” (Gouveia,

1994: 129) Further, the farm crisis of the mid 1980s left many rural locations desperate for investment and so meatpacking plants could negotiate attractive deals on land and get tax breaks, as well as be guaranteed to be in favor with local business leaders and politicians.¹⁴

In addition to consolidating actual firms and plants, meat corporations are consolidating the power and control they have over the entire system of meat production. Contractual agreements between farmers and agro-industries are another recent development in the meat industry that allow increasing company control over the production process. In Iowa, for example:

[i]ncreasingly hogs are produced under contract by farmers who own neither the hogs nor the necessary inputs to produce them ... contractual arrangements are steadily replacing market exchanges as nominally independent growers are brought under the control of agro-industrial firms that orchestrate relationships within the entire commodity system – from livestock production through slaughtering, processing, and marketing. (Page, 1997: 134).

In the contract system, growers take on all the risks associated with disease or other natural disasters that may occur while the pigs are growing. These relationships between farmers or growers and agro-industries present a complicated situation for workers in meat packing plants as members of communities, especially when anti-industry sentiment enflames. Further complicating the politics of the meat industry are the multiple interest groups and possible government agency connections that allow the industry considerable political bargaining weight.¹⁵ These relationships differ by place, but it is important to recognize that the political

¹⁴ Gouveia and Stull (1997: 1-3) discuss the negotiations IBP made with officials in Lexington, Nebraska, during the siting of their new plant.

¹⁵ The National Meat Association and the American Meat Institute both maintain websites on their political activities. (www.nmaonline.org, www.meatami.com) An example of their political involvement is in the case of the AMI's efforts to halt the Immigration and Naturalization Service project Operation Vanguard, which was intended to uncover undocumented and falsely documented workers in Iowa and Nebraska processing plants. ("Nebraska Beef Raid," 2000; "Industry Accomplishments," 2000) Eisnitz (1997:24) claims the USDA shares interests with the meat industry.

economy of meat production at various scales has significant impact on the experiences of workers as well as their opportunities for political action.

“Vulnerable” Labor as an Industry Strategy

Shifts in the meat industry have been accompanied by strategies to subvert the power of organized labor and to recruit workers who are unlikely to organize for better conditions. Accordingly, “[t]he most important cost-reduction strategy currently used by meatpackers is the incorporation of new immigrant workers, primarily Mexican and Central American, and including women.” (Gouveia, 1994: 140) In their study of the impact of the new IBP plant in Lexington, Nebraska, Gouveia and Stull note, “[a] top executive of [a] major packing firm ...[said], ‘We couldn’t ... begin to staff our plants if we didn’t have women ... I hope we can get them to stay longer because they probably aren’t as mobile.’” (Gouveia and Stull, 1997: 3) In the same vein is the following quote from an article in *The Washington Post* about the “new economic cultural landscape” of Iowa:

Getting men and women to work in the kill rooms of this state’s meatpacking plants is vital to the agribusiness economy that dominates Iowa ... But the work is so brutal, repetitive, low-paying and dangerous that until recently the jobs were going begging. ‘No American white man wanted those jobs,’ said one union official here. (Edsall, 2000: A6)

These quotes suggest an explanation for the increasing numbers of women and immigrants, particularly Mexican and Central American, working in the meat packing industry.

Because meat industries do not have to report on their workforce (Gouveia and Stull, 1997: 2), the sex and ethnicity of those currently employed by meat industries are difficult to obtain. However, in the study by Gouveia and Stull of the Lexington IBP plant, the authors used

