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The Spectacular Origins of the EU Horse Meat Scandal

abstract | *This article discusses the implications of the 2013 EU horse meat scandal, not only for consumers, but all actors in the food supply chain, including governments and retailers. Nearly 200 beef products sold in the EU were found to contain horse meat, but the scale of the supply chain made investigating the source of the adulteration extremely challenging. Moreover, the proportions in which meat is produced allowed the horse meat to mingle with beef unnoticed—only DNA testing could sort one being from the other. To analyze this case of mistaken identity, I use Guy Debord’s theory of the spectacle, as it provides a useful conceptual framework for discussing how appearances mediate various levels of commodity circulation and consumption. The article also draws on Marx’s value theory, for concepts such as the commodity and exchange–value form the basis of Debord’s theses on the spectacle. I conclude that the spectacle of packaging, price, and the supply chain leaves us prone to risks far more fatal than any concern the horse meat scandal posed to European beef–eaters.*

keywords | *spectacle, horse meat scandal, Debord, supply chain, commodity*

INTRODUCTION We are currently faced with a scale of industrial food production that has reached inhuman proportions. Even our mediated forms of oversight (e.g., quality control, food inspection, sensor technologies) cannot fully capture all the movements of inputs and outputs across the globe. The 2013 horse meat scandal in Europe made this very clear. Nearly 200 beef products sold in the EU were found to contain horse meat, but the scale of the supply chain—its extension in space and the dizzying number of suppliers—made investigating the source of the contamination extremely challenging. The proportions (a phenomenological term I will give greater attention to later) in which meat is produced—disassembled and ground up, distributed, and reassembled from thousands of animals—allowed the horse meat to mingle with beef unnoticed. Only DNA testing could sort one being from the other. Using Marx’s value theory and Guy Debord’s theory of the spectacle, this article focuses on (1) the food commodity and its packaging, arguing that these are less about informing the consumer and more about producing spectacle; and (2) the opacity of the supply chain in terms of its scale and the source of the horse meat contamination, arguing that this opacity adds to the spectacular nature of commodities and obscures the potential dangers of mass-produced and distributed foods.

Debord’s theory of the spectacle uses Marx’s value theory as its point of departure, particularly the value-form, which is the form in which the abstract substance *value* must appear. The spectacle is a “theoretical extension of [value] beyond those forms that Marx outlined: accidental,

expanded, general, and money,”¹ money being the most concrete form of value’s appearance. Value is otherwise imperceptible and, without a form, nonexistent. The spectacle, according to Debord, “is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image.”² It is a visible affirmation of the invisible world of value, typically associated with film, advertising, and packaging.

Though spectacle belongs to the realm of sight, its reach goes much further. That is why the horse meat scandal is striking: it allows us to see a rift in the spectacular veil of commodity production but also to acknowledge how its effects extend to the body, effects that may begin on one side of the globe and increase in magnitude as they are distributed through the supply chain and to our bodies. One of the first considerations when news of the adulteration reached government officials was whether it was an issue of fraud alone or a risk to human health as well. In this instance, it was judged that it was an example of food crime and that only the sensibilities of the public had been offended. But there is yet a darker lining to this story: If something so seemingly substantial as horse flesh can mix imperceptibly with beef flesh and be distributed unobserved and untested across the EU, then one can only imagine what other invisibles could pass through the supply chain and into our bodies unnoticed.

The argument of this article proceeds as follows: I first provide a timeline and description of the events surrounding the discovery of the horse meat adulteration. Following this, I introduce the concept of the spectacle and explain why it is such an apt tool for understanding

the scandal. I then break down the spectacular elements of commodity production that contributed to the scandal, analyzing in particular the role that food packaging, price (arguably, a form of packaging), and the supply chain played in creating the conditions for this single instance of food adulteration and its far-reaching consequences. While the spectacular nature of the commodity form is central to Debord's theory, I argue that the role the spectacle plays in today's food supply chain goes largely unrecognized, creating a blind spot with dangerous consequences. As I subsequently argue, the spectacle of packaging, price, and the supply chain leaves us prone to risks far more fatal than any concern the horse meat adulteration posed to European beef-eaters.³

THE SCANDAL The scandal dates back to January 2013, when food inspectors in Ireland discovered horse meat in frozen beef burgers being sold in Irish and British supermarkets. At that time, of twenty-seven tested products, ten were found to contain horse meat.⁴ In early February, a report was made to the European Commission that the British company and frozen food brand Findus UK had also been selling adulterated beef products, this time frozen beef lasagna supplied by the French company Comigel. Tests of the Comigel product showed it to contain 80-100 percent horse meat.⁵ The UK, Ireland, France, and Romania were named often in the scandal, but a long list of countries also reported findings of adulterated beef in the weeks following the initial discovery, including Sweden, Poland, Italy, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Austria, and more.⁶

Initially, 7,259 tests were carried out across the twenty-seven member states of the EU.⁷ While horse meat is not considered harmful to human health, the antibiotic phenylbutazone, with which horses are sometimes treated, is. Of the number of tests described, 4,144 tested for the presence of horse meat, and 3,115 tested for the presence of phenylbutazone, also known as 'bute.' 193 products tested positive for horse meat DNA. Put another way, 4.66% of beef products on the EU market were found to contain more than trace amounts of horse DNA (that is, above 1%). Sixteen products showed positive traces of bute, but at a rate of less than 1 percent, which is considered to be below the threshold of what is harmful to humans.⁸ A further 7,951 tests were carried out in a second round of testing, which produced another 110 positive tests for horse meat DNA.⁹ Overall, "the horse-for-beef switch affected more than 4.5 million processed products representing at least 1,000 tons of food."¹⁰

