

## Consuming with Conscience? The Moral Privilege and Narrative Scale Paradoxes of Happy Meat

Josée Johnston\*  <sup>a</sup>

Emily Huddart  <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Sociology, University of Toronto (Canada)

<sup>b</sup> Department of Sociology, The University of British Columbia (Canada)

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### Abstract

Class critiques of ethical consumption function as conventional wisdom, and green goods are often dismissed as luxuries for the affluent. While these critiques have merit, they can obscure the paradoxes at the heart of sustainable consumption, where moral aspiration is entangled with material constraints. To examine these dynamics, we use the case of “happy meat”, a shorthand for ethically branded animal products marketed as humane, local, or sustainable. Drawing on a broad Canadian multi-site study, we develop two analytic paradoxes that likely extend beyond food. The moral privilege paradox captures how ethical consumption organizes care through forms of distinction that also reproduce exclusion. The narrative scale paradox highlights how reassuring cultural narratives of happy meat make ethical consumption feel meaningful and achievable in ways that can also narrow recognition of the structural limits of small-scale solutions. Together, these paradoxes show how sustainable consumption can generate meaningful ethical actions while also reproducing the exclusions and limitations that undermine its broader promise. Seeing sustainable consumption through this lens helps move beyond the familiar cul-de-sac where consumption is cast either as empty performance or as a hopeful path to sustainability. Instead, it reveals sustainable consumption as a project shaped by enduring contradictions and illuminates how people navigate competing moral, material, and cultural demands within contemporary food systems.

**Keywords:** Happy meat; Green consumption; Moral privilege; Scale; Paradox.

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\*  [josee.johnston@utoronto.ca](mailto:josee.johnston@utoronto.ca)

## 1 Introduction

In public and policy discourse, the promise of sustainable consumption is often imagined via technological objects: low-flush toilets, energy-efficient appliances, or rooftop solar panels. These technologies matter, and fixes of this kind remain central to the dominant framing of sustainability. Yet environmental sociologists have long emphasized that such objects are not only material goods with ecological effects, but also socially and culturally embedded commodities. “Green” goods are no exception: tools for reducing environmental impact also function as markers of class, place, and global inequality. This raises difficult questions about the socio-ecological consequences of encouraging privileged consumers to “save the earth” through consumption, when such choices may reproduce the very logics of privilege and inequality, as they seem to address (Anantharaman, 2022). Sustainable commodities are saturated with meanings of morality and symbolic distinction, evident in products ranging from Whole Foods groceries to organic crib mattresses to plastic-free water bottles (Johnston, 2008; Szasz, 2007). These commodities circulate through markets sharply divided by class, geography, and the racialized global inequalities that distribute resources and risks. Sustainability narratives also download responsibility onto women, reproducing familiar gendered expectations about who should care for the planet and consume responsibly (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Huddart & Kmec, 2019; Wang, 2016). Sustainable consumption, then, is not only a technological puzzle but also a moral and cultural project, organized through everyday goods and recursively coupled with inequality.

The critique of sustainable consumption as an exclusionary project has moved well beyond environmental sociology into the cultural mainstream. Journalists, commentators, and consumers themselves echo Maniates’ (2001) argument that the “individualization of environmental responsibility” is both materially insufficient and structurally misguided. Eco-conscious goods are routinely critiqued as status markers, whether in the cynical shorthand “Whole Paycheck” for Whole Foods Market, the mockable trend of accumulating reusable water bottles, or the TikTok refrain, “there is no ethical consumption under capitalism”.<sup>1</sup> Currid-Halkett (2018) characterizes such patterns of consumption as reflective of the “aspirational class,” wherein elites signal their status through supposedly subtle investments in sustainability, education, and health. In practice, however, many of these goods are anything but subtle: they serve as conspicuous signals of eco-conscious privilege, available only to those who can afford them, thereby excluding those who cannot. A now-visible consequence is that environmentalism itself can come to appear as a lifestyle for the affluent, recasting care for the planet as a luxury rather than a broadly shared social and political project (Huddart, 2022).