various social service records and employment service information to correlate information on workers hired as the plant first opened in November of 1990.¹⁶ They found that “over time, a marked reversal in ethnic composition occurred: during start-up, 81% of those hired were non-Hispanic, but by the end of the study period, that figure had fallen to 37%.” (Gouveia and Stull, 1997: 3) Though the “IBP officials initially projected that 60% of their processing workers (the majority of hourly employees) would be women, many of them single mothers or farm wives,” the actual number Gouveia and Stull found was only about 20%. (1997: 3-4) Two other pieces of information help to make sense of these employment figures. Employee turnover during the first 21 months of operation at the Lexington plant was about 12% per month, and the Hispanic population in the city increased from 4.9% in the April 1990 census to 24% in the specially requested recount conducted in February of 1993, after IBP had been in operation just over 2 years.¹⁷ What this suggests is that, as Gouveia and Stull assert, “the majority of jobs in the meatpacking industry are unattractive to native-born [white] workers.” (1997: 4) This assertion is reinforced by the quotes of former IBP women workers, primarily local Nebraskans, who found the work difficult and were able to find other jobs or could otherwise afford to leave their IBP jobs.

The employment of women in the meat industry has long been a subject of division on plant floors, and the increasing racialization of meatpackers with the recent decades of globalization-related migration and competitive pressures has served to further stratify workers. Deborah Fink found that “Jake,” the plant manager at the IBP plant in Perry, Iowa where Fink worked, considered the increasing employment of women at the plant since the 1980s to be the reason that “the people who worked for him would never have the opportunity that he had to

¹⁶ See Gouveia and Stull (1997: 3) for a description of their data gathering methodology.

make enough money to support their families.” (1998: 72) During her time at the plant, Fink found that jobs were segmented by gender, and that the best (highest paid) jobs were reserved for men, often with the explanation that women did not belong in certain tasks. This finding is consistent with the work of scholars studying women’s work in numerous occupations where notions of “skill” are linked to gender.¹⁸

David Harvey provides a useful summary of the changes in industry politics and spatiality and what these changes mean for workers:

We should pay close attention to the industrial structures developing in rural and small-town settings in the United States, for it is here where the decline of agricultural employment (to say nothing of the rash of farming bankruptcies) over the past decade or so has left behind a relatively isolated industrial reserve army... which is more vulnerable to exploitation than its urban counterpart. US industry has long used spatial dispersal and the geographic isolation of employees as one of its prime mechanisms of labor control (in industries like chicken processing and meatpacking the equation is obvious) But recent transformations in industrial organization, flexible locational choices, and deregulation have here been turned into a totally unsubtle form of coercive exploitation which is pre- rather than post-Fordist in its organizational form. (Harvey, 1996: 336-337)

This quote frames the situation of workers in the structures of the industry quite effectively. I now want to continue building an understanding of the experiences of workers by drawing together what these changes in industry and labor strategy mean for the conditions workers face at their jobs.

Conditions of the Jobs

¹⁷ Gouveia and Stull (1997: 1-4) provide charts and methodological information on these employment figures. For corroboration on turnover rates, see Grey (1999).

¹⁸ See, for instance, Lawson (1995). Also, Gouveia (1994:129) notes that IBP “was ... one of the first to eliminate higher-paid skilled workers such as trained butchers ... This was accomplished through the fractionalizing of tasks, which enabled IBP to tap pockets of unskilled labor.” In rural and de-populated areas, unskilled or even unemployed people are likely to be women or recent immigrants.

Work at a meat processing plant is segmented into discrete tasks that proceed along the “disassembly line.” (Adams, 1990; Schlosser, 2001) In fact, Henry Ford credited a visit to the Chicago slaughterhouses with lending inspiration to the assembly line at his factories.¹⁹ The conditions at Chicago slaughterhouses attained notoriety with the 1906 publication of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, which induced Congress to enact food safety legislation later that same year. The legislation was to protect the safety of the meat and not the workers, despite the findings of the federal investigators appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt to investigate the claims of *The Jungle*. The investigators confirmed the book’s accuracy and found that “Chicago’s meatpacking workers labored ‘under conditions that are entirely unnecessary and unpardonable, and which are a constant menace not only to their own health, but to the health of those who use the food products prepared by them.’” (Schlosser, 2001, citing Yeager, 1981) Despite years of labor struggles and exposés on the meat industry, conditions on the disassembly line are still “brutal, repetitive, low-paying and dangerous.” (Edsall, 2000: A6)²⁰

