

The Negotiation of Vegetarianism as a Remedy for an American Sociocultural Schizophrenia in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals*

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Abstract: Reading Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals* with a particular emphasis on the narrative dimension and rhetoric of the text, this article analyzes how Foer's book employs the issue of vegetarianism to reveal and remedy a perceived condition of 'American sociocultural schizophrenia' in the context of modern-day factory farming. In particular, it pays attention to the psychological mechanisms involved in the process of meat consumption. The paper makes visible how *Eating Animals* employs the narrator's story of achieving a sense of mental wholeness and unity through vegetarianism as a template for the larger state of disconnectedness and alienation with respect to American society and culture. Additionally, it is demonstrated how Foer's text taps into the rhetoric of the American jeremiad in its discussion of vegetarianism in the face of modern-day factory farming to offer this diet as a potential and practical remedy for a perceived state of 'American sociocultural schizophrenia.' In doing so, the article aims to point to the implications of the entailed invocation of American values and identity in the global context of shifting and changing relations of power and identity.

Whoever strolls around the city of London these days is likely to stumble over highly disquieting sights: Whether it is a pig or a cow staring at passersby from behind bars or the toes of chicken sticking out from ventilation grills—in more than thirty places around the city these and similar images or objects provoke more than just puzzled looks. Having been installed by the street artist Dan Witz in cooperation with the animal rights organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), these pieces represent the recently launched art project “Empty the Cages.” The aim of this project, according to its website, is not

only “to bring these animals out from the shadows – and remind us of what happens every day on farms and in slaughterhouses” but also to “[remind] us that their fate is in our hands and that we have the power to save them by choosing not to consume their flesh” (“Empty the Cages”). This double aim underscores ethically motivated vegetarianism: Though often being reduced to an argument for animal rights or welfare, the decision of not eating meat for moral reasons is by no means detached from the issues of human physical and mental health. On the contrary, this choice is just as central to the question of human mental well-being as to the pressing and urgent quandary of how one is to align one’s daily performance of identity with the established ideals and responsibilities concerning this performed self.

In the American context, the same twofold significance of ethically motivated vegetarianism can be seen in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Eating Animals*.¹ The story of the meat-eating but conscience-ridden narrator, who goes on a three-year-long mission to learn about the production of factory-farmed meat and ends up as a strict vegetarian, has primarily been read as a highly evocative, yet nonfictional muckraking of the gruesome reality behind the price tag of factory-farmed meat in the US.² In other words, the text is still perceived as a comparably clear-cut environmentalist argument for eschewing meat in the service of either animal rights and welfare or human physical health. The subject of mental health, however, has been ignored to a great extent thus far. This article suggests a reading of the text as a narrative—however, nonfictional—work to analyze the text’s rhetoric and poetics that go beyond the question of material and tangible welfare of human and nonhuman animals as an argument for vegetarianism. In particular, *Eating Animals* shall be examined with respect to the still largely overlooked interconnection between a vegetarian diet and the issue of mental health, and, by extension, the notion of identity in the context of a perceived ‘American sociocultural schizophrenia.’³ Further, the interrelation of these

1 Following the distinction between health and ethical concerns as possible motifs for vegetarianism as proposed by Donna Maurer (“Vegetarianism” 488) and applied in psychological research (Fox and Ward 2585; Jabs, Devine, and Sobal), the ensuing discussion of Foer’s text will be restricted to vegetarianism as grounded in ethical and moral concerns. For a more detailed discussion of the different motivations and reasons for adopting a vegetarian diet see Fox 54-64.

2 See for example the reviews by Michiko Kakutani, Peter Singer, and Joe Yonan. Each of these writers is mainly concerned with the nonfictional quality of the book and focuses on the physical effects of factory farming on human and animal health.

3 In this article, the term ‘schizophrenia’ does not refer to the clinical description of schizophrenic disorders. Instead, I use the word ‘schizophrenia’ in its more general and figurative application, which denotes a conflict of mutually contradictory or inconsistent elements (“Schizophrenia,” “schizophrenic”). In the larger context of American society and culture, the term schizophrenia is particularly used to refer to the dominant narrative framed by the contemporary food movement, which attests to a general national mental disorder based on current modes of food production and consumption in the US. The term ‘sociocultural schizophrenia’ is hence used to refer to this notion of a food-related disorder based on a fundamental conflict that pervades

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themes will be discussed with respect to two different levels that are nevertheless connected through the issue of vegetarianism in *Eating Animals*: The first one being the personal-individual level of the narrator and the second one being the level of American society and culture.

To this end, the ensuing discussion of Foer's *Eating Animals* will begin with an outline of the mental and cultural processes involved in meat eating and the adoption of a vegetarian diet, focusing particularly on Carol J. Adams's concept of the "absent referent" (*Politics* 51). Using these mechanisms, I will then analyze how the narrator's personal adoption of a strict vegetarian diet is presented as a means of psychological well-being. The remaining part of this article will be concerned with demonstrating how *Eating Animals* links the individual story of the narrator's attainment of mental health through vegetarianism with the sphere of American society and culture at large. It will be shown that the text achieves this by presenting the contemporary methods of meat production as being opposed and inimical to American values and traditions, and by tapping into the rhetoric of the American jeremiad in its discussion of vegetarianism against this background. As a result, the text proposes a meatless diet as a potential remedy for the malaise of both the individual and American culture and society.

Overall, this paper argues that Foer's *Eating Animals* represents not only the narrator's individual story as an example of adopting vegetarianism to attain a state of mental coherence but also uses this personal story as a model to present vegetarianism as a remedy for the lamented predicament of a larger 'American sociocultural schizophrenia.'

