

## The irrelevance of animals

*How the path of intensification leads inexorably to laboratory meat*

Pedro M. Herrera

**S**o-called "laboratory meat" is simultaneously generating great expectations and concerns. The huge investment and research efforts of economically powerful private initiatives have uncovered an important economic niche waiting to be exploited. The promoters of the market for laboratory meat or meat derived from vegetable products have seen in their ethical and ecological foundations the great lever that will mobilise consumers on a massive scale towards their products. The [growth in supply and speculation](#) around these products responds, among other factors, to two very different pressures: on the one hand, [the climatic behaviour of meat production](#). On the other hand, the growing pressure from animal and vegan groups on the living and dying conditions of the animals that are raised for their consumption.



Photo by [Eric Herni](#) on [Unsplash](#)

This situation has set off alarm bells in the sectors linked to the meat industry and animal production. Agricultural organisations, interprofessional organisations and many livestock farmers are very concerned about an emerging reality that is putting pressure on the current model of production and distribution of animal products and generating additional uncertainty about its future. And this concern is well-founded because, in the medium term, it could have an enormous impact on the global food system.

The paradox of this scenario is that the leap to laboratory meat is the latest step in the process of technologisation, industrialisation and intensification, of which the same production, market and political structures that now see it

as a threat have been part. In this sense, replacing animals with laboratory processes is a further step along the same lines and is being driven by the same impulses, which are still underpinning the industrialisation of animal production.

The process of technologisation and industrialisation, the focus on productivity as the sole objective, and the predominance of technological solutions that require large investments due to the inadequate orientation of the advisory options available to livestock farmers are all factors that have pushed animal production down the path of intensification at all costs. Nor is the concept of yield used to value this type of production any stranger to this drift. In reality, if we consider that the basic magnitude for measuring animal productivity is the kilograms of feed needed to produce a kilo of meat or a litre of milk, the domestic animal becomes a mere transitional instrument.

The battle for yield, which seems to be the main strategy to address the whole issue of livestock products and their environmental impact, has major limitations, mainly because it depends on the rhythms and biological activity of the animal, its growth, development, maturity, relationships... and all this consumes energy that is not used to produce meat or milk, and is therefore superfluous in the whole industrial production process. It is still common to present domestic animals as meat-producing machines. Logically, under this premise, the next step is to replace the animal with an automated device that does not need any of that and can invest all the energy received in generating the product. It was only a matter of time, research and investment before someone came up with a laboratory meat production process that would make animals irrelevant.

There are several key strategies in livestock production where performance has been used as the primary objective. The first relates to animal welfare, a concern shared by all concerned, from animal welfare advocates to technicians and farmers. There are many ways of measuring animal welfare, although they can be explained under

*Moving with other animals of their species consumes energy, does not generate a product, and is, therefore, contradictory to the path of maximum profitability.*

one of the main umbrella concepts used by the central authorities and institutions worldwide: domestic animals should enjoy a life worth living. This concept, in turn, encompasses other parameters used [to measure animal welfare](#), including freedom from hunger, malnutrition, suffering, discomfort,

distress and freedom to move and express their species' behavioural patterns and conduct.

It seems clear that the process of industrialisation has been concerned only with the freedoms compatible with higher performance (hunger, malnutrition and health) but is incompatible with the other freedoms. Moving or communicating with other animals of their species consumes energy, does not generate a product, and is, therefore, contradictory to the path of maximum profitability. Industrial animal husbandry has not been able to cope with this situation and has continued to grow on the basis of situations that are progressively detrimental to animal welfare and dignity. This situation has led to enormous public controversy where. For example, images of the facilities where animals are bred, transported and slaughtered have circulated the world, generating real collective nightmares. The industry's greed and lack of sensitivity have thus provided an excellent breeding ground for animalistic sensitivities, which have openly confronted animal production as a whole without the need for a deeper analysis of the role of animals in development and food.

The second has to do with environmental behaviour. Livestock production has been called into question for its role in climate change, an assessment that targets the whole of livestock production without distinguishing between different production systems. [Methane emissions](#) during the digestive process of ruminants constitute

approximately 5% of the greenhouse gases emitted into the atmosphere by human activities, and reduction targets and strategies have been proposed, which, so far, have fallen short of expectations.

The main tactics to tackle the emissions problem are also based on production performance. Various feed additives are being tested, which have to be provided along with the feed or fodder offered to the animals in the barn, which, logically, are of much less use if the animals are outdoors. The other line of action aims to reduce emissions by increasing yields. This strategy involves using more concentrated feeds, reducing fibre in the diet or shortening rearing periods (if the animals are alive for less time, they will logically emit less gas). This strategy has achieved some positive results, reducing emissions per kilo of product by a certain percentage. However, there is a ceiling to the improvement that can be achieved by increasing yields if other vital factors, such as demand, remain unchanged. Again, the reductionist and industrial view of the concept of yield and productivity that has been applied to livestock farming in recent years leads inexorably to a hyper-industrialised and hyper-technologised scenario in which domestic animals are a weakness, for example, when calculating the energy consumption of the nervous and sensory system of any vertebrate animal over its lifetime, which is not invested in muscle or milk. The way is thus open to the hegemony of large international producers who do not rely on live individuals for their production (neither domestic animals nor, of course, their caretakers).