Originally targeted as the main culprit of the adulteration, the French company Comigel said the horse meat came from the French supplier Spanghero, which has since been investigated on charges of aggravated fraud and mislabeling of food products, culminating in the arrest of eight managers in September 2013.¹¹ Prior to these arrests, Spanghero maintained that the Romanian suppliers of its beef meat had committed fraud, but the consensus is that Spanghero received horse meat, relabeled it, and shipped it out as beef. French authorities allege that Spanghero knowingly sold approximately 750 tons of horse meat as beef over a period of six months.¹² In another instance, Spanghero is also said to have banned mechanically separated mutton on its premises, because it had a greater chance of containing bone fragments, which heighten the risk of the transmission of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, also known as mad cow disease, a source of previous anxiety in Europe.¹³

Overall, the scandal was considered a crisis of consumer confidence. In a report commissioned by the UK government in response to the scandal, the author Chris Elliott argued that greater attention needs to be paid to the opaque and distributed nature of the supply chain and its proneness to incidences of 'food crime.'¹⁴ Indeed, Elliott insists further that a food crime unit be established, as the horse meat scandal only revealed what is already a trend in food adulteration in the EU and around the world. A 2014 article in *The Guardian* stated that one-third of food products fail authenticity testing to some degree, meaning that they are mislabeled, contain unintended ingredients, or were purposively adulterated.¹⁵ This is a concern not only for risk of food-borne illness or contamination but for those with cultural or dietary restrictions. In the early days of the horse meat scandal, reports emerged from a UK prison that Muslim prisoners had been served halal meals that tested positive for pork DNA.¹⁶ Following that, reports were made about pork-contaminated halal sausages served as part of a London school lunch program. A similar labyrinthine investigation and circuit of finger-pointing followed on these discoveries. Unlike the horse meat scandal, however, the halal meat scares were considered an issue of human error. Of the initial twenty-seven tests when news first broke of horse meat contamination, far more products tested positive for pig DNA: twenty-three total. When it came to the pig meat contamination, the reaction of the chief executive of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) lacked the horror associated with the horse meat contamination. Beef and pig meat may be processed in the same facilities, and thus, there was an implication that such

accidents are bound to and clearly *do* happen.¹⁷ Horse meat was an anomaly only because it is not typically produced for food in the UK and Ireland, and so there is no plausible way for it to make its way accidentally into the supply chain.

The scandal epitomizes the post-war food regime, which is marked by high-input, outsourced, industrial agriculture and an emphasis on cheap produce.¹⁸ This “Food from Nowhere” tends to obscure the exploitative labour relations, geographic scale, and questionable processing techniques complicit in low-cost production.¹⁹ More recently, food scares, a distrust of science, and so-called crises relating to obesity and malnutrition have culminated in the emergence of the subsequently termed “Food from Somewhere” regime.²⁰ This is typified by EU labeling standards and represented in the mainstream by authors such as Michael Pollen, Eric Schlosser, and documentaries like *Food, Inc.* Nevertheless, even in the EU, where food regulation is considered to be strongest, Food from Nowhere reared its ugly, equine head in the horse meat scandal. Indeed, the high-input, low cost paradigm revealed itself to be operating at full strength despite the latest efforts of supermarkets to stock Foods from Somewhere and, particularly in the UK, foods sourced in Britain, which in an import-heavy economy is near impossible to achieve. In a way, Food from Somewhere needs Food from Nowhere to exist: These contradictory regimes shape and stabilize one another.²¹

Despite increasing consumer skepticism around processed meat, Larissa Drescher et al. show that “convenience in food production has been clearly identified as important to consumers” and consequently that processed foods “are the fastest growing category of agricultural trade.”²² Moreover, using a national survey of 9,000 Canadian households, Drescher et al. show that levels of consumer trust in processed meat, whether they be low or high, do not ultimately affect overall purchasing decisions, which are determined more by socioeconomic factors such as income, work schedule, and education.²³ Indeed, while British butchers saw fresh meat sales increase in the immediate aftermath of the scandal, consistent with Drescher et al.’s findings, consumers started to return to their previous purchasing habits only months after, as had been the case following the BSE outbreak in Britain.²⁴ For, as one British butcher stated so succinctly, consumers “are only interested in price,” and from this author’s point of view, consumers constrained by the wage relation are given little other choice.²⁵

Reports produced in the wake of the scandal that debated labeling regulations in the EU suggest that

consumers want their products marked with origin labeling but that such desires do not factor into their purchasing decisions.²⁶ Is there a discrepancy here between consumer desire and behavior or simply an inability to pursue that desire in dollar terms? After all, the costs of increasing transparency and tracking in the supply chain either fall on producers or consumers.²⁷ When the European Commission published a report on improving pork commodity labeling, it was reported that “on average in the EU27 about 12% of the extra costs for labeling [would be] transmitted to the producers, while about 88% of the extra costs [would be] transmitted to the consumer.”²⁸ For poultry commodity labeling, consumers were projected to bear 91% of the costs of labeling.²⁹ Notably, in the year following the scandal, it would appear that consumers voted with their wallets, purchasing less red meat in volume than they had in years previous to the scandal, a 3% decline.³⁰ However, as retailers endeavored to make good on their promises to source meat from local farms, consumers were clearly bearing the cost of heightened regulation. The volume of beef purchased in 2013 may have dropped, but British consumers were paying more per pound (an average of 7% more), showing that price played as big a role as provenance, if not bigger, in determining consumer behavior.³¹