Because of the repetition and because of the danger of working with large, heavy and sometimes still kicking and fighting animals, injuries and accidents are common in meat production jobs.²¹ At Perdue chicken plants, workers “earn \$5.45 an hour cutting up to 75 chickens a minute or 40,800 in an 8-hour shift. Their repetitive motions along the processing lines leave virtually all the deboners with carpal tunnel syndrom or tenosynovitis, according to a 1985 survey.” (Sorrel, 1989: 5) John Morrell and Company meatpackers in South Dakota was recently the subject of an OSHA investigation that found over half of the employees with

¹⁹ Adams (1990: 52), citing Henry Ford’s (1922) *My Life and Work*. Also, she cites Robert B. Hinman and Robert B. Harris, writing for Swift & Co. meat producers, in *The Story of Meat* (1939).

²⁰ Exposés on the meat industry include Schlosser (2001), Eisnitz (1997), and Robbins (1987).

²¹ Eisnitz (1997), Krebs (2000) comment on the recent allegations against IBP that improper management of the “stunning” device used to kill or knock out animals at the first stage along the disassembly line has led to still-conscious animals proceeding to the skinning station. This puts the skimmers at risk of being kicked, as well as violating “humane-slaughter” laws.

symptoms of repetitive motion disorders, and a similar investigation at a Cargill plant in Georgia, “where some jobs require making the same forceful cuts tens of thousands of times a day,” found 31% of workers affected. (Goldoftas, 1991: 18) Such figures suggest the inherent consequences of the work necessary to cheaply “disassemble” live animals into meat products at a rapid pace on a large scale with a deskilled and poorly organized work force.

The poor organization of the work force is, as I have suggested above, in part due to the fragmentation of labor that defines strategies of wage and numerical flexibility. Bennett Harrison describes numerical flexibility as a strategy in which “jobs are redesigned so as to substitute part-time, contract, and other ‘contingent’ workers, who (at least in the United States) receive few or no benefits such as health insurance and pensions, for full-time employees who had been receiving more or less comprehensive fringe benefit coverage.” (1994: 129) In the meatpacking industry, the contingent workers are often racialized ‘Others,’ such as the sanitation crew who are frequently “independent contractors” brought in after regular operating hours to clean up the days work. Schlosser comments that “a large proportion of these workers are illegal immigrants ... They earn hourly wages that are about one-third lower than those of regular production employees. And their work is so hard and so horrendous that words seem inadequate to describe it.” (2001: 176) Accounts such as Gouveia and Stull’s (1997), and Fink’s (1998) confirm that the worst jobs tend to be held by the most vulnerable workers – most frequently Hispanic immigrants.

The segregation of jobs by race and by gender has persisted in the meat industry since the early 1900s. In a study of the sexual division of labor in American meatpacking industries from 1890 to 1990, Roger Horowitz found that “the pattern of women’s work in meatpacking emerged from a complex interaction between the objectives of male and female packinghouse workers,

production-floor supervisors, and the personnel departments of packing companies.” (1997: 187) More recent studies, such as Fink’s (1998) and Schlosser’s (2001) suggest that gendered roles continue to define both task segregation and power relationships in the meat industry. Both Fink and Schlosser found evidence of sexual harassment and the pressure for women workers to engage in sexual relationships with male superiors in order to gain “protection” on the job.²²

The atmosphere for women workers in meatpacking is inseparable from the position of the industry as a whole, for the gender relations in the plant are not reducible to workplace dynamics. Instead, men and women alike are agents and subjects within a complex web of relationships of production, consumption, and cultural meanings, occurring across multiple scales, that have shaped the meat industry and the experiences of workers. Accounts of conditions in meat processing plants are frequently particular and personal. Efforts to improve conditions often involve law suits or legislation focused on a particular factory or on a specific workplace issue, such as the documentation of illegal workers or the proper functioning of the stun gun. While these issues are important, especially because the work to unveil injustice often includes ethnographic accounts that takes seriously the particulars of people’s (and animal’s) lives, the politics of meat in American and global cultures and economies have roots so complex that these specific actions are insufficient. The following section examines the efforts by various groups to resist the injustices of the global corporate meat industry.