The combination of a globalised and delocalised meat industry and a social scene that is increasingly urban and disconnected from the natural environment is inexorably leading to the abandonment of livestock farming and its replacement by ultra-processed foods from laboratories and factories. The consequences on our diet, our food sovereignty and the rural economy can be very negative, but, above all, this process highlights the total irrelevance of the people involved in livestock farming and of the landscapes in which they evolved in a scenario that not only poses a long-term threat to domestic animals but also to many of the territories that depend on them.

Nonetheless, there are alternatives and different production models, based on the resources offered by the territories themselves, which provide a very different perspective from the environmental and animal welfare aspects discussed here. But first, it is important to regenerate the concept of performance or productivity, to

*While grazing animals are alive, they not only produce food, but also generate numerous services necessary for society as a whole.*

abandon the reductionist view that has so far been applied in animal production and to opt for measures of performance that are multifunctional, flexible and open, more coherent with the role of domestic animals and

humans in the landscapes we inhabit. It is not a question of renouncing technology and innovation. Quite the contrary, because modern pastoralism demands ever more knowledge, more sophisticated tools and a careful blend of ancestral knowledge and scientific research that brings us closer to our own nature. But shepherding is also an activity deeply rooted in the evolution of modern societies, a sculptor of landscapes and bearer of humanity's mark on the territory. While grazing animals are alive, they not only produce food, but also generate numerous services necessary for society as a whole. Under these conditions, its performance is not diminished by being alive, moving or having a satisfactory relationship with its fellows; it simply fails to monetise it. In a different sense, it is much more efficient than animals in factories, because it transforms plant matter that cannot be assimilated by people directly into the environment, instead of concentrated foodstuffs of high nutritional value. And it uses minimal external resources: everything it needs is provided by the soil itself. It also contributes to maintaining biodiversity, sustainably managing some of the world's most interesting landscapes, preventing fires and preserving an ancient culture. It is the only possible source of food for communities living in the most inhospitable areas of the world, in deserts and arid zones, and contributes to the survival, nutrition and

development of some of the most impoverished populations. And all this with a deep respect for the lives of its animals. Because you can respect the welfare and quality of life even by scheduling their death; because cows, sheep, pigs and goats would not exist without shepherds, nor do they have a future without them. And we want them with us because we are responsible for their future. Domestication is a contract between several species, one of which is us. And in exchange for our exploitation, we must offer them, at the very least, a life worth living. And a future as a species linked to our own. Even if there are times that do not invite optimism on either side. Intensification leads to increasingly heartless production, and its foreseeable final destination, animal-free animal products, does not reduce the cruelty of the whole process either, but only brings it forward and extends it to the people who have raised them so that we as a society are well fed.

*Domestication is a contract between several species, one of which is us.*

---

### Related links:

- The Jus Semper Global Alliance
  - Nubia Barrera Silva: [Spiral of contradictions between financialised capitalism and rural smallholdings in South and Mesoamerica](#)
  - João Pedro Stedile: [We Only Have One Planet—Defending It Will Require Collective Measures](#)
  - Elizabeth Kolbert – Olaf Bruns: [“No Good Choices Left”: Our Dilemma Under a White Sky](#)
  - Gustavo Duch: [Time of Insurrection](#)
  - Gustavo Duch: [Vegan Capitalism: food multinationals and Blackrock](#)
-



❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.

❖ **About the author: Pedro M. Herrera** is a biologist, specialist in territorial planning, researcher, part of the Fundación Entretantos and advisor to the FAO.



❖ **About this Brief:** "The irrelevance of animals" was originally published in Spanish by CTXT in January 2023. This paper has been published under Creative Commons, CC-BY-NC 4.0. You are welcome to reproduce the material for non-commercial use, crediting the author and the original publisher.

❖ **Quote this paper as:** Pedro M. Herrera: "The irrelevance of animals" — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, July 2023.

❖ **Tags:** capitalism, democracy, ecology, laboratory meat, animal husbandry, domestication, animal welfare.

❖ The responsibility for opinions expressed in this work rests only with the author(s), and its publication does not necessarily constitute an endorsement by The Jus Semper Global Alliance.



Under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

© 2023. The Jus Semper Global Alliance  
Portal on the net: <https://www.jussemper.org/>  
e-mail: [informa@jussemper.org](mailto:informa@jussemper.org)