THE SPECTACLE Thesis 1 of *The Society of the Spectacle* is a detournement of the opening to Marx’s *Capital*, vol. 1. It reads: “The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.”³² Debord takes Marx’s description of the commodity and extends it to the images that draw us further into the commodity fetish, valorizing the process of exchange and presenting it as the means by which we may attain everything we lack. The commodity fetish is a supersensuous relationship among all commodities which obscures the concrete reality of their production, and which is an effect of the alienation of humans from the products of their labor and further exacerbated by the global division of labor.³³ A logical development of the commodity fetish, the spectacle becomes that which unifies the alienated and divided subject through appearance as well as participates in the virtual collapse of distances that mark our global food supply chain. Debord states further in Thesis 3 that “the spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification.”³⁴ What events like the horse meat scandal do is reveal the divisions that underlie global commodity production, i.e. the spatially dispersed

points of production that together contributed to the fraudulent labeling of horse meat as beef, not to mention the divided nature of the mechanically separated meat that was adulterated. The packaging of, for example, Tesco's frozen spaghetti bolognese (Figure 1) belied the composite nature of its contents—assembled from numberless beef carcasses, but presenting images of the whole, unified animal on its surface.



FIGURE 1. Packages of Tesco's Everyday Value spaghetti bolognese were found to contain up to 100% horse meat. PHOTO: *The Guardian* (UK)

The event also undermines any sense of a unified and manageable supply chain the EU or governing bodies like it may idealize.³⁵ Consider the supply chain and its opacity in terms of Paul Virilio's concept of arrival:³⁶ The commodity is produced at such distances, and across such divides, that it moves without the knowledge of man and merely has the effect of "arriving" at market. The sense of departure, or in this case origin, is lost. This immanent state of arrival glosses over the many divisions and departures that characterize capitalist food production.

The spectacle can quickly suture what events like the horse meat scandal reveal to be partial and separate, and indeed, Tesco responded to the scandal with a new ad campaign, called "Love Every Mouthful" (Figure 2). With this campaign, Tesco moved away from its former emphasis on price to a more spectacular meditation on the sensuous qualities of food, as well as provenance, that is, the location of a commodity's production and the history of ownership associated with its movement through various stages of production and distribution. Previous to the scandal, Tesco was accused by the anti-poverty group War on Want of "having a disturbing ignorance of its own supply chain."³⁷ Since this accusation proved to be true, and because the horse meat in Tesco products was touted as a foreign invasion, it is no surprise that the new campaign placed

more emphasis on produce of British provenance. In effect, "Love Every Mouthful" is an attempt to show consumers that Tesco has control over its supply chain—"every farmer, every picker, every baker" as one of its ads claims—as well as being a total deflection away from the frozen, low-price food that was the focus of the scandal.

Let us consider further the role the spectacle arguably played in the scandal. After all, Debord states that the spectacle is a form of packaging for the commodity, a general gloss that hides the rationality of the system. I will consider this rationality from two points of view: (1) packaging and price, which is also to say value in Marx's sense of the word, and (2) the supply chain.



FIGURE 2. Tesco introduced its new "Love Every Mouthful" campaign in July 2013.

PACKAGING AND PRICE Debord's Thesis 15 stands out as an apt starting point for a discussion of packaging:

As the indispensable packaging for things produced as they are now produced, as a general gloss on the rationality of the system, and as the advanced economic sector directly responsible for the manufacture of an ever-growing mass of image-objects, the spectacle is the chief product of present-day society.³⁸

Here, Debord states that the spectacle is the packaging for our impoverished life under capital; it is also a description of the spectacular nature of commodity packaging itself, especially the very opaque paper and plastic packaging of convenience foods, like the frozen foods predominately impacted by the horse meat adulteration. The spectacle is the negation of life, according to Debord, as the packaging of a food commodity likewise negates the contents of the package that are considered too

banal or are too opaque to communicate as well as negating the circumstance of its production.³⁹ More importantly, it glosses over the rationality of the system of food production, which is no longer about feeding people (and other animals) but about profit. The capitalist is indifferent to what shape a commodity takes, that is, its use-value or concrete form; the use-value is seen merely as a container for value. The capitalist as food producer may be indifferent to the nutritional content or wholesomeness of a food commodity, so long as it is preserved in transit and remains unspoiled until the time of its sale.

The purpose of packaging is to protect and preserve a commodity, and to communicate. Historically, packaging's communicative purpose was proprietary, that is, displaying the brand or the name of the product's maker, and intended to establish provenance.⁴⁰ With the rise of the self-service store, packaging was supposed to be a "silent salesman" and, in today's retail environment, accelerate the rate of purchase.⁴¹ "The packaging design ... articulates the brand's promise" and—in language that points to the unifying nature of spectacular packaging—"fuses" with the product "in the mind of the consumer;" I would add that price is a part of this spectacular unity.⁴² Increasingly, the image-object becomes the thing desired, the package rather than the contents. In the hierarchy of information on a product's packaging, brand and imagery take precedence over nutritional labeling, which is almost always located on sides of a package not immediately visible to the consumer. The FDA, for instance, only mandates that the brand, name of the food, and net quantity of a product be included on the principal display panel (the forward-facing side of a product).⁴³

Both the package and contents of a commodity are the bodies in which value appears, its value-form. Price, too, is the consumer-facing image of value, or, in Marx's words "the money-name of the quantity of social labor objectified in [the commodity]."⁴⁴ Price, more than packaging, creates the illusion of intrinsic value in commodities but is itself a form of packaging and an agent of the spectacle. Price is the relation the consumer bears to a product, and it obscures the true relations objectified in the natural body or concrete form of the product. During the moment of exchange we can only perceive the sensuous object, that is, the commodity's use-value, though packaging makes this more difficult. Due to the commodity fetish, we mistake value in its price-form (\$5.99 for a frozen pizza) as intrinsic to the use-value, that is, as an indicator of the product's material worth. Value, however, does not issue from a commodity's natural, physical form. It rather comes into being through the act of

exchange when two commodities are brought into relation with one another.