Identity construction and social justice

The aim of this section is to discuss what the changing gendered and racialized worker identities within global meatpacking mean for the possibilities for social justice within and

²² Schlosser (2001: 175-176) cites several lawsuits as well as personal observations, and Fink (1998:72-112) cites interview evidence and personal observations of multiple instances of harassment.

around the industry. This will include a review of how feminist and other scholars have reacted to industry conditions, as well as organizational strategies to improve conditions in meatpacking. I include an assessment of the reactions to the meat industry from various viewpoints, including environmentalist, labor activist and feminist perspectives. My goal is to pull together the various literatures on the meat industry and the oppression of workers within it in order to make suggestions for empowering or improving strategies. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to accomplish this goal, my work here will contribute by assessing how the current restructuring of the industry in the wake of globalization tendencies has contributed to shifts in the meanings of gendered and racialized worker identities.

Feminist Critiques

In what she terms a “feminist-vegetarian critical theory,” Carol Adams (1990) presents an analysis of “the sexual politics of meat.” Adams claims that “[t]he coherence it [meat] achieves as a meaningful item of food arises from patriarchal attitudes including ... that the objectification of other beings is a necessary part of life, and that violence can and should be masked. These are all a part of the sexual politics of meat.” (1990: 14) The power of Adams’ analysis is that it deconstructs the cultural patterns of consumption, patriarchy and Eurocentrism that are all linked within what she calls the “text” of meat. Following in the vein of ecofeminists, animal rights activists and vegetarian activists, Adams asserts that meat eating is a cultural and sociological construct, not a biological necessity.

On the relationship of meat and imperialism, Adams argues, “the hearty meat eating that characterizes the diet of Americans and of the Western world is not only a symbol of male power, it is an index of racism.” (1990: 29) She cites evidence of:

nineteenth century advocates of white superiority [who] endorsed meat as superior food. ‘Brain-workers’ required lean meat as their main meal, but the ‘savage’ and ‘lower’ classes of society could live exclusively on coarser foods, according to George Beard, a 19th century medical doctor who specialized in the diseases of middle-class power. (Adams, 1990: 30)

Adams’ arguments point to the fact that food – the control over its production and distribution – is a powerful societal commodity.²³ Adams also recognizes that regarding animals as a commodity is a factor of social and cultural construction. The naturalization of this fact obscures the processes that are necessary to produce meat from a live animal. She argues that “[t]he action of fragmentation, the killing, and the dividing is elided. Indeed, patriarchal culture surrounds actual butchering with silence. Geographically, slaughterhouses are cloistered. We do not see or hear what transpires there.” (Adams, 1990: 49) Work on the disassembly lines of slaughterhouses contributes to a double alienation, in that workers are alienated in the traditional Marxist sense from their labor, and at the same time are alienated from the particular tasks of killing and dismembering animals: “[t]hey must view the living animal as the meat that everyone outside the slaughterhouse accepts it as, while the animal is still alive. Thus they must be alienated from their own bodies and animals’ bodies as well.” (Adams, 1990: 53) The fact that frequently the most societally vulnerable people are the ones performing these tasks makes the injustice of the meat industry all the more stark.

There are other gender-critical attacks on the meat industry, including the work of Gouveia (1994) and Gouveia and Stull (1997), Fink (1998), Deslippe (1993), and Fehn (1998), that present historical analyses, perspectives from particularly racialized communities, and which are more concerned with the political economy perspectives that Adams largely omits.