Yet reducing sustainable consumption to a story of privilege and exclusion does not capture the full picture. Cynicism highlights real inequalities, but it risks foreclosing a fuller account of how and why sustainable consumption persists as both a classed aspiration and a meaningful cultural and material practice. As Willis and Schor (2012) argue, consumer practices such as buying efficient light bulbs may appear trivial or symbolic, yet they can also connect to broader political commitments and environmental action. A simple opposition between private-sphere consumption as self-centered and public-sphere action as other-oriented misses important nuances and exceptions. In this article, we examine these tensions through the case of “happy meat”, a shorthand for ethically branded animal products such as grass-fed beef, free-range chicken, and humanely raised, heritage pork (Johnston et al., 2025). The analysis draws on a

1. We are grateful to Brody Trotter for alerting us to the TikTok hashtag “there is no ethical consumption under capitalism” and we look forward to citing his insightful academic work on this topic.

broader Canadian multi-site study of happy meat, including consumer and producer research conducted across several regions. We ask how happy meat's case illuminates the contradictory dynamics of sustainable consumption.

We approach the contradictory dynamics of sustainable consumption through the concept of paradox, which we use as an analytic rather than an emic category. By paradox, we mean not a strict logical contradiction but situations in which practices or narratives generate some of the goods they promise while also reproducing harms, exclusions, or limits that undermine that promise. In this sense, paradox captures more than tension or ambiguity alone: it names a dynamic in which the very elements that sustain a practice can also limit or unsettle it. This usage is compatible with practice-theoretical approaches that treat practices as configurations of meanings, materials, and competences (Shove et al., 2012); rather than assuming these elements are coherently aligned, we show how their alignment can itself generate contradictions that are productive, enduring, and difficult to resolve. Happy meat offers a particularly illustrative case: it is often framed as humane, sustainable, and delicious, even as these narratives can soften or obscure systemic inequalities and ecological limits. Seeing sustainable consumption through the lens of paradox allows us to move beyond the binary of technological optimism versus cultural cynicism, and toward an analysis that takes both the ethical appeal and the undermining limits of consumer action seriously.

We develop two analytic concepts to make sense of the contradictory dynamics of sustainable consumption: the moral privilege paradox and the narrative scale paradox. The first, the moral privilege paradox, captures how ethical consumption can function simultaneously as an expression of care and as an exclusionary form of distinction. Ethical meat is undeniably more expensive and is often framed as food for the wealthy, yet it is also valued as a marker of ecological concern, animal care, and moral responsibility. Our respondents described not only the exclusionary aspects of happy meat, but also the sincere ethical intentions that underpin its purchase. The moral privilege paradox lies not simply in the coexistence of privilege and care, but in the fact that a practice oriented toward moral good is also a practice of distinction that is unevenly available and socially excluding. In this way, the moral privilege paradox is located in the moralized field of consumption and evaluation, where ethical consumption involves forms of distinction that simultaneously legitimize ethical commodities and reproduce social exclusion.

The second paradox, the narrative scale paradox, captures the ways narratives of happy meat both sustain ethical aspirations and limit the horizon of change. Stories of humane, sustainable, small-scale meat do important moral and cultural work: they make certain forms of production feel meaningful, viable, and ethically reassuring for consumers and producers alike. Yet that very reassurance can also obscure the structural problem of overconsumption by presenting "better meat" as a sufficient response to ecological crisis. Small-scale, ethically ambitious forms of meat production cannot be easily scaled up to meet contemporary levels of demand without losing the very qualities that make them morally compelling. The paradox lies not simply in the coexistence of narrative promise and material limits, but in the fact that the happy meat stories that make ethical meat compelling can also deflect attention from the systemic imperative to reduce overall meat consumption. In this way, the narrative scale paradox is located in the relationship between narrative appeal and structural infeasibility, where the very stories that sustain ethical action can also limit recognition of the scale of change required.

The discussion proceeds in three parts. First, we situate our argument within broader debates on sustainable consumption, status, morality, and practice, outlining the theoretical and empirical context for our case. Second, we develop the moral privilege paradox, showing how happy meat organizes ethical aspirations through forms of distinction that simultaneously ex-

press care and reproduce exclusion. Third, we outline the narrative scale paradox, analyzing how narratives of happy meat make ethical consumption feel meaningful and practicable while also narrowing recognition of the structural limits of small-scale solutions, as well as of meat's role in the climate crisis (Eisen & Brown, 2022). We conclude by reflecting on what these paradoxes reveal about the broader contradictions of sustainable consumption, particularly in light of this symposium's focus on conspicuous sustainability.