Value, according to Marx, is a social and abstract phenomenon. The price of a commodity is projected on a concrete, physical object but is determined by circumstances wholly unrelated to the particular use-value or the conditions of its manufacture. Just as there can be a total divorce between what is communicated on the package of a commodity and its contents, so too can the price of a commodity misrepresent the true human and material expense of the commodities we are confronted with. As I will discuss with reference to the supply chain, price is also what appears to the middleman choosing between meat commodities when he can realize more profit by substituting horse meat for beef. By considering price before all else, the middleman demonstrates how the commodity's "sublime objectivity as a value differs from its stiff and starchy existence as a body."⁴⁵ The objectivity of value supersedes any consideration of the ontological-physiological difference of these substances, their provenance, or regulatory consequences, let alone any ethical relationship between the myriad individuals implicated in each product. The use-value or "concrete labor becomes the form or manifestation of its opposite, abstract social labor."⁴⁶ This is one of the contradictions of the commodity: to be both qualitative and quantitative, or concrete and abstract in nature, with those natures being divided and utterly disassociated.⁴⁷

We can discuss what role price may have played in the horse meat scandal, and to do so, we must turn to the retailers who increasingly set the price on food products. It has long been acknowledged that retailers have grown increasingly powerful compared to their counterparts in the manufacturing and distribution sectors.⁴⁸ Retailers, such as Tesco in the UK and WalMart worldwide, know that consumers in general, and low-income consumers in particular, respond to low prices. Minimum-wage workers have little choice but to purchase low-priced items because their income or work schedules undercut their ability to buy and prepare whole, nutritious foods.⁴⁹ One must also consider the promotion of ready-made convenience food, which can be turned over rapidly as a commodity and consumed quickly, but which is also nutrient-deprived due to the processes used to make the product shelf-stable. In the case of foods like these, capitalist reproduction takes precedence over metabolic reproduction. For 90 percent of Americans, processed prepackaged foods have become the foremost option for meals inside the home.⁵⁰ The popularity, necessity, or tragedy of our relationship to these foods can

be understood as an aspect of the deskilling that pervades both the spheres of production and consumption.⁵¹

Retailers also have the power to conceive of a price they wish to offer their customers and demand the cost efficiencies required to produce that cheap a product from their partners in manufacturing and supply. As Marx puts it, a product's character as a value, or in this case, its value in price-form, is often already "taken into consideration during production."⁵² For example, the second-largest grocery retailer in the United Kingdom, Asda, was able to work with the supplier Northern Foods to produce a one-pound frozen pizza—fifty pence cheaper than the lowest priced frozen pizza retailing at the time.⁵³ This venture was successful. In his report on the scandal, Elliott also learned of an instance in the United Kingdom where a company asked a supplier to produce a thirty-pence 'gourmet' burger, requiring the use of low-grade meat to achieve such a low unit cost.⁵⁴ The supplier declined to provide the product under those conditions, but one can imagine that others may rise to the occasion. This may create a situation for suppliers where they seek out lower prices for the inputs to their food products that ultimately have nefarious origins, as was the case with the horse meat scandal. The optics of price is relevant in the sphere of production, as well. As Elliott suggests, a lower price for prepacked, minced beef could indicate that its journey to market may have included unsanctioned suppliers or even adulteration, such as when meat categorized as fit only for animal feed is packaged for human consumption.⁵⁵

Tesco and other companies' cost-cutting measures and price focus are not performed out of concern for their low-income customers. In reality, these companies pursue a low-cost item that can be produced en masse, so as to realize profit quickly and repeatedly. Debord says that the spectacle is the "omnipresent affirmation of the choice already made in production."⁵⁶ The consumer does not make purchasing decisions in a vacuum and, in the case of food purchases, has less agency than the appearance of sprawling heterogeneity on store shelves implies, especially as relates to the constituent ingredients of those products (which, in the case of the brand-differentiated adulterated beef products, were of the very same origin; more on this below). Alf Hornborg states that, due to the inherent biases of global IT and the global distribution of technical infrastructure, we have seen "the pivotal evaluative moment shifted from the local to the global level," and this applies aptly to the food supply chain.⁵⁷ Decision-making power does not lie at the individual level, despite the long-held assumption that consumer demand structures the

market. The choice, today, often lies with retailers, with manufacturers and suppliers left scrambling to fulfill the retailer's desire.⁵⁸ Let us briefly consider one such example of how global industrial agriculture interests supersedes individual consumer agency and comes to inform what we may think is our personal choice. Here, I refer to that ubiquitous substance, corn.