²³ See also Castree and Braun (1998), Fitzsimmons and Goodman (1998) and Haraway (1990) on the construction of consumption. Similar arguments on the distribution of food, especially regarding women’s self-sacrifice of their own food needs, have been made in literature on food scarcity, development policies, and poverty.

The kind of discourse analysis and particularly positioned vegetarian critique that Adams presents provides a necessary supplement to this work. Meat production is inseparable from the systems of global capitalism in which it is embedded, but so too is it inseparable from the cultural demand that necessitates its existence. Adams' work shows that this cultural demand has consequences beyond the concerns of animal rights activists, whose views, though legitimate, are often marginalized from both popular and academic dialogue. This type of critique serves to provide convincing evidence for the necessity of a more unified opposition to the meat industry.

Union Activism

The relationships between unionism and meatpacking are both longstanding and varied. Meatpacking has traditionally been a highly unionized labor force, especially with the rise of the United Packinghouse Workers of America in the years immediately following World War II. (Page, 1998) However, the position of organized labor in the meat industry has declined significantly in the recent decades. This decline in unionization is due to moves to rural areas, particularly areas in states with union-discouraging right-to-work laws, as well as to the troubled relationships unions have had with the labor populations most significant during these decades of globalization: women and immigrants.

Signaling the wavering positions of unions with regard to immigrant labor, Anderson notes: “[i]ronically, it was the labor unions themselves that pressed Congress in the mid-1980s to enact sanctions against employers who hired immigrants who lacked authorization to be here. In its February [2000] statement, however, the AFL-CIO’s executive council proposed not only amnesty, but also an end to employer sanctions. It also called for legislation that would protect

immigrant workers from exploitative business practices.” (Anderson, 2000: 1) Commenting on the history of women’s ambiguous relationships in unions, Deslippe writes:

One male UPWA [United Packinghouse Workers of America] Local 46 member in Waterloo claimed that women ‘were a little more handy with their hands and dexterous,’ while UPWA president Ralph Helstein informed a group of women unionists in the 1950s that meatpacking companies were ‘hiring you because of your dexterity, the way you do the kind of work they put you to. You’re not doing heavy work.’ (1993: 13)

These comments suggest that if unions are to provide bargaining power and foster solidarity for workers against the multifaceted and expanding power of agro-industrial corporations, they must find ways to counter the stratification techniques of meatpacking companies and integrate workers. Roger Horowitz suggests that despite their troubled past, unions still hold great promise for improving the experiences of workers:

Turmoil in the meatpacking industry in the 1980s destroyed national contracts, reduced the strength of labor organizations in national firms and resulted in a 30 percent fall in real wages. This has measurably weakened the power of female packinghouse workers. Unions may have entrenched the sexual division of labor after World War II, but they also served as a vehicle through which women could eliminate glaring inequalities, improve the conditions under which they worked, and eventually erase the line between male and female jobs. (1997: 213)

The work of unions must, I argue, not only be more concerned with integrating diverse groups of employees, but also must work with other community groups in order to fully provide for the needs of workers in the current configurations of the global meat industry. The final section on activism examines the work of other groups interested in opposing the meat industry

Community Activism

Resistance to the global meat industry comes not only from labor groups and feminists, but also from environmentalists, immigrant communities, farmers, animal rights activists, and others. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine all of these groups in detail, but I do want to point to their existence as evidence for the potential of broad-based coalitions against corporate meat industries.