In developing these two paradoxes, our intended contribution is twofold. First, we argue that sustainable consumption cannot be understood solely as a site of technological fixes or dismissed as a cynical expression of elite privilege. Instead, it must be analyzed as a moral and cultural field in which ethical consumption can generate meaningful forms of care while also reproducing exclusion and structural limits. Second, the case of happy meat shows how meanings, emotions, and everyday routines shape whether sustainable consumption feels compelling, achievable, or sufficient, positioning culture alongside material infrastructure and technology as central to our understanding. In this way, the article contributes to sociological debates by reframing sustainable consumption not simply as a technical solution or a failed project, but as a domain where morality, inequality, and ecological constraints are structurally entangled.

## 2 Empirical and Theoretical Context

This article draws on a broader Canadian multi-site study of “happy meat”, conducted between 2017 and 2022, that combines qualitative and mixed-methods research on both consumption and production (Johnston et al., 2025). The broader project included fifty site visits and seventy-six in-depth interviews with ethical meat producers across British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario. It also included focus groups with sixty-seven urban consumers in Toronto and Vancouver who expressed concerns about meat production and consumption but were not necessarily strict ethical meat purchasers. In addition, the project included a survey of 2,328 Canadians. It also included discourse-oriented analysis of marketing materials, popular culture, and meat-related public narratives. Producers and sites were selected to capture variation across regions and sustainable farming models, and the broader project combined interview, observational, survey, and discourse-based material to analyze how happy meat is produced, understood, and justified. This article draws selectively on that broader empirical archive to develop two analytic concepts: the moral privilege paradox and the narrative scale paradox. While we do not aim to present the full project in methodological detail, we do want to clarify the substantial empirical basis from which these conceptual claims emerge. The case of happy meat is especially useful as an entry point into larger debates about sustainable consumption because it brings into view the entanglement of moral aspiration, material constraint, and social distinction that structures sustainable consumption more broadly.

The case of happy meat speaks to a broader feature of sustainable consumption: it is always organized across multiple scales. It is both a systemic endeavor aimed at reducing the material and energetic costs of meeting human needs (Princen, 1999) and an individualized practice in which consumers are invited to align everyday habits with moral commitments to the planet (Huddart & Hauslik, 2018). Early work on household-level sustainable consumption emphasized rational choice and environmental attitudes, assuming that better-informed consumers would make more sustainable decisions (Gill et al., 2005). This approach depended on the idea that consumers had access to the information needed to reduce their environmental impact, if

they chose to act on it. By contrast, innovations from practice-oriented scholarship showed that much of what sustains unsustainable consumption is infrastructural and often invisible: energy grids, food systems, and the material organization of everyday life (Shove, 2003). From this perspective, shifting practices toward lower material impact requires changes in the materials that enable consumption, the meanings attached to it, and the competences needed to carry it out (Hargreaves, 2011; Shove et al., 2012). Our paradox framework builds on this insight by asking what happens when these elements align in ways that make a practice feel ethical and workable, while also reproducing the very limits that constrain its broader transformative reach.

The case of happy meat also speaks to broader debates about sustainability, morality, and social hierarchy. Much social scientific research on sustainable consumption attends to two key issues. First, the emergence of social norms around sustainable goods and practices appears to reproduce and naturalize existing social hierarchies (Anantharaman, 2024; Baumann et al., 2022). Consumption, sustainable or otherwise, is never strictly functional; it is a language of recognition, belonging, and distinction. As Bourdieu (1984) argued, taste is both structured by and a structuring of social hierarchy. Recent work has illuminated how sustainability functions as a form of moral and symbolic capital. Baumann et al.'s (2022) concept of "moral aestheticism" captures how moral virtue is transformed into the very definition of good taste. Certain forms of ethical consumption not only signal social class but also reinforce class advantage and social boundaries. Anantharaman (2024) demonstrates this clearly through ethnographic research in Bengaluru, India, showing how middle-class residents embrace "clean and green" practices that depend on the invisible labor of waste pickers and domestic workers, earning them respect and recognition. Sustainability here symbolizes personal virtue and serves as a site of social ordering, where moral worth is distributed unevenly along lines of class and caste. By articulating the moral privilege paradox, we build on this scholarship by showing how happy meat consumption is organized through a moralized field in which ethical aspiration is pursued through unequal access, distinction, and exclusion.