EATING MEAT

It does not come as a surprise that the various interrelations between identity, health, and one's adherence to a vegetarian diet have frequently been objects of investigation in cultural studies and psychology. After all, both as a quotidian and literally embodied practice, eating in general plays a major role in constructing and maintaining the self—physically, psychologically, culturally, and sociologically. For example, in their article "You Are What You Eat? Vegetarianism, Health and Identity," Nick Fox and Katie J. Ward analyze the various ways in which vegetarianism as "not only a cognitive or expressive response to food, but [...] also an embodied practice [...] can act as a cue to identity" (2586). Although focusing mainly on vegetarianism motivated by concerns of

American culture and society.

physical health and the related 'health identities,' their article also comments on how adopting a vegetarian diet for ethical reasons can function as a means of self-construction by effecting a sense of mental unity (2586). As the following discussion of vegetarianism in the context of Leon Festinger's theory of "cognitive dissonance" (2) and Carol J. Adams's notion of the "absent referent" (*Politics* 51) will show, this particular diet may serve as a vehicle for mental unity or wholeness in several ways.

To begin with, the decision to adhere to vegetarianism can be employed to remove "cognitive dissonance." This mental conflict, Festinger argues, results from the "existence of nonfitting relations among cognitions" (3). In this context, cognition does not only refer to factual knowledge tied to reason but also to "opinion, or belief about the environment, about oneself, or about one's behavior" (3), and thus may also include embodied practices such as eating. Consequently, the knowledge and awareness of one's physical action of eating meat might be at odds with the opinion of oneself as being humane and compassionate. As Jennifer Jabs, Carol M. Devine, and Jeffery Sobal point out in their article "Model of the Process of Adopting Vegetarian Diets: Health Vegetarians and Ethical Vegetarians," "when respondents [future ethical vegetarians] realized that their behavior of eating animal-derived food was against their values of compassion, nonviolence, and ecological preservation," this "awareness led to internal dissonance" (200).

Since any such cognitive conflict brings about "psychological discomfort," the individuals trying to remedy this state are presented with two options (Festinger 3). The first one is to achieve consonance by adapting their behavior to support personal beliefs and values. In the case of the conflicted carnivore described above, this alternative often means adopting a meatless diet. As a result of this adoption, the meat-eating self can overcome the internal conflict. Moreover, the decision to adhere to a vegetarian diet can equally serve as a vehicle for establishing a sense of mental wholeness in terms of continuity, especially in the context of changing circumstances of life.

As Jabs, Devine, and Sobal state, "for many ethical vegetarians, the adoption of a vegetarian diet occurred concurrently with other significant life transitions [...] [and was] a way for them to take control of their life when things seemed beyond their control during these transitional periods" (199). Also, adhering to this diet can be a way to overcome the schizophrenia and sense of fragmentation that are involved in the mental and cultural process of the "absent referent" as proposed by Adams. This process may be seen as based on what Festinger calls the second option of "avoid[ing] situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance" (3).

However, when it comes to meat eating, the avoidance which enables humans to "disregard the fact that animals are slaughtered for meat when this information

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contradicts their perception of themselves” results in an even greater conflict (Iacobbo and Iacobbo 133). According to Adams, this denial entails a mental and cultural state of schizophrenic alienation which she refers to as the “absent referent.” She argues that in order for meat to exist and be consumed, the living animal as the referent of that meat needs to be removed: Literally, it has to be slaughtered to be eaten; symbolically, the animal and the knowledge of its death need to be rendered invisible to “keep our ‘meat’ separated from any idea that she or he was once an animal, to keep something from being seen as having been someone” (*Politics* 51); linguistically, the word *meat* itself conceals the truth of the animal’s death (*Politics* 74). In Adams’s words, “[b]ehind every meat meal is an absence, the death of the animal whose place the meat takes” (*Politics* 74). This process of rendering the animal’s body invisible and absent, she goes on to say, results in a state of fragmentation because it “separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product” (qtd. in Iacobbo and Iacobbo 133).

As meat itself becomes a “free-floating image” without any point of reference in this process, omnivores are alienated not only from the animal—and vice versa—but also from the food they consume (Adams, *Politics* 59). Consequently, if understood through the concept of the absent referent, meat consumption can be considered as a practice that involves the negated conflict of cognitive dissonance within the self, and an alienation of the self from both the meat that is being consumed and the referent of that meat.

In this context, vegetarianism can function as an effective remedy for this state of conflict and fragmentation. On the one hand, the decision of an individual to eschew meat serves to highlight ethical concern about the animal itself, thereby retrieving what is made absent by the meat meal (Adams, *Politics* 74). As a result, the individual’s decisions and actions make visible again the cognitive dissonance involved in the process of eating animals. Even though this may lead to further avoidance by turning vegetarians themselves into an absent referent (Adams, *Politics* 86-88), it also enables a reconstruction of the symbolic relations among the referent of the meat, the meat eater, and the meat as such. Moreover, the individual decision to adhere to vegetarianism for ethical reasons is, as Maurer points out, likely to induce other individuals to turn to this diet in order to attain cognitive consonance on their part (*Movement* 6). On the other hand, this act of eschewing meat serves to terminate the state of disconnectedness on a larger social scale, although this might seem counterintuitive at first.