When advancements in agricultural techniques resulted in record yields of corn in the mid-twentieth century, corn became, and remains, a near-universal commodity for production.⁵⁹ It is a commodity crop, like wheat or soybeans, overproduced to provide a cheap input for several sectors of industry. Corn is ubiquitous in the marketplace and production because it is particularly convenient for multiplying the points of exchange as a substrate for value, that is, as various commodities.⁶⁰ Not only is corn a product for direct human consumption, it has also become a prolific source of feed in industrial meat production; serves as a filler and preservative for processed food products; and is more and more produced for biofuels. When we are advertised "grain-fed" beef (or chicken, and now fish), we are presented with an attribute of current food products as if it is a virtue in itself. Corn feed was imposed on animals that do not naturally digest the substance in order to produce mass amounts of meat commodities.⁶¹ It is one of countless examples of tastes we are led to believe we have formed on our own when, really, we are responding to a new, value-adding technique of which we were not conscious.⁶²

Choice at the level of the consumer is often only a choice between brands and products made with very similar ingredients and processes. Whether or not these foods are worth buying is up to the consumer, and companies can righteously point to their packaging as laying everything out in facts and figures for the eye to see. Of course, the focus of this paper is what is *not* seen on the package. The responsibility of choosing lies with the consumer, who is only given a choice of spectacles (commodities), rather than producers having to bear the responsibility of producing unadulterated, healthy, safe, and transparent products. Wynonah Hauter's *Foodopoly* describes the voluntary labeling systems American companies have adopted to circumvent stricter policies being imposed on them by the Food and Drug Administration.⁶³ Nutrition professor Dr. Marion Nestle called these voluntary labeling programs an effort to "preempt the FDA's front-of-packaging food-labeling initiatives that might make food companies reveal more about the 'negatives' in processed foods."⁶⁴ Packages become busy with weights and measures of

constituent ingredients, but without any context as to how nutritional or harmful those contents are. Consistent with the spectacle, these positive attestations to a product's contents negate any quality of its production that might deter the customer from purchasing it.

THE SUPPLY CHAIN “Proportions are the limit of Being”: There is a phenomenological, perceptual relationship to the way we define categories of being.⁶⁵ From the imperceptibly large to the imperceptibly small, the proportion of an object determines its status as a being among other beings.⁶⁶ Food objects also need to be of a certain “proportion” to be manageable by the human hand and mouth, and so the cow as category gives way to “beef,” and then to “steak” or “ground” or whatever more individual a portion is desired by the consumer or, as I have emphasized, the producers and retailers.⁶⁷ The proportions imposed upon a food object mediate between the thing that it was and the thing it is intended to be. In industrial meat production, that mediation is far more profound, taken to the limits of material breakdown and the imposition of force. But there remains a huge representational gap between the concept of beef, the images it conjures up of farm-fresh, butchered joints, and the inputs of ready-made and convenience food manufacture; the packaging is merely a photo negative, an undeveloped glimpse of the total picture. Indeed, the commodity fetish takes a negative form—a “present absence,” to borrow a term from Bruno Latour—that resolves the contradictions of a commodity's divided nature; the spectacle resolves those contradictions in the positive form of an image, as, for example, the images of cows on Tesco's horse-contaminated products were intended to do.⁶⁸ Compare this image with an image of the mechanically separated meat used to make products like it (Figure 3).



FIGURE 3. USDA image of mechanically separated beef.

I meditate on this close-up of industrial food manufacturing to emphasize that the divisive nature of capital, and the visible form it takes as the spectacle, pervades every aspect of the supply chain. According to Debord, the “spectacular prestige” of the commodity “evaporates into vulgarity as soon as the object is taken home by a consumer—and hence by all other consumers too. At this point its essential poverty, the natural outcome of the poverty of its production, stands revealed too late.”⁶⁹ The often sickly, hyper-processed appearance and qualitative homogeneity of food products are masked by packaging. With the horse meat scandal, this homogeneity was brought to the fore when it became clear that so many products in Europe were touched by a singular instance of adulteration. The material that was mass-processed, a mixing of diverse bodies, and divided once again, became the substratum of a relatively high number of competing products, breaking down any claims that the various retailers made about the superiority of their product, for all of the products contained the very same meat. The distributed nature of food production and supply means that the reach of contamination is vast, potentially global. Not only were horse meat-contaminated products found in at least a dozen EU countries, the products had even made it to Hong Kong.⁷⁰

In his report, Elliott outlined a few of the circumstances contributing to the horse meat adulteration that are rooted in the nature of industrial meat production and the organization of power in the supply chain. He acknowledges, as I have described, that the increased power of retailers in setting the terms of their contracts puts a downward pressure on suppliers to provide products at set prices, making them responsible for achieving the efficiencies needed to produce at such a low cost.⁷¹ At the same time, the state of mechanically separated meats makes them ripe for adulteration, as they already look so little like the animal flesh from which they are made.

While some suppliers may be duped into buying mislabeled foods, it is likely that deliberate human intervention occurred somewhere in the supply chain, as cheaper commodities can be sold at higher prices, for instance if pork is substituted for beef. Elliott also describes instances where Category 3 food, which the EU states is only suitable for animal consumption, makes its way into products destined for human consumption.⁷² The margin of profit would be very high for the offending middleman. For example, Category 3 animal by-product would sell for one pound per kilogram, whereas if repackaged as fit for human consumption, it could sell for at least three pounds fifty

per kilogram. Elliott says that a too-low price on any meat commodity should also alert suppliers and distributors to the possibility of fraud in their product's history.⁷³

Elliott identifies an important site of potential fraud and opacity in the cold storage facilities where large blocks of mechanically separated meat are shipped (Figure 4). It is easy to make the low-quality trim meat contained in these blocks appear higher quality by mixing them with meat from cheaper species or adding red offal, such as heart and lungs, into the mix.⁷⁴ The blocks themselves, when frozen, are the very definition of opaque, being impenetrable by eye and often wrapped in layers of plastic that further obscure the contents. They are also often handled mechanically, and in addition, the EU food supply chain relies heavily on paper accounting and only turned to testing real products in the wake of the scandal.⁷⁵



FIGURE 4. Frozen blocks of mechanically separated beef.