Second, sustainable consumption demands both consuming less and consuming differently, yet mainstream projects often focus on shifting or substituting the objects of consumption rather than challenging absolute levels of consumption, for example, by eating different kinds of meat rather than eating less meat (Fuchs & Lorek, 2005; York, 2012 & 2017). The narrative scale paradox we introduce below helps make sense of why so many well-intended efforts to green consumption across multiple domains have yielded relatively modest material gains. Consumers concerned about the environmental impacts of meat may seek out happy meat because producers present it as a form of better stewardship and improved animal welfare. Yet that stewardship is itself predicated on small-scale production, so the very features that make happy meat ethically compelling also limit its wider material reach.

Food offers a uniquely rich site for studying moralized consumption: it is consumed daily, deeply embedded in culture, and carries significant material consequences. Within the expanding field of "ethical" or "sustainable" food, meat occupies a distinct position. Ahead of the 30th Conference of the Parties (COP30), the annual United Nations climate summit, in Belém, Brazil, a consortium of environmental non-governmental organizations released a report calling for greater scrutiny of the global meat and dairy industry's role in climate change. The report estimates that the livestock sector accounts for 12–19% of greenhouse gas emissions (Foodrise, 2025). Meat is implicated in ecological, social, and animal harm, yet it continues to be consumed at prodigious and often growing levels across most nations (OECD/FAO, 2023). The rise of happy meat, marketed as local, humane, or regenerative, emerges from this contra-

diction (Johnston et al., 2025). It allows consumers to maintain an unsustainable volume of consumption while re-signifying meat eating as ethical. At smaller scales, however, the production of happy meat can indeed realize some of its promises, including ecological restoration, safer labor conditions, and improved animal welfare. It is precisely this combination of partial realization and structural limitation that makes happy meat a revealing case for studying the paradoxes of sustainable consumption.

Across these perspectives, sustainability emerges as a paradoxical moral field. It promises collective redemption through individual virtue, but in doing so, it often reinforces the very hierarchies it seeks to transcend. The performance of sustainable living translates planetary responsibility into acts of taste and restraint. These acts can be meaningful expressions of care, but they are also bound up in what Bourdieu (1984) would call the reproduction of distinction. Those with economic and cultural capital are best positioned to access and display sustainable goods like solar panels, electric cars, and organic meat. Low-income consumers, by contrast, are often exempt from systems of moral sanction and moral reward tied to sustainable consumption norms (Huddart & Horne, 2020). Sustainability, then, functions as a moral aspiration that is also organized through mechanisms of social exclusion. Taken together, these literatures suggest that sustainability should be understood not as a coherent moral project but as a field of paradoxes in which moral aspiration, aesthetic distinction, and structural constraint intersect. Sustainable consumption, in this light, is not simply a solution to the environmental crisis but a contested moral terrain in which care is pursued through classed distinction and unequal economic constraints.

### 3 The Moral Privilege Paradox

The first paradox that emerged from our research on happy meat is what we call the moral privilege paradox. Put simply, the moral privilege paradox lies in the fact that efforts to consume more ethically are pursued through a field structured by both a logic of care and a logic of distinction. As such, this paradox captures the entanglement of moral aspiration and consumer inequalities in the North American foodscape. A survey of Toronto consumers revealed that 63% agree that shopping is a powerful force for social and ecological change (Huddart et al., 2019), a sentiment encapsulated by the phrase “vote with your fork”. This belief translates ethics into consumer choice, prompting shoppers to select organic, grass-fed, or small-farmer-raised meats as a way to signal moral commitment and ostensibly improve the foodscape. Yet the very choices that embody this consumer-driven model of social change are often high-priced, time-intensive, and information-heavy. Voting with one’s fork assumes the availability of ethical goods, sufficient knowledge and information to validate ethical claims, and the capacity to pay for products that are, on average, about 50% pricier than mainstream options (Islam & Colonescu, 2019). In this way, ethical consumption is organized through unequal capacities to access, interpret, and afford goods.