Given the fact that vegetarianism is based on the rejection of food, it may be seen as negating what Massimo Montanari describes as the “collective identity at the table” (94). Yet, even this rejection does not weaken the fact that, as Roland Barthes states,

“we have communication by way of food,” and hence social interaction (25) because the vegetarian who rejects the meat at the dinner table still refers to the same signifier within the system of representation, even if this signifier is preceded by a rejection (Montanari 100). In other words, both practices of eating and not eating meat function as communication and thus—like language or any other structured system of representation—locate the individual within a web of social, cultural, and historical relations.

Moreover, the rejection of a certain product within the system of food-related representation does not preclude but rather require a shared set of values in a given group (Montanari 100). As Montanari points out with reference to the eschewal of meat in monasteries during the Middle Ages, “the apparent separation from shared values in fact brought these values back” (100). The same paradox of symbolically affirming shared values through their apparent rejection is also visible in the conceptualization of human identity in Western culture. In fact, eschewing meat may seem to put the individual at odds with society and culture as it negates the schema of the subject as being a virile eater of animal flesh. As both Derrida and Adams argue—albeit in their own terms and independently⁴—Western patriarchal culture not only associates the consumption of meat with “individual and societal virility” and power but also connects the construction of subjectivity as such to the consumption of meat (Adams, *Politics* 36).⁵ As Derrida points out, “[i]n our cultures, he [the male subject] accepts sacrifice and eats flesh,” that is, the notion of the subject implies and preconditions the activity of eating meat (113). It is this overall “dominant schema of subjectivity” in Western culture that Derrida terms “carno-phallogocentrism” (114), whereas Adams employs the phrase “the sexual politics of meat” to refer to the same notion (*Politics* 36).⁶

4 As Matthew Calarco points out regarding the connection between Adams’ “sexual politics of meat” and Derrida’s notion of “carno-phallogocentrism,” “the most obvious linkage [...] concerns the way in which being a meat eater is understood [...] as central to being a subject. Both [...] [theories] call explicit attention to the carnivorousness that lies at the heart of classical notions of subjectivity, especially male subjectivity” (qtd. in Adams, *Preface* 6).

5 In her preface to the twentieth anniversary edition of *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Adams defines “the sexual politics of meat” as both “an attitude and action that animalizes women and sexualizes and feminizes animals” and the “assumption that men need meat, have the right to meat, and that meat eating is a male activity associated with virility” (4).

6 It is important to note that—despite their similarities in interpreting the paradigm of either “carno-phallogocentrism” or “the sexual politics of meat”—Derrida and Adams use different approaches regarding the question of eating or not eating meat. For Derrida, the consumption of meat is not restricted to the physical act of consumption but also includes symbolic eating (114). Hence, according to Derrida, vegetarianism does not necessarily deconstruct this understanding of subjectivity, as “[v]egetarians, too, partake of animals, even of men” (114). Adams, however, perceives vegetarianism as a central means of activism in this context (*Preface* 7). For a more detailed analysis of the connection between vegetarianism, human subjectivity, and

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To eschew meat and to challenge the dominant paradigm of subjectivity in Western culture can thus be seen as “a subversive political act” (Fox 30). Yet, in the context of Derrida’s “carno-phallogocentrism” or Adams’ “sexual politics of meat,” the ethically motivated rejection of animal flesh and the entailed negation of human identity can equally be interpreted as an affirmation thereof. If the consumption of meat and the schema of human subjectivity and culture resting on it is seen as violent, war-like, oppressive, and disconnected as argued by Adams (*Preface* 2, 7) and Foer (37, 244), then the adherence to a meatless diet can indeed be understood as the confirmation of a human identity built on equality, freedom, compassion, consonance, and reintegration (Adams, *Preface* 7; Foer 258-59, 263, 267). Thus, in the context of Derrida’s and Adams’s concepts, the act of denying meat may also be understood as a means of reaffirming and integrating a notion of human identity, society, and culture that entails harmony instead of schizophrenic conflict and disconnection.

On a more practical level, vegetarianism is also a vehicle for establishing group identities by generating a strong sense of belonging and identification, as can be seen in the common practice of people who do not adhere to a strictly vegetarian diet to still identify themselves as ‘vegetarian’ (Fox and Ward 2586). Additionally, as Maurer points out, adopting a vegetarian diet is most often “a gradual process that involves [...] social interaction [...] [which can,] in turn, lead to social activism,” and hence an involvement with and in society (*Movement* 4-5).

Overall, the decision to refrain from consuming meat can thus be employed to attain mental wholeness since it reconciles the individual’s cognitive dissonance, serves to ensure a sense of personal continuity, and terminates the state of psychological, cultural, and social disconnectedness and alienation caused by the absent referent.

NOT EATING MEAT AND THE NARRATOR’S INTEGRATION

In Foer’s text, vegetarianism is negotiated as a vehicle for mental wholeness with respect to the narrator on different textual levels. Within the diegesis the depiction of the narrator’s checkered history concerning ethically motivated vegetarianism exemplifies the variety of ways through which adhering to a meatless diet may induce a state of psychological wholeness. As a result, the decision to eschew meat ends the narrator’s cognitive dissonance. Also, vegetarianism removes his individual sense of alienation and schizophrenia because the retrieval of the hitherto absent referent

deconstruction see Matthew Calarco’s article “Deconstruction is not vegetarianism: Humanism, subjectivity, and animal ethics.”

enables the reconstruction of the relations among animal, food, and the narrator himself.