The system the EU uses to monitor and quality control the supply chain was developed in the United States. It is called HACCP: the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point system. In the United States, HACCP has been used extensively as a cost-cutting measure, seeing more and more inspectors removed from food processing plants, but also from a technical point of view, where inspection at an earlier point in production is dispensed with in favor of introducing bacteria-killing techniques like irradiation and chemical rinses at a later stage in the process.⁷⁶ Even with meat being easier to test once thawed from the frozen blocks, food manufacturers in the EU took the meat supply labeling for granted and processed it into food products, untested.

CONCLUSION: CONSEQUENCES The spectacle reaches inside the body as well as out, which the horse meat scandal makes clear. Unsuspecting European consumers had seen and purchased beef, but the body was fed horse—and who knows what else. As already mentioned, a third of UK products are adulterated or contain uncommunicated ingredients. There is also something to be said for products

that are marketed as food and yet bear no nutritional value or pose harmful effects for the body. Despite the ubiquity and abundance of foodstuffs, we must take account of how people may be able to feed themselves adequately in terms of quantity but not in terms of nutrition. Someone who is fed with packaged, processed foods throughout the day can still be considered malnourished. For this reason, low-income people are the spectacle's most frequent victims, and not only because of the usual health risks associated with spectacular food, which is to say, food that masquerades as more than it truly is. In terms of the horse meat scandal—and we can see this is true for any cheap, mass-produced and processed product—Elliott commented that low-income people are most often the victims of food fraud or contamination, since they are forced to buy products that are the most easily adulterated.⁷⁷

There are two kinds of risk debated in the wake of events like the horse meat scandal. One is the risk to business that contaminations and product recalls pose. Retailers, especially those as large as Tesco or Asda in the United Kingdom, have risk assessment profiles and insurance to cover them in instances where a product is proven harmful to human health and must be recalled. However, insurance assessments for food crime, which, again, is considered to be an ongoing and increasing possibility in today's food supply chain, are not standard.⁷⁸ The horse meat scandal has prompted food suppliers and retailers to consider fraudulent labeling and adulteration as inevitable, as contamination is already considered to be.

The other risk I speak of is that posed to those who ingest potentially harmful food products. The scale of the supply chain poses the largest risk to human bodies, as a single instance of contamination or adulteration can be widely distributed, due to both the distances that food commodities travel and the degree to which they are processed and recombined. In *Foodopoly*, Huter provides an extensive list of outbreaks in the United States that crossed state lines and affected thousands of people. In 2010, 500 million eggs produced in only two Iowa facilities were recalled after having caused at least two thousand traceable cases of salmonella poisoning, with links to tens of thousands of cases of illness nationwide. In 2008, a salmonella outbreak in peanut products affected people in forty-three states and killed nine people. The outbreak was traced back to a single processing plant in Georgia that had never been inspected prior to the outbreak. The plant supplied 275 different companies, which had to recall a total of 3,500 different products.⁷⁹ The striking consistency in these examples and the horse meat scandal is that little

or no oversight occurs at the original site of processing or production, that a “sightless” system like HACCP is trusted to indicate human risk, and that it is often too little too late in terms of stopping an outbreak from spreading. In fact, when testing does produce evidence of contamination, consumers often are not alerted to the fact until the majority or all of the product has been consumed.⁸⁰

What becomes evident as one looks closer at the horse meat scandal is there is a proportionate decline in oversight as the spectacle secures its rule. Debord says,

*Owing to the very success of this separated system of production, whose product is separation itself, that fundamental area of experience which was associated in earlier societies with an individual's principal work is being transformed at last at the leading edge of the system's evolution—into a realm of non-work, of inactivity. Such inactivity, however, is by no means emancipated from productive activity: it remains in thrall to that activity, in an uneasy and worshipful subjection to production's needs and results; indeed it is itself a product of the rationality of production ... within the spectacle all activity is banned.*⁸¹

The human's role in overseeing production has been radically reduced, replaced with paper accounting, a development that caters to profits rather than people. The spectacle stakes an even greater claim on the human, rendering us inactive in the production of one of the most important materials to our survival: food. Hauter describes how “job-killing” rhetoric is often thrown around in American discussions of food inspections, as the discovery of adulteration and contamination can shut down production lines as well as opportunities for profit. The American context is relevant, considering that the United Kingdom used the same system of “oversight” developed in the United States up until the scandal. Under these primarily paper accounting systems, inspectors are told to “let the system work.”⁸² As ever, we are supposed to trust that technical systems are superior to us, benign, and working in our best interest.

Writing several decades after Debord, Virilio expressed the fear that we are “about to lose our status as eyewitness[es] of tangible reality, once and for all, to the benefit of technical substitutes.”⁸³ Such technical substitutes are enlisted in the spectacle, smoothing and accelerating the way of exchange while negating the role of the human in the production and distribution of products

which are for us the means of subsistence but for capital are merely a means of circulating value. Even food packaging, with its pictures and information panels, becomes a substitute for the individual consumer's ability to see, touch, and taste a product before purchasing it.