The moral privilege paradox lies in the fact that these unequal capacities not only restrict access to ethical consumption; they also help generate its moral force, making the practice appear distinctive, desirable, meaningful, and moral. Many consumers genuinely want to purchase meat from animals they understand to be healthy, humanely treated, and sustainably raised (Johnston et al., 2025). There is real evidence here of a logic of care, oriented toward environmental protection and, in the case of meat, animal welfare. Yet these same choices also function as markers of distinction that are unevenly available and accessible. In Bourdieusian terms (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), this is a mechanism of symbolic violence: class-differentiated

capacities, such as the ability to decode labels or access high-end butchers, are misrecognized as differences in virtue and competence. The dictum of “voting with your fork” converts economic and cultural capital into moral capital (Lamont, 2000), so that those who can prioritize and purchase happy meat appear more caring, informed, and responsible, while those who are priced out or time-poor risk being read as apathetic, uncaring, or ignorant. The result is a subtle but pernicious moral logic that naturalizes privilege as conscientiousness. The paradox, then, is not simply that care and exclusion coexist, but that ethical consumption is enacted through forms of distinction that simultaneously express moral concern and reproduce social exclusion.

In our focus group discussions, participants described lived dilemmas that make the moral privilege paradox visible in practice. They balanced the pleasures of eating happy meat and supporting responsible animal agriculture against the discomfort of consuming in a class-stratified marketplace. Interviewees spoke of the genuine pleasure derived from eating happy meat: the satisfaction of good taste combined with the moral gratification of supporting humane and sustainable farming practices. This form of pleasure aligns with what Kate Soper (2007) termed *alternative hedonism*, a sensibility that locates enjoyment not in conspicuous luxury but in ethical and ecologically attuned consumption. Across groups, participants described happy meat as a way to express care for animals and to respond to concerns about the environmental harms of meat production, while also making meat consumption feel more morally defensible. At the same time, participants often displayed significant reflexivity and empathy toward those who could not afford happy meat products, which are typically sold at a premium price. Many were aware that their own practices were situated within a moralized field of distinction that reproduced inequality. They voiced sadness for consumers excluded by price, and unease that opportunities to enact moral concern were unequally distributed by income.

Alongside this reflexive empathy for consumers excluded from ethical meat consumption, participants also critiqued the privilege embedded in voting with your fork. They did so not by naming a paradox as such, but through hesitant and often qualified depictions of the kinds of people they imagined buying ethically branded meat products. When we asked who buys happy meat, participants initially hesitated, often signaling discomfort with appearing judgmental. Yet their subsequent descriptions painted a fairly consistent portrait of the happy meat shopper as someone wealthy, educated, often white, and endowed with the time, knowledge, and disposable income required to purchase premium ethical cuts. These depictions were also gendered. In a Toronto group, one participant invoked “Gwyneth Paltrow — her exact gendered body type and income level” as the archetype of someone who buys local, grass-fed meat. Another described the happy meat shopper as “a very thin, rich, white woman”, underscoring how ethical meat consumption was imagined as racially distinct, class-marked, and feminine. When men were imagined in this role, they often appeared as urban hipsters eager to display expensive steaks to friends, but not necessarily as deeply informed consumers. These recurrent depictions did not simply express personal prejudice; they made visible the classed, racialized, and gendered schemas through which ethical consumption acquires moral distinction.

Alongside critiques of privilege and pretentiousness, participants also attributed a sincere ethic of care to ethical meat consumption. The “ethical” meat shopper was often imagined as someone motivated to do good: a person who wanted to protect animal welfare, safeguard family health, and consume more sustainably. This uneasy combination of distinction and care came through clearly in a Vancouver focus group, where participants joked about the archetypal happy meat shopper while also acknowledging the moral appeal of such practices. Peter, a Chinese Canadian father, quipped that he pictured “a person who does boot camp, shops at Whole Foods, and blogs about their cleansing diet”, which drew laughter, followed by Ivan, a

middle-aged white father, chiming in with a single word: “kale”. Yet once the laughter subsided, Ivan added that this figure also included “people who are making a conscious decision to eat better [...] the family who has just made that decision to have a better quality of food”. Madia, a Latina mother, agreed, describing the happy meat eater as “a person who is conscious about their carbon footprint, conscious about how much water they use. It’s the whole package”.