Alan Durning, of World Watch Institute (1991) notes the basis upon which many environmental critiques of factory farming and large scale meat production are founded: “Estimated inputs to produce a pound of: Pork: 6.9 pounds of grain, 0.44 gallons of gasoline, 430 gallons of water; Beef: 4.8 pounds of grain, 0.25 gallons of gasoline, 390 gallons of water.” (Factoryfarm.org, 2000) I located his comments on a website about factory farming that coordinates a variety of critiques on meat production from environmental, agricultural, and animal rights activists, among others. From the same site came the following comment from the USDA Economic Research department: “The farmer’s share of each food dollar has dropped steadily over the last 40 years, from 41 cents in 1950 to only 20 cents in 1999.” This quote indicates the impact of the increasing consolidation of the agro-industrial complex, and thus the foundation for solidarity between plant workers and farmers with interests in changing the system of meat production. Before discussing a particular example of a community-based group advocating for change in the meat industry, I want to mention one further example of the coalition of interests in resisting corporate meat; in this case the coalition is between IBP workers and animal rights activists. Remarking on the issue of improper maintenance of animal stunning equipment, A.B. Krebs (2000:1) of *The Agribusiness Examiner* reports: “[S]ixteen ... employees at IBP’s Wallula plant ... call for an immediate investigation and prosecution of IBP Inc. for what the workers allege are ‘ongoing, systematic violations of state anti-cruelty and

humane-slaughter laws,’ and for alleged violations of ‘basic public-health and worker-safety requirements.’” These quotes demonstrate the diversity of people whose lives are affected by the injustices of the meat industry, and thus indicate the basis for action towards social justice.

One example of a place-based and broadly organized group advocating for change in the meat industry is “Omaha Together One Community (OTOC) [whose] members include 36 congregations, as well as a range of other organizations.” (Center for Community Change, 1998) The group is “conducting a systematic house-meeting campaign to build community support around the plight of meatpackers. And, in an ingenious move, OTOC has recently affiliated the Nebraska Latin Soccer League – providing an institutional connection to hundreds of men who work inside the meatpacking plants.” (Center for Community Change, 1998) In cities like Omaha, as well as smaller towns like Lexington where Gouveia and Stull did their work, where union membership has always been low and where new groups of largely Hispanic migrants are moving in to work at packing plants, such coalitions may provide a useful supplement to unions, since they can take advantage of the social networks, often based in churches and strong community relationships, that are already in place.²⁴ I will provide further commentary on these groups and how they may contribute to issues of social justice in the conclusions that follow.

Conclusions

The conclusions of this paper will include my assessments about the current state of the meat packing industry as well as the work that I argue needs to continue in this field of study.

First, I will present a brief summary of the arguments of this paper.

²⁴ Grey (2000a, 2000b) and Stull (1990) also provide examples of the need for and possibilities of community-based organizing against the meat industry.

The US meatpacking industry is both characteristic of expanding, multinational corporations in the current phase of global capitalism and unique as a biologically-based and American cultural industry. The juxtaposition inherent in the international expansion of this industry, then, presents a complex study in the globalization of American culture and consumption patterns as well as the globalization of business practices, technology and finance. Though the globalization of meat has effects throughout the world, in this paper, I have focused on how the sites of the meat production industry in the United States have changed with globalization. At the industry level, these changes include strategies of consolidation and flexibilization designed to maintain profits in the wake of shifts in demands and in global competition.

The particular strategies of flexibilization have been specified to the character of an industry where profits are tied to biological processes, and have varied by individual corporations. However, across all companies, flexibilization strategies have included the extended fractionalization of labor by race and gender and an increasing reliance on low paid and poorly organized workers. The siting of plants in rural communities furthers the corporate pursuit of wage reduction and the fight against unionization, as well as shaping the experiences of meat industry workers. These industry conditions are integrated with the character of the work itself in the meatpacking industry, which has always been dangerous, brutal and difficult.

David Harvey suggests that in the wake of the targeted corporate strategies of wage and numerical flexibility, designed to limit worker power, a broad class-based organizing strategy is required. Harvey discusses a 1991 fire in Hamilton, North Carolina, that killed 25 people – including 18 women and 12 black workers – employed at a chicken processing plant that had not

been properly regulated because, Harvey argues, of a lack of attention to working-class issues.