The point of this article was to discuss the implications of the EU horse meat scandal, not only for consumers but for all actors in the food supply chain, including the government and retailers. While consumers bear the most risk in events like these, this article has attempted to show that everyone, in a sense, falls victim to the spectacle of price and packaging. The horse meat scandal, with its spectacular origins, is exemplary for showing just how opaque the nature of food production and distribution has become. The pulverizing mechanisms of meat processing allowed horse meat to easily masquerade as beef, while the EU's protracted supply chain obscured the country and facility of origin. Further manufacturing processes, like the addition of packaging that definitively advertised the contents as “beef,” added insult to spectacular injury. The irony is in our assumption that the scandal is a mark of human folly, attributable to individual greed or ignorance. The scandal truly lies in our continued disavowal of the inequities concretised and reproduced by the topologies of capital.

ENDNOTES

1. Mark P. Worrel, “The Cult of Exchange Value and the Critical Theory of the Spectacle,” *Fast Capitalism* 5.2 (2009), http://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/5_2/Worrell5_2.html.
2. Guy Debord, *The Society of The Spectacle* (Brooklyn: Zone, 2008), 24.
3. This article focuses on the European context of food production and supply and, even more specifically, the United Kingdom. Hence, I will refer to prices using British currency. I also discuss the American context in a few instances, which is interesting generally as a foil for EU food policy, since the US is far less stringent with regulation, for example, with its continued use of rapid growth hormones in beef production. Wynonah Hauter, *Foodopoly* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 143.
4. Food Safety Authority of Ireland, “FSAI survey finds horse DNA found in some beef burger products,” 2013.
5. European Commission, “Q&A on horsemeat,” Health and Consumers: Food, *Europa*, 2013.
6. Ibid.

7. European Commission, "Commission publishes European test results on horse DNA and Phenylbutazone," Press Releases, *Europa*, 2013.
8. "A person would have to eat 500 to 600 burgers of pure tainted horse meat a day to consume close to a human's daily dose." Rudy Ruitenberg, "Horse-meat suspect Spanghero denies beef scam responsibility," *Bloomberg*, February 15, 2013.
9. European Commission, "Commission publishes European test results."
10. Ruitenberg, "Horse-meat suspect Spanghero denies beef scam responsibility."
11. Radio France Internationale, "French police arrest Spanghero managers over horsemeat scandal," *RFI English*, September 10, 2013.
12. Ibid.
13. "Banned British mutton seized in France," *The Telegraph*, March 20, 2013.
14. European Commission, "Q&A on horsemeat." Chris Elliott, "Elliott Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks—Interim Report," *Gov.Uk.*, Government of the United Kingdom, 2013.
15. Felicity Lawrence, "Fake-food scandal revealed as tests show third of products mislabeled," *The Guardian*, February 7, 2014.
16. Lucy Crossley, "Halal pies and pasties given to Muslim prisoners found to contain pork in latest meat contamination scandal," *Daily Mail UK*, February 2, 2013.
17. Food Safety Authority of Ireland, "FSAI survey."
18. Harriet Friedmann, "From Colonialism to Green Capitalism: Social Movements and the Emergence of Food Regimes," *New Directions in the Sociology of Global Development*, ed. Frederick Buttel and Phillip McMichael (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005).
19. Hugh Campbell, "Breaking New Ground in Food Regime Theory: Corporate Environmentalism, Ecological Feedbacks, and the 'Food from Somewhere' Regime?," *Agriculture and Human Values* 26 (2009): 311.
20. Ibid., 309.
21. Ibid., 317.
22. Larissa Drescher et al., "Consumer's Stated Trust in the Food Industry and Meat Purchases," *Agriculture and Human Values* 29 (2012): 509. On this point, Drescher et al. cite J. Michael Harris and Rimma Shiptsova, "Consumer Demand for Convenience Foods: Demographics and Expenditures," *Journal of Food Distribution Research* 38, no. 3 (2007): 22-36; and Klaus G. Grunert, "Future Trends and Consumer Life-styles with Regard to Meat Consumption," *Meat Science* 74, no. 1 (September 2006): 149-160.
23. Drescher et al., "Consumer's Stated Trust," 510, 515.
24. "Boom for butchers dies down six months after horse meat scandal," *The Gloucester Citizen*, July 5, 2013. Andrew Fearn, "Post-bse Impacts on the Beef Industry and the Value Chain: Insights from the UK," presented to the Tiffin Conference (2004), Lethbridge Community College, Lethbridge, Alberta.
25. "Boom for butchers," July 5, 2013. This argument proceeds on the assumption that to some degree, all people under capitalism are subject to coercion, most obviously in the wage labor relation but also in the ways in which they reproduce themselves (through eating and leisure), which are likewise mediated by the commodity form.
26. European Commission, "Executive Summary: Study on Mandatory Origin Labelling for Pig, Poultry and Sheep & Goat Meat," Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development, *Europa*, 2013: 4.
27. Ibid., 7, 9.
28. Ibid., 7.
29. Ibid., 9.
30. Sarah Butler and Rebecca Smithers, "Horsemeat scandal results in slide in sales of red meat in Britain," *The Guardian*, January 10, 2014.
31. Ibid.
32. Guy Debord, *Spectacle*, 12.
33. Marx states in *Capital*, vol. 1 that "the relations connecting the labor of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as ... material relations between persons and social relations between things" (1976, 166). This is his description of the commodity fetish, whereby commodities serve as subjects around which humans organize themselves, both in the workplace, and as consumers. The process by which humans come into a fetishized relationship with the products of their labor is a historical one. While there is no way of possibly pinpointing the historical origins of the fetish, it is consistent with the increasing move away from subsistence living, where humans produced food and various other items for direct, personal use, to market economies, where humans began producing items for someone else's use, that is, to be sold. Alongside these events, the increasing spe-

cialization and division of labor meant that humans were increasingly separated from the production of all manner of useful things, except for the one item they were employed to produce. In the end, one only comes into contact with the products of human labor at the market, bearing no relationship to those people who produced them, which is especially true in today's global market. Even though people may meet at the market, they do so as buyers and sellers of commodities. Their relationship therefore revolves around the commodity.

