Chapter 12

Exploring Flexitarianism: Meat Reduction in a Meat-Centred Food Culture

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ABSTRACT

Broad scholarly consensus exists nowadays that high meat consumption is particularly critical from an ecological perspective. Traditionally, technological progress and efficiency innovations in food supply processes are identified as key to solving food sustainability problems. However, it is increasingly recognised that technological innovation and efficiency gains alone are not enough to reduce the environmental impacts of growing meat production and consumption. Therefore, this chapter’s point of view is consumption-oriented. Are consumers part of the solution by making transitions towards more sustainable consumption patterns in general and less meat-centric diets specifically? This chapter explores flexitarianism as a present-day food style that consists of different forms or levels, ranging from minor adjustments to regular meat consumption patterns to fundamental departure from habitual meat eating practices.

Plenty of people are attempting to change their daily lives in ways that do reduce their consumption. (Klein, 2014, p. 90)

[A] diet higher in plant-based foods (...) and lower in (...) animal-based foods promotes personal health and is associated with less environmental impact. (USDA & USDHHS, 2015, p. 7)

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INTRODUCTION

As a result of several decades of scientific work, broad scholarly consensus exists nowadays that meat production and consumption account for a significant share of our ecological footprint (Smil, 2013; Steinfeld et al., 2006; Westhoek et al., 2011). One of the major causes of the “excessively high environmental cost of meat,” to use Vaclav Smil’s (2014, p. 67) words, is that the production of meat for human consumption requires a lot of plant material – and in turn, vast amounts of land, water and resources. In addition to arguments for the reduction of meat intakes centred around animal welfare or human health, the impact of meat production and consumption on environmental sustainability and climate change is addressed as a topic of attention and urgency. A wide scholarly consensus currently exists that reduction of meat in our diets is a significantly more sustainable option – both in terms of the environment and human health – than meat-rich diets (see van Dooren, Marinussen, Blonk, Aiking & Vellinga, 2014; Scarborough et al., 2014; Westhoek et al., 2014 for other recent studies). This state of the art is gradually making its way into the establishment: it has been put forward by the Health Council of the Netherlands (HCN) (2011), and, more recently, has reached the columns of Nature (Tilman & Clark, 2014) and is even subscribed to by the Scientific Advisory Committee of the 2015 U.S. Dietary Guidelines (USDA & USDHHS, 2015). Time will tell whether the latter report will become a comparable landmark study with respect to meat consumption in the way FAO’s Livestock’s Long Shadow (Steinfeld et al., 2006) previously was in relation to meat production.

Having said this, two conflicting tendencies demand attention. The first one is that low-meat or meatless diets are contrary to the worldwide dietary transition towards a higher intake of animal proteins (this includes, besides meat, dairy, eggs, and fish). This nutrition transition is a global phenomenon manifested since the 1950s. Between then and now meat consumption has doubled in many affluent and developing countries. Per capita meat consumption has increased significantly particularly over recent decades. The meat-rich diet is advancing not so much in high-income countries (which show frequently high but relatively constant levels of meat consumption since the 1990s) but especially in a number of Asian countries, such as China and Thailand. It is widely expected that other Asian countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines will follow this meat consumption pattern in the coming years, due to a growing number of people in the middle classes who can afford to purchase and eat meat for functional (nutritional), sensory (taste) and symbolic (status) reasons. Overall, the global trend of rising meat consumption is fuelled by the combination of increasing global population and growing prosperity in many developing countries (Henchion, McCarthy, Resconi & Troy, 2014; Smil, 2014). Put differently, the forecasted future of meat consumption is based on increasing meat production and growing meat demand. Flexitarianism, the topic of this chapter, opposes this future because it is about eating less (frequently) meat.

The second trend concerns the problem-solving capacity of technological progress and efficiency innovations in the food supply processes. Despite deeply-ingrained expectations of technology to solve food sustainability problems, the premise here is that technological improvements in productivity processes cannot keep pace and are not enough to reduce the environmental impacts of growing meat production and consumption. The market for meat is, as every market, an interplay of both supply and demand. If only because of this it is important to pay attention to consumption. We live in a consumer society in which consumption is vital to people’s identities as well as to nations’ economies. It is unjust and unwise however to present consumption simply and solely as the cause of sustainability problems without considering its potential role in solving these challenges. Fortunately, it is increasingly recognised that