A scene that visualizes the interplay of these mechanisms particularly well is the narrator's depiction of what Paul R. Amato and Sonia A. Partridge call a "meat insight experience" (71). This incident not only ends the pristine state in which the narrator felt that "[e]ating was carefree" (Foer 4) but also leads to his first—unsuccessful—attempt at adhering to a meatless diet. When his vegetarian baby-sitter eschews meat at the dinner table with the plain and somewhat tautological statement that "chicken is chicken" (6), the nine-year old narrator is made aware of the absent referent of the animal's death that, for him, had been hitherto concealed by the meat meal. Consequently, he and his brother, their "mouths full of hurt chickens," experience "simultaneous *how-in-the-world-could-I-never-thought-of-that-before-and-why-on-earth-didn't-some-one-tell-me?* [sic] moments" (6).

In what follows, the narrator ruminates on the personal implications of this new awareness. Based on his responsibility and inclusion of animals into the realm of human ethics, he now perceives the practice of meat eating as murder and thus being in blatant conflict with the commandment of not hurting—let alone killing—anyone, which he was taught by his parents (6). As a logical consequence of this reasoning, the narrator does not finish his meal and vows himself to a henceforth meatless diet (6).

For one, this scene is an example of how vegetarianism can effectively make visible the absent referent, thereby reconnecting the animal, the meat eater, and the food, and also foregrounding the cognitive dissonance underlying the consumption of meat. In addition, the decision to eschew animal meat in this context reconciles the narrator's mental conflict between the knowledge of his actions and the beliefs which he was taught by his family.

Likewise, the narrator's final adoption of vegetarianism after years of willful forgetfulness and "conscientious inconsistency" (7, 9) with respect to the practice of meat eating again serves as a remedy both for the schizophrenia resulting from the state of "knowingly, so deliberately, forgetting" about the animal as the absent referent of meat, and for the narrator's contrasting insights in terms of consistency as well as personal cohesiveness (198). When being faced with the new responsibilities of raising a child according to the values and traditions of his family (11), the narrator is again forced to confront the absent referent of, and hence the conflict inherent to the meat meal. Against the overall backdrop of the narrator's involvement with the issue of vegetarianism, this awareness and the concomitant psychological discomfort of cognitive dissonance is the "immediate impetus," yet not the reason, for the narrator's endeavor to write a book about eating animals and about the question "what meat is" (5-6, 12).

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As might be expected, the ensuing research and its gruesome findings about factory-farmed meat is concluded by the narrator's decision to adhere to vegetarianism, which brings about a sense of relief and a "newly found peace" (198).⁷ This peace results from the state of both cognitive consonance and the removal of fragmentation that the mechanism of the absent referent entails. As stated by the narratorial voice, "what we forget about animals we begin to forget about ourselves"—a forgetfulness which brings about a "war not only between us and them but between us and us" (37). For the narrator as an individual it is this state of war and schizophrenia that is terminated by the adherence to a meatless diet. Moreover, the narratorial I is equally able to acquire mental wholeness in the sense of personal continuity by adhering to vegetarianism. As has been shown by Jabs, Devine, and Sobal, the involvement with and ensuing adherence to a meatless diet can be seen as a vehicle for negotiating fundamental life changes by constructing linearity and continuity, in this case with respect to the narrator as a new father (199).

Additionally, these mechanisms of reintegration and unification in connection to the narrator are further mirrored in the negotiation of vegetarianism on the structural level of the text. By forming the overarching theme of *Eating Animals*, the discussion and practice of this diet fulfills two functions in this respect. On the one hand, the theme of eschewing meat is employed to generate the image of a united narrator because it links his younger persona, the "grandmother's grandson," with the older narrating I, who is now a father himself (Foer 267). On the other hand, vegetarianism also ends a state of symbolic alienation and fragmentation of meaning by constructing a new frame for the free-floating images that lost their point of reference for the narrator. As pointed out in the text, meaning is not created by the facts themselves, but only within the coherent structure of a story (14). This mechanism is particularly visible in the chapter "Words/Meaning" (43-77). At first glance resembling an alphabetical list of unrelated words and labels that, as the entry on "KFC" shows, are now "signifying nothing" (66), this subsection of *Eating Animals* is structured and framed as a story by the overarching theme of the narrator's involvement with vegetarianism. Hence, what enables the narrator to attach any meaning to these words is his involvement with and adherence to a meatless diet.

7 Even though the narrator initially only argues against factory-farmed meat, his final decision to eschew meat altogether is eventually motivated by the urge to avoid both any involvement with the factory-farming industry and any suffering on part of the slaughtered animal (Foer 241, 243-44). In this sense, even farming methods that adhere to the strictest animal welfare standards are perceived as a compromise by the narrator, whereas vegetarianism is seen as the only way to be consistent and make a "fair deal"—both for the animal and for his personal sense of mental wholeness (244).

In addition to these ways of generating a sense of psychological wholeness within the self, vegetarianism also becomes a vehicle for removing the narrator's more general disconnectedness on the level of both human and nonhuman society. Generally, the issue of not eating animals relates the vegetarian narrator to other human beings and positions him in society at large by bearing signifying value within the system of food-related representation. As stated in *Eating Animals*, "you don't eat alone. We eat as sons and daughters, as families, as communities" (261). With respect to familial relations, this notion is evident in the dinner scene described above. By rejecting to support or enact the hurting and killing of the chicken, the narrator consciously identifies with and performs the values mediated by his parents. Hence, despite the fact that the narrator rejects the commonality of sharing the chicken with his brother (6), his act of eschewing the meat dish is also depicted as claiming a common identity with his family by adhering to a set of shared beliefs and values.