He comments that:

the commonality that cuts across race and gender lines in this instance is quite obviously that of class and it is not hard to see the immediate implication that a simple, traditional form of class politics could have protected the interests of women and minorities as well as those of white males. (Harvey, 1996: 338)

The question is whether simple traditional class politics can overcome the shadow of historical unionism that excluded women and immigrant workers, and whether this form of class politics can include within its framework the kind of broad cultural criticism advocated by Adams.

Certainly, Harvey is right in asserting that what the marginalized workers have in common is an economic position that forces them to accept the jobs any one who has a choice will avoid. Class politics also have the potential to unite the interests of farmers and meatpackers against the capitalist arrogance of corporate meat industries, and thus to improve the conditions within the industry. But can class politics challenge the meaning of meat production culturally, as well as address the critiques of communities of environmentalists, animal rights activists and feminists?

I argue that a more thorough gender- and race-critical analysis is needed of how the meat industry contributes to workers' and more broad societal experiences, specifically in current phases of industry restructuring and international migration. This analysis needs an integration of the multiple disciplines that address issues of oppression and abuse in the meat industry. Social justice within the meat industry is related to numerous issues outside of the workplace. The operation of the industry and the experiences of workers cannot be understood outside of the cultural and symbolic history of the US meat industry, especially as this industry expands

globally. Effective strategies of resistance and mobilization must situate the meat industry within a multi-scaled and multi-faceted understanding – this realization necessitates significant future work on the politics of meat.

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Globalization is the word used to describe the growing interdependence of the world's economies, cultures, and populations, brought about by cross-border trade in goods and services, technology, and flows of investment, people, and information. Countries have built economic partnerships to facilitate these movements over many centuries. But the term gained popularity after the Cold War in the early 1990s, as these cooperative arrangements shaped modern everyday life. The history of globalization is driven by technology, transportation, and international cooperation. Since ancient times, humans have sought distant places to settle, produce, and exchange goods enabled by improvements in technology and transportation.

ILO/Discussion paper/Gender dimensions of globalization. 1. Any assessment of the benefits and costs of globalization would thus be insufficient if it does not differentiate the outcomes for female and male workers. A second, perhaps less obvious, reason is that failure to take into account gender-based differences in economic behaviour and labour market outcomes could lead to the formulation of ineffective and inefficient strategies. Women and men are differently, often unequally, positioned in the economy, perform different socially determined responsibilities, and face different constraints.

The US Agriculture Sector has become more and more efficient over the last century. During the past decade there have been many changes fueled by a more global economy, more goods are shipped around the world, including agriculture products. Globalization means policies in the United States that force our prices as low as possible by removing an effective commodity loan rate or reserve; these policies force the world price to levels that are unsustainable for farmers around the world. Globalization has altered the economic structure of both developed and developing countries in ways that are sometimes difficult to understand or even believe. Their report cites that, "Two companies, IBP and Cargill, dominate the beef packing sector with 74% of Canadian capacity. The anti-globalization mood is ascendant in the United States where its supporters assert the phenomenon has robbed Americans of their jobs and livelihoods, opened their borders to too many immigrants—a curious claim in a country made up almost entirely of immigrants and their descendants—and diluted America's culture and values. However, America may have lost sight of the many benefits that have accrued to the country and the whole world as a result of globalization. What may also surprise them is that the version of globalization seen today in America and around the world was made in the good.

Globalization Impacts: positive and negative impacts. As a result of globalization, the economic growth of both developing and developed countries is impacted positively and negatively. Here are some of the positive and negative effects of globalization. Positive effects of Globalization. It is not easier to discuss the extent of positive globalization in the world. Due to globalization, most global economy jobs are insecure and temporary. The impact is mostly felt in developed countries since they can outsource cheaper white collar and manufacturing jobs. For example, wages and manufacturing costs are lower in India and China, making countries like US and UK to outsource cheaper labor. The effect is people in developed countries losing or having fewer jobs. Related posts