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Global risks of intensive animal farming and the wildlife trade

Commentary on [Wiebers & Feigin](#) on Covid Crisis

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Abstract: This commentary discusses two issues highlighted by Wiebers & Feigin in the context of the current and future global health crisis: the wildlife trade and factory farming. Both are instances of globalized animal cruelty – in China as well as worldwide -- that require global solutions for the well-being of both humans and nonhumans.

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Animal cruelty used to be local, involving a person, a group, a community, an industry, or a country. In an increasingly globalized economy and world, we now have globalized animal cruelty (Cao 2015). Wiebers & Feigin (2020) (W&F) are to be commended for highlighting the wildlife trade and factory farming in our fight against the current and future global health crisis. Both these instances of globalized animal cruelty call for global solutions for the well-being of the human as well the nonhuman beings on this planet.

1. Manufacturing Animal Cruelty. In the past few decades, China has come to be called the world factory for manufactured goods. I have suggested that China is also a world factory for manufacturing animal cruelty (Cao 2015), although there are other partners in crime: Other countries support the cruelty in China, directly or indirectly, wittingly or unwittingly, through global collaboration or collusion. China is now the largest breeder and supplier of nonhuman primates and other animals used for research, selling them to Western research institutions. Another example is the wildlife trade. The domestic demand for wildlife body parts in China is the biggest driver for wildlife poaching, trafficking, and consumption worldwide today (Cao 2018).

There have been calls in recent years from outside China to lift an international trade ban on certain endangered animal products on monetary grounds – under the pretext of wildlife conservation (Treves et al. 2019). The U.S. and U.K. had been among the largest ivory trading countries in the world, often facilitating Chinese wildlife trafficking. The ban on the trade and use of ivory, rhino horns, and pangolins within China has not halted the killing of elephants, rhinos, and pangolins in Africa and elsewhere, nor their smuggling internationally.

2. Partners in Crime. The wildlife trade between China and its neighboring states has increased in recent years with some Southeast Asian countries now becoming the major illegal wildlife suppliers to China. China and its bordering countries need to ban the wildlife market for human consumption. In other wildlife crimes, the Middle East has been identified as a key transit region for wildlife trafficking, as well as a source of illegal wildlife products. Europe too serves as a major destination and transit region for wildlife trafficking, as well as a source of illegal wildlife products. Currently, only 10 to 15 per cent of illicit wildlife products

transiting through Europe are seized (Interpol 2018). Thus, global and domestic enforcement of laws on illegal wildlife activities is urgent and imperative in all nations.

3. Factory Farming. In connection with our fight against the current pandemics most authors have been focusing only on wildlife, but W&F are spot on in singling out factory farming. The inhumane and inherently cruel practices of intensive farming are another instance of globalized animal cruelty. Factory farming was invented in the West and introduced to China in the last three decades. The cruelty of this practice was exported to and expanded in China. Now globalized, it is still expanding to other developing countries, replacing traditional farm animal practices with industrialized cruelty, produced around the world, its products consumed by billions of people every day, everywhere. Various countries and jurisdictions such as the E.U. have adopted measures to regulate factory farming methods and improve animal welfare, but such regulations in effect legalize what animal protection laws would normally deem to be cruelty.

4. Antibiotics, Hormones and Other Chemicals. W&F also point out that as the factory farm model has become a global phenomenon, antibiotic resistance has become a major health threat. Antibiotic residues in food originate from their use in the animal husbandry and aquaculture industries as veterinary drugs or feed additives, especially under intensive cultivation practices (Wang, Ren et al 2017). The extensive use of antibiotics in animals has two major adverse impacts on human health: antibiotic resistant bacteria and toxic effects from antibiotic residues in human food (Wang, Ren, et al 2017).

There has been increasing concern about the growth hormones, antibiotics, and other chemicals in meat causing health problems such as unnatural sexual development in adolescents in China (Klein 2017). In 2013, 84,000 tons of veterinary antibiotics were used in animals as compared to 78,000 tons in humans in China; around 49 types of antibiotics were used for pigs and chickens (Teng et al 2018). These multiple potential health risks have been confirmed in many studies: Traces of 21 veterinary antibiotics linked to the meat they consumed were found in 80% of urine samples from 586 children in Shanghai (Wang et al 2016). Antibiotics from meat, milk, and aquatic products were also detected in the urine of pregnant women in China (Wang, Wang et al 2017). In another Shanghai study, 15 antibiotics were found in approximately 40% of samples of fresh meat, milk, and aquatic products (Wang, Ren et al 2017).

The routine use of growth hormones and antibiotics in factory farms is not limited to China, but prevalent and characteristic of intensive farming practices. Some countries, including China, have begun to regulate the use of antibiotics in animal feed, tightening control of their use in animal farming. The enforcement of such rules, however, is problematic.

5. Legislating Against the Zoonotic Threat. Finally, as also recommended by W&F, the intensive confinement of animals in factory farming should be discontinued worldwide for the sake of animals, humans, and the environment. We now have painful firsthand knowledge of what the coronavirus pandemic can do to human societies and to billions of people across the globe, and of the imminent zoonotic threat of known and unknown viruses jumping species between animals and humans. If human societies continue to ignore the risks and keep behaving recklessly, I would pose the question: *Should governments and the owners of intensive animal farms, wildlife markets and their collaborators not be held legally liable for failing to prohibit, prevent, and terminate the practices that are now known to pose grave and global threats to the health and well-being of human and nonhuman beings alike?*

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