Moreover, the adoption of a vegetarian diet connects the narrator to society in an even larger context because this dietary decision pertains both to the personal as well as to the public and political spheres. For one, the inherently political implications of vegetarianism are visible in the textual negotiation of the narrator's three-year-long research project. As the narrator points out, this quest becomes increasingly socially and communally oriented and relates him to other individuals (12). This process, secondly, is mirrored in the overall structure of the text. Instead of being presented as the story of one individual narrator, *Eating Animals* includes different voices,⁸ all of which are concerned in some way with the subject of Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO) and the entailing question of vegetarianism.

Thus, vegetarianism is being negotiated as inherently more than just personal in Foer's text, since the practice of this diet itself necessitates social interaction on a larger scale. For example, vegetarianism is repeatedly associated with the act of storytelling (14, 224). Of course, this practice is inherently bound to the notion of sociality because it involves at least two individuals, namely narrator and narratee, or, as in the case of *Eating Animals*, the connection to a possibly much larger readership. In addition, the practice of eschewing meat can also be seen as forging the link between the narrator and the narratee in Foer's text in the first place. To begin with, the narrator's long-standing engagement with issues concerning the practice of a vegetarian diet is the underlying reason for the quest-like attempt to do research on the referent of the meat meal (5-6, 12). Furthermore, it is also the inherently public and political dimension of his vegetarianism that induces the narrating I to turn his initially

8 These include, for instance, "The Kind of Person Who Finds Herself on a Stranger's Farm in the Middle of the Night" (90), a factory farmer (94), "the Last Poultry Farmer" (110), a vegetarian rancher (205), or "a Vegan who Builds Slaughterhouses" (238).

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personal story into a book: Although the narrator asserts that his decision to not eat animals in response to his findings regarding factory farming is a strictly personal matter (198), he also states that “we need to do more than just change our diets; we need to ask others to join us” (221).

By reaffirming the narrator's human identity as such, vegetarianism is equally negotiated as a vehicle to reintegrate the narrating I into a universal, i.e., human and nonhuman, society. Since the narrator himself defines humanity as the only species that may choose not to eat something for reasons of conscience (63), his own ability to eschew meat in the face of the factory farm enables the narrating I to negotiate his position within this greater, universal community by claiming a distinctly human identity based on responsibility and compassion (263, 267). By thus establishing and enabling the sum of these diverse and not only social and interpersonal connections, the issue of a meatless diet serves to further remedy the narrator's sense of disconnectedness on a larger scale.

Thus, Foer's text presents vegetarianism as an agent of psychological comfort for its narrator. In this context, the adherence to a meatless diet is depicted as generating a sense of mental wholeness: firstly, by removing the sense of schizophrenia resulting from the cognitive dissonance involved in meat eating; secondly, by establishing a perceived continuity of the self; and thirdly, by ending the overall condition of psychological and social disconnectedness that results from the animal as the absent referent of the meat.

EATING MEAT AND AMERICA'S 'SOCIOCULTURAL SCHIZOPHRENIA'

As not only the increasingly social orientation of the narrator's quest but also the existence of *Eating Animals* itself indicates, the personal also is inherently public and political with respect to the issue of meat consumption. Although the narrator's story of attaining mental wholeness by adopting a vegetarian diet might serve as a paragon for other individuals, the book goes beyond this argument as it ties the notion of a meatless diet to culture and society at large. In general, *Eating Animals* uses the personal story of the narrator's negotiation of mental health and vegetarianism as a template to offer this diet as an effective remedy for the perceived condition of an American sociocultural schizophrenia.

In particular, this is achieved via two intertwined textual strategies. For one, Foer's text associates vegetarianism with American culture and identity by contrasting it with the image of factory farming and its corporate industries. Throughout the text, the contemporary, industrialized mode of meat production is depicted not only as being

diametrically opposed to American core values but also as being responsible for their current removal from both food production and the lives of American citizens. As the narrator of *Eating Animals* repeatedly bemoans, American government officials as well as customers have gone astray from America's ideal way by promoting the factory farm, thereby bringing about the present state of general dissonance, alienation, and fragmentation of culture and society.

By making this argument and also prescribing vegetarianism as the remedy for this perceived American sociocultural schizophrenia and depravation, Foer's text taps into the rhetoric of the American jeremiad as described in detail in Sacvan Bercovitch's book of the same title.⁹ Bercovitch argues that the traditional European model of the jeremiad, which generally expressed a "lament over the ways [and sins] of the world" and "warned of God's wrath to follow" (7) was fundamentally altered in the American context. In contrast to the European model, the Puritan version of the jeremiad did not only bemoan the present state of individual and societal corruption but was always characterized by both the lament and an "unshakeable optimism" (6-7).¹⁰ Thus, the American jeremiad did not only feature the complaint about both the failure to live up to certain spiritual or biblical standards and the state of depravation that ensued from this failure but also the call to return to these standards in order to secure the survival and success of the 'American project' in an ideal future that was, however, always grounded in a "prophetic view of [its] history" (177).¹¹

As will be shown in the following section, the book employs the same—albeit secularized—rhetoric in its negotiation of vegetarianism with respect to the larger state of disconnectedness and alienation in American culture and society. *Eating Animals* not only voices a "lament over the ways of the world" and "warn[s] of God's wrath to follow" (Bercovitch 7) by presenting the current state of sociocultural schizophrenia as the direct result of America having gone astray from its idealized agrarian roots and

9 By doing so, *Eating Animals* also bespeaks its position within the larger narrative constructed collectively by texts of the American food movement, from Lappé's 1971 *Diet for a Small Planet* to more contemporary texts such as Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma and In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, or Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. As McWilliams points out, "[l]ike so many other stories America tells itself, the narrative of modern food is a classic jeremiad, a linear tale of success and virtue brought to a halt by modernity and greed" ("The Appeal").

10 For instance, John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" can be seen as a model of this rhetoric (Bercovitch 8-9).

11 As Bercovitch points out, the rhetoric of this cultural narrative presupposes not only an "unbridgeable difference" between the sacred and the profane but also a linear progression towards the "gradual conquest of the profane by the sacred" (178). As a result of this prescribed linear narrative, the American jeremiad was not so much a call for cultural or social change but on the contrary served to "transform what might have been a search for moral or social alternatives into a call for cultural revitalization," thereby effectively precluding "the possibility of fundamental social change" (179).

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values in supporting the factory farm. Conversely, the book also expresses the “unshakeable optimism” that Bercovitch describes as the defining feature of the American jeremiad (6-7) by depicting the quotidian act of denying meat as an embodied practice that serves to recover, reintegrate, and reenact American identity and culture by overcoming the current state of sociocultural schizophrenia and depravity.

On one level, the text emphasizes the dissonance between the prevalent mode of contemporary meat production and American cultural values and traditions by presenting the ways in which the factory-farming industries have compromised the ideals of liberty, equality, independence, and democracy as well as traditional rural values like compassion, honesty, and virtue (239). Most visibly, the text foregrounds this conflict by associating today's smaller farmers such as Frank Reese with the image of the American yeoman (234-38). This figure, as McWilliams points out, often served as the idealized emblem of pre-revolutionary and early republican American values. He argues that

[t]he colonial character evolved in the more rugged context of the land. There was [...] nothing more virtuous than making a living from tilling the soil. [...] Making a living from the land [...] meant the willingness of the individual to subordinate his private interests for the good of the whole. In embracing that value, if only theoretically, the colonists [...] adopt[ed] a coherent political ideology encompassing both virtue and self-interest. (*Revolution* 298)

In the book, it is this coherent political ideology that is threatened by the growing influence of the factory farm, which—in contrast to the ideal of the yeoman farmer—does not benefit the public by any means (209): “At stake [regarding the factory farm] is the future of an ethical heritage that generations before us labored to build. At stake is all that is done in the name of ‘the American farmer’ and ‘American rural values’” (237).

Consequently, the factory farm is also set into stark contrast with the notion of independence. As pointed out in *Eating Animals*, it was the American yeoman whose self-sufficiency made the former colonists “Americans and not subjects of European powers” in the first place (265). Hence, the factory farm as such becomes the counter-image of American independence by being depicted as an “entire goliath of the food industry,” which threatens the farmers whom the narrator meets on his quest (172-73, 236-37). Like the British colonizers of the colonial era, the food industry is depicted as a small elite that holds the political as well as economic power to “administer [...] immense personal gain” by exploitation (237).

To further support this image, the text depicts the contemporary American meat consumer as a misinformed subject rather than an independent citizen: Not only are these consumers kept in a state of misinformation by the lobby of the food industry (145), they are also—and more importantly—unaware of their power as individuals to emerge from their state of self-incurred subordination and enforced participation. “What is not sufficiently clear [...] is the extend of our complicity, as individuals and especially as individual consumers, in the behavior of the corporations” (172). Of course, the notions of subordination and oppression with respect to both animals and humans obviously conflict with the ideal of equality. This stark contrast is further highlighted via references to environmental injustice through outsourcing of costs and frequent human rights violations in meat plants on the part of the factory farming industry (175-77, 254). Thus, the narrator’s association of today’s meat-production with the marginalization and disenfranchisement of certain groups within larger society makes explicit the conflict between factory farming and the ideal of equal rights (243).

Moreover, Foer’s text presents the meat-producing industry as willfully eroding democracy as such—both in the political and in the cultural spheres. Concerning the realm of state politics, the text emphasizes how the meat-producing industries have honeycombed the structures of federal administration and authority (145-48), which has resulted in a state where “the factory farm industry [...] has more power than public-health professionals” and the American “nation gets its federally endorsed nutritional information from an agency that must support the food industry, which today means supporting factory farms” (141, 146). In the cultural context, this is visible in the increasing destruction of a communally and independently organized rural infrastructure that the text imagines as the grassroots of democracy at large (153, 162, 236).

The book thus equally focuses on how the industry of factory farming has turned the animal farm as an emblem of American values and rural traditions into an image of tyranny that is no longer associated with democracy: “The formula for a good animal farm has been turned on it head” (239), so that “[a]nimal husbandry has been turned into animal abuse” (252). As a result of this representation of the factory farm, meat consumption under contemporary conditions turns into a practice that necessarily involves a cognitive dissonance with respect to American culture and identity. Hence, vegetarianism could be imagined as a remedy for this mental conflict in the first place.

Yet, *Eating Animals* also emphasizes how the factory-farming industry avoids this dissonance by turning American values into the absent referent of their animal products. Just as the death of the animal and the animal itself are made the absent

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referent of the meat dish, so are both the obliteration of American values in the process of modern factory farming and these values themselves rendered invisible by the meat-producing industries. As the text states, “[t]he power brokers of factory farming know that their business model depends on consumers not being able to see (or hear about) what they do” (87). Not only does the narrator himself have to play ‘hide and seek’ to get behind the closed doors of factory farms (81-89); indeed, the entire industry is engaged in a game of “Hiding/Seeking” as the heading of the fourth chapter indicates.

Like in the case of the absent referent of meat as such, this concealment results in a condition of schizophrenia and disconnectedness with respect to the signifier of meat, its American consumers, and American culture itself. Instead of being the symbol of American husbandry and the associated ideals described above, meat has been disconnected from these referents. In the same vein, American carnivorous consumers have been alienated from their culture and the food they consume:

In earlier times, Americans were closely connected to the ways and places their food was produced. This connectedness and familiarity assured that food production was happening in a way that matched the values of our citizens. But farming’s industrialization broke this link and launched us into the modern era of disconnectedness. (Foer 217)

In this state, American values and traditions have been turned into free-floating images which—just as the signifier of meat—have lost their points of reference in the reality of citizens’ lives. This is visible on both the national and the global level. Therefore, *Eating Animals* depicts Americans as indeed suffering from a condition of profound schizophrenia: By means of consuming factory-farmed meat, they simultaneously are and are not performing an American identity.

This self-alienation becomes most obvious in the textual representation of the Thanksgiving meal. On the one hand, the text depicts this festive occasion as a celebration of American values through the consumption of food that is native to this land and the incantation of “a distinctly American ideal of ethical consumerism” (266). On the other hand, the regular Thanksgiving dinner—centered around the factory-farmed turkey—is also presented as the most glaring example of how this American cultural and ethical heritage is symbolically and literally being eaten away. By purchasing and consuming this bird, American omnivores support an industry that has not only obliterated the genetic heritage of turkeys (108, 110-11), the cultural heritage of the American independent farmer, and fundamental American values as such but also conceals this obliteration behind closed doors and marketing.

The same disconnectedness can be perceived with respect to American cultural values in the global context. This becomes visible in the textual negotiation of

American exceptionalism in the face of contemporary farming methods. Due to the promotion of a now globally acting factory-farming business, *Eating Animals* argues that the pristine ideal of founding a democratic enterprise to provide shelter for the oppressed and persecuted has been distorted beyond recognition. As the global leader in the consumption of factory-farmed meat, the US has not only turned into a nation whose example should rather be avoided than imitated (148); in fact, it has even become an oppressor itself. As the narrator states, “our [the American consumer’s] sustenance [...] comes from misery” (143): “We treat animals as we do because we want to and can” (243).

As can be seen from these depictions in the text, both the conflict of modern factory-farming methods with American agrarian values and the concealment of this dissonance have led to the present condition of profound schizophrenia and self-alienation, not only within American culture itself but also concerning American identity in a global context. Yet, as the narrator in his role as a modern Jeremiah prophesies, “it doesn’t have to be this way. The best reason to think there could be a better future is the fact that we know just how bad the future could be” (262).

NOT EATING MEAT AS A REMEDY

In keeping with the rhetoric of the American jeremiad and its vivid emphasis on hope for the future, *Eating Animals* presents vegetarianism as a remedy for the current state of deprivation and sociocultural schizophrenia. In analogy to the case of the narrator, this diet is presented as both a potential and actual cure to achieve consonance, continuity, and reintegration of American culture and identity at large. Therefore, vegetarianism is presented as a way to overcome the state of sociocultural dissonance and disconnectedness in the future. However, the text does not offer this diet as a remedy for this condition of schizophrenia by associating it with the absence of the factory farm, meaning the mere rejection of meat; as stated by the narrator in hindsight, *Eating Animals* is not “a straightforward case for vegetarianism” (13). Rather, it is through the depiction of factory farming as a colonizing and oppressing power that vegetarianism is imbued and identified with central values and concepts of the American creed: independence and liberty, equality, democracy, and the notion of exceptionalism. With respect to the values of independence and freedom, Foer’s book presents vegetarianism as—to quote the title of Levenstein’s book on American ways of eating—a “[r]evolution at the [t]able” by describing this diet as a conscious decision in resistance against the subjugation of not only animals but American farmers and consumers alike.

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This notion is made explicit in *Eating Animals* through the parallel between the act of eschewing meat and the Boston Tea Party (258). As a result, vegetarianism is also associated with the fight for independence since it was not only tea that tied the American Revolution closely to victuals. Indeed, as Waverley Root and Richard de Rochemont claim, food in general “ha[s] to be counted among the causes of the American Revolution” (89). By the same token, the issue of vegetarianism also turns its adherents into free citizens. Against this background, the idea of abdication as such is an empowering one because it implies that choices of consumption determine and drive the food industry (Foer 172). In fact, Foer’s text presents the decision to eschew meat as necessitating the same self-sacrifice for the greater good of society that has been ascribed to the American yeoman farmer as the virtuous exemplar of self-sufficiency and independence (Foer 257, 262; McWilliams, *Revolution* 298). Further, by contrasting vegetarianism with the factory farming system and its neglect of human and animal rights, *Eating Animals* associates this diet with the notion of equality.

In accordance with the notions of independence, liberty, and equality, the adherence to a meatless diet is also described as fostering democratic structures and behavior, particularly with respect to food and agriculture as the imagined center of American culture. On the one hand, the decision to adhere to a meatless diet for ethical reasons requires every consumer to become aware of their responsibility as citizens of society. On the other hand, *Eating Animals* highlights the social activism of veg(etari)ans (238-41); by supporting local and rural structures that ensure the survival of small and independent farmers such as Frank Reese, they strive for a mode of farming that is not only the sustainable continuation of an American cultural heritage but also a truly democratic enterprise (238).

In addition to displaying a vegetarian diet as an embodied practice of American cultural values in resistance against the global network of the meat-producing industries, Foer’s text also imagines vegetarianism as a vehicle for reaffirming and performing American exceptionalism in an international context. As the narrator of *Eating Animals* points out, “[o]ur response to the factory farm is ultimately a test of how we respond to the powerless, to the most distant, to the voiceless” (267). By presenting the answer to the ‘tyranny’ of the meat-producing industries as a moral burden that needs to be shouldered by American citizens, Foer’s book clearly aligns the decision to reject factory-farmed meat with the notion of founding again a “city upon a hill” (Winthrop 157), namely a shelter for the oppressed and persecuted in a globalized world of corporate capitalism.

As a result of being associated and identified with these American core values, vegetarianism is depicted as a potential vehicle for attaining a state of consonance in American society and culture since it might be employed to reconcile the lived reality

with the ideals of the American creed. Additionally, the rejection of meat is further reinterpreted from being a break with American cultural values and traditions into the fulfillment and continuation thereof (Foer 195).

According to Foer, vegetarianism hence reintegrates American culture and identity. By enacting American values in resistance against a global opponent, the practice of vegetarianism would thus serve to reestablish an American identity within the international system of representations of communal, ethnic, and national identities. As the narrator of *Eating Animals* claims, “[o]ne of the greatest opportunities to live our values—or betray them—lies in the food we put on our plates. And we will live or betray our values not only as individuals, but as nations” (258). Yet, this holistic sociocultural consonance that would result from a widespread and common adoption of a vegetarian diet within American society clearly remains a utopia in Foer’s text. Even though the narrator’s quest turns into a project that involves a growing number of different people, *Eating Animals* remains as a story told by a group of individuals that represent only a minute part of the American population. In keeping with the prophesy of the narrator as a modern-day Jeremiah, the realization of this promise of wholeness needs to be sought after in the future. Therefore, instead of offering a definite answer, the narrator seems to leave the narratee with a fundamental question: “Can we tell a new story”? (244)

However, it is precisely because of this dissonance between an uncertain, ideal future and a real present in the context of the American jeremiad that *Eating Animals* not only imagines but truly employs vegetarianism as a remedy for the state of American sociocultural schizophrenia and disconnectedness. In the text, vegetarianism becomes the means by which the conflict between American ideals and the lived reality of Americans in the system of today’s meat production is made visible again. As pointed out above, the issue of not eating animals is the main motivation for the narrator’s quest (5-6). The book itself thus becomes the medium through which vegetarianism retrieves the absent referent. By offering critical information on how the factory farm conflicts with American core values and how this conflict is concealed, the narrator’s involvement with vegetarianism uncovers the traditions and values of an American culture that has been obliterated and obscured by the meat-producing industries. As the narrator states towards the end of the book, “[t]he secrecy that has enabled the factory farm is breaking down” (251).

By deconstructing the dominant narrative promoted by the corporations behind factory farming, the discussion of and involvement with vegetarianism enables the narrator to ask for a new and better story to be told (10-11, 244). Through this negotiation of a meatless diet, *Eating Animals* employs the issue of vegetarianism to retell the story of American identity and culture through the rhetoric of the American

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jeremiad, rather than ask for a completely new story. By associating vegetarianism with this larger cultural narrative, Foer's text indeed offers this diet as a remedy for the American sociocultural disconnectedness and fragmentation. As Bercovitch points out, "following the ritual of the jeremiad bespeaks an ideological consensus [...] unmatched in any other modern culture" (176).

In other words, *Eating Animals* employs the issue of vegetarianism to frame and thus reintegrate American society and culture through a master-narrative that allows Foer's book not only to reaffirm a united American identity centered around a creed of continuous ideals but also to relocate this national identity through its exceptionalism within the modern-day, global system of identity representations. By reconstructing the "typology of America's mission" (Bercovitch 93) in the context of this 'new American story' enabled by vegetarianism, *Eating Animals* shows that the sociocultural 'health' of the American identity lies precisely in the continuous dissonance between a perceived factual reality and a promised future ideal.

CONCLUSION

By analyzing the story of the narrator of *Eating Animals* through the lens of the psychological processes involved in the consumption of meat, this article has first shown how Foer's book presents the narrator's adoption of a vegetarian diet as a means of attaining a sense of mental unity. In particular, *Eating Animals* depicts vegetarianism as a remedy to the state of cognitive dissonance, discontinuity, and the disconnectedness resulting from the psychocultural mechanism of the absent referent.

In the second part it was demonstrated how the personal story of the narrator's journey to mental wholeness through vegetarianism is applied to the larger context of American culture. The text achieves this by presenting factory farming as diametrically opposed to American core values and cultural as well as social traditions, thereby associating vegetarianism with American culture and identity.

By diagnosing a condition of American sociocultural schizophrenia that results from the dissonance with and removal of fundamental American values from both the meat production and the lived reality of American citizens, and by discussing vegetarianism as a potential remedy for this depraved state, the story taps into the rhetoric of the American jeremiad. Through this textual strategy, *Eating Animals* negotiates vegetarianism as more than a mere potential remedy. By depicting how vegetarianism reveals the current state of depravity and enables the promise of a better future, Foer's book employs this diet as a vehicle for overcoming the current state of sociocultural disconnectedness and alienation by reintegrating and

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reconstructing American identity through the cultural master-narrative of the American jeremiad.

Therefore, the negotiation of vegetarianism in *Eating Animals* not only reveals the condition of dissonance between promise and fact as inherent to the conceptualization of American culture. In fact, the general invocation of American values within the framework of the American jeremiad implies the need to reaffirm an American cultural and national identity in the context of a globalized world and is thus determined not so much by deconstructing but rather by reconstructing and reintegrating the inherited relations of power and identity based on an idealized American past.

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