The humorous critique of pretentiousness and privilege persisted throughout the discussion. Ivan teased that such people “eat kale and wear hemp underwear”, and Peter added that he imagined “a beautiful Caucasian couple with no children” living in Yaletown, an affluent Vancouver neighborhood. But Peter then shifted from parody to self-reflection, admitting that he and his wife could not consistently live up to these ideals when feeding their young daughter. They had hoped to provide only the most ethical, high-quality meat products at family dinners, but in practice, he sighed, they often defaulted to “mac and cheese and chicken nuggets [...] I’m so tired”. Other group members responded sympathetically, recognizing not only the privilege and performative dimensions associated with happy meat consumption, but also the fatigue involved in trying to live up to its demands. At the same time, they acknowledged the goodwill underlying such choices. Ivan emphasized that these shoppers included “people with good intentions”, while Madia stressed that even those “who may not have the resources” could still remain attentive to where meat came from and to the planetary resources required to bring it to the plate. What surfaced in this exchange was not simply mixed feelings, but a lived awareness that the ethical appeal of happy meat was inseparable from the classed demands through which it was made practicable.

Alongside this ethic of care, participants’ accounts also reproduced a schema of purity and pollution that made the moral privilege paradox especially visible. Expensive happy meat was often imagined as “good” and “pure”, while cheap meat, especially from discount chains and some Chinese or Korean grocers, was cast as “bad”, “dirty”, or morally suspect. One Toronto participant described meat from discount supermarkets as fundamentally “gross”: “I don’t want to look at it. I don’t want to participate in it. I don’t want to smell it. I don’t want to touch it”. Another said she would not buy meat from certain Asian supermarkets because they were “questionable”, adding that there was “something very unappetizing about the meat there”. By contrast, European butchers and upscale retailers were often imbued with trust and authenticity, even when their practices looked unconventional from the standpoint of formal retail norms: “They’re slaughtering meat, like, two feet from where I’m paying! That’s against the rules, but [...] they’re selling me good meat, they’re doing their own practices that are working just fine”. Others assumed that premium grocery stores and butchers meant expensive but ethically sourced, “better quality” meat: “You know that it’s coming from a better environment”. An Ontario interviewee described her trust in expensive boutique butchers as an “operating assumption,” even though she admitted she had “no real evidence behind this trust”. These accounts show how moralized consumption can operate as boundary work, attaching care and purity to expensive meat while displacing suspicion and disgust onto cheaper, classed, and sometimes racialized alternatives. In doing so, they make visible the moral privilege paradox: ethical aspiration is enacted through distinctions that make ethical meat appear caring and conscientious while also helping reproduce inequality and exclusion.

But happy meat is not a simple case of class exclusion. What makes it paradoxical is that participants often recognized the privilege embedded in ethical meat consumption even as they remained committed to its moral appeal. The schematic contrasts of purity and pollution discussed above underscore this point: even when happy meat was framed as virtuous, careful, and pure, participants were quick to acknowledge the class constraints at play and to resist

sounding judgmental toward those who could not afford it. As Amber put it, “It’s a privilege to be able to afford the ethical meat”, and she vehemently critiqued the “privileged perception” surrounding it, one that carries “a real element of shaming”, implying that people who buy cheaper meat are “ignorant, or they don’t care about the environment, or they’re lazy”. In the same discussion, Hayun observed that “the whole idea of ethical as a label and as a practice [...] I feel like largely it’s still used to exclude, because it’s just not accessible”. Garth, a Toronto participant, echoed these frustrations: “It’s also super expensive [...] and it can be weaponized as sort of this elitist thing. It’s like, ‘Oh, I don’t want to eat that!’ And I hate that [...] I hate socioeconomic barriers to food!”. Taken together, these reflections show that participants did not simply reproduce the moralized field of ethical consumption; they also recognized and critiqued its exclusions. Yet that reflexivity did not undo the paradox. Instead, it revealed how the ability to express ethical care through consumption remained structured by unequal access, price, and distinction.

#### 4 The Narrative Scale Paradox

“Less meat, better meat” acts as a rallying cry for the happy meat narrative. The narrative scale paradox captures the way this narrative both sustains ethical aspiration and narrows the horizon of change. The producers we visited spoke of, and often vividly illustrated, a sincere commitment to animal welfare and sustainable farming practices. Consumers likewise understood happy meat as a meaningful alternative to conventional meat, in part because it was produced by people who care. Yet despite the prominence of “less meat, better meat” within this discourse, happy meat stories tend to emphasize better meat far more than less meat, muting the demand-side question. At the same time, happy meat is not simply a small-scale alternative that happens to be difficult to expand. Its ethical appeal is bound up with a niche market form defined by premium pricing, limited throughput, and distinction from the mass market. The meanings, materials, and competences that make happy meat morally compelling also tether it to forms of production and consumption that are difficult to generalize without altering the practice itself. The paradox, then, lies not only in the gap between narrative promise and material limits, but also in the fact that the very qualities that make happy meat feel like an ethical solution are linked to a market form whose reach remains structurally constrained. This becomes especially clear in our producer data, where commitments to animal welfare and land stewardship appear inseparable from production models that are difficult to scale without transforming the practice itself.

In our fieldwork with sustainability-oriented producers, we saw clearly how the practices that made happy meat ethically compelling also tethered it to a limited scale. The operations we observed involved long hours, heavy labor inputs, and sustained attention to animal well-being. Those same practices constrained output and resisted easy expansion. Consider the Alberta “bush pig” operation we visited: pigs lived outdoors on pasture with ample forage and rooting space, moving freely in a way that closely matched the happy meat ideal described by consumers in our focus groups. But this system depended on abundant, low-cost land, intensive, hands-on work (especially when it came to catching the pigs), and a niche buyer willing to pay a premium for an irregular product. Crucially, the same rural conditions that made land affordable also limited access to a large market of affluent consumers; the farm relied heavily on a single high-end restaurant account to remain financially viable. At the time of our interview, roughly fifteen pigs were on pasture, a small but telling indicator of scale. This case makes the narrative scale paradox clearly visible: the very arrangements that enabled better lives for an-

imals also anchored the operation in a niche market form that was difficult to scale without changing what made it ethically laudable.

The Alberta bush pig operation offered a vivid illustration of scale, but the underlying constraints were not unique. Across the sites we visited, producers described the demands of individualized animal care, the slower growth rates of heritage breeds, limited slaughter capacity for small numbers of non-standard-sized animals, the high cost of pasture, and vulnerability to price shocks in organic feed. These details underscore the intensive work required to sustain non-standardized grass-based operations on thin profit margins. More importantly, they clarify the narrative scale paradox at the level of production: the very inputs required to deliver animal welfare and ecological care, including ample land, affordable labor, time to raise animals slowly, skilled slaughter capacity, and a stable, high-price market, also place structural limits on how much meat can be produced. The result is exemplary meat in limited quantities, but not a model readily generalizable to meet mass demand at current levels.

These hard limits did not disappear when producers attempted to expand; rather, expansion often required altering the very practices that align with the small-scale, happy meat consumer imaginary described in our focus groups. As farms sought to feed more people, the forms of care that made animals appear “happy” at small scales increasingly came into tension with the practical demands of land, labor, seasonality, and reliable supply. To be clear, the larger producers we visited continued to emphasize animal welfare. Yet their operations often moved further from the image of animals roaming freely in open fields. One pig farmer, for instance, walked us through a modern barn that local chefs praised as “good” space: bright, clean, and airy, with adjustable side panels that opened to the outdoors. Even so, we noted that these pigs spent most of their lives in an enclosed pen. This operation, like many others we visited, was constrained not only by the high cost and scarcity of land but also by the fact that pigs’ rooting behavior could quickly degrade pasture systems.

Chicken producers described similar compromises. Many relied on Cornish Cross birds, which grow quickly but are prone to health problems and are poorly suited to outdoor life, though farmers used various workarounds to coax birds outside. By contrast, slower-growing heritage birds were often hardier outdoors, but they took longer to raise and produced smaller breasts and tougher meat that did not