34. Debord, *Spectacle*, 12.

35. Kerstin Gustafsson et al., *Retailing Logistics and Fresh Food Packaging: Managing Change in the Supply Chain* (Philadelphia: Kogan Page US, 2006), 41.

36. Paul Virilio, *Open Sky* (London and New York: Verso, 2008), 56.

37. Andrew Seth and Geoffrey Randall, *The Grocers: The Rise and Rise of the Supermarket Chains* (London: Kogan Page, 2011), 38.

38. Debord, *Spectacle*, 16. Emphasis added.

39. "In this manner the labor objectified in the values of commodities is not just presented negatively, as labor in which abstraction is made from all the concrete forms and useful properties of work. Its own positive nature is explicitly brought out, namely the fact that it is the reduction of all kinds of actual labor to their common character ... human labor in general, of being the expenditure of human labor-power" (Marx 1976, 160).

40. Marianne R. Klimchuk and Sandra A. Krasovec, *Packaging Design: Successful Product Branding from Concept to Shelf* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2006), 5.

41. Ibid., 22, 30.

42. Ibid., 40.

43. Ibid., 235.

44. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 202.

45. Ibid., 144.

46. Ibid., 150.

47. Ibid., 165.

48. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 70. Gustafsson et al., *Retailing Logistics*, 44.

49. Drescher et al., "Consumer's Stated Trust," 510, 515.

50. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 66.

51. By deskilling, I refer to the loss of traditional skills like cooking, attributable to the pressures of work life but also promoted by food manufacturers, and a common quality of life in automated settings like factories or fast food restaurants.

52. Marx, *Capital*, 166.

53. Seth and Randall, *The Grocers*, 48.

54. Elliott, "Elliott Review," 22.

55. Ibid., 37.

56. Debord, *Spectacle*, 13.

57. Alf Hornborg, "Technology as Fetish: Marx, Latour, and the Cultural Foundations of Capital," *Theory, Culture and Society* 31, no. 4 (2013): 14.

58. Reports produced in the wake of the scandal that debated labeling regulations in the EU suggest that consumers want their products marked with origin labeling but that such things do not factor into their purchasing decisions. European Commission, "Executive Summary: Study on Mandatory Origin Labelling," 4. Is there a discrepancy here between consumer desire and behaviour or simply an inability to pursue that desire in dollar terms? After all, the costs of increasing transparency and tracking in the supply chain either fall on producers or consumers. Ibid., 7,9. When the European Commission published a report on improving pork commodity labeling, it was reported that "on average in the EU27 about 12% of the extra costs for labeling [would be] transmitted to the producers, while about 88% of the extra costs [would be] transmitted to the consume." Ibid., 7. For poultry commodity labeling, consumers were projected to bear 91% of the costs of labeling. Ibid., 9.

59. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 34.

60. Marx, *Capital*, 293.

61. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 157.

62. "Value," here and in the context of "value-added," does not refer to Marx's definition of the term. It is rather a general term used by economists.

63. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 47.

64. Ibid.

65. Paul Virilio, *Grey Ecology* (New York: Atropos, 2008), 34.

66. Virilio tells us that what we know to be human, or any other ontological category, is a matter of proportion: "There is no object without proportions. There is no man without dimensions." Virilio, *Grey Ecology*, 27. I take my understanding of the ontological nature of proportion from the follow-

ing passage in particular: "What we call real-time leads to the space-time continuum suffering a temporal contraction which reduces to nothing or practically nothing the vastness of the world ... Great or weak, this vastness constitutes the power of Being. And now I'll give you a very clear example: to be a man is to measure basically between one and two meters. If a man measures 20 meters in height, it is not a man. This is unthinkable. Today, everything is like this. It is amazing to what degree proportions have disappeared from the modern world." Virilio, *Grey Ecology*, 27-28.

67. See Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2005) for a history of McDonald's effect on the poultry industry, particularly how its demand for hand-held food portions (i.e. for chicken McNuggets) influenced the production and sale of chicken portions like thighs and breasts when people had previously only purchased chickens whole.

68. Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Box: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 189.

69. Debord, *Spectacle*, 45.

70. Radio France Internationale, "French police arrest

Spanghero managers."

71. Elliott, "Elliott Review," 15, 22.

72. *Ibid.*, 36.

73. *Ibid.*, 37.

74. *Ibid.*, 38.

75. J. Blythman, "The really bad news? Horse burgers aren't the only nasty secret in the chill cabinets," *Daily Mail UK*, January 17, 2013.

76. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 123.

77. Elliott, "Elliott Review," 12.

78. Sarah Veysey, "European horse meat scandal not expected to trigger insurance claims," *Business Insurance*, February 14, 2013.

79. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 137-8.

80. Elliott, "Elliott Review," 15.

81. Debord, *Spectacle*, 21.

82. Hauter, *Foodopoly*, 129.

83. Virilio, *Open Sky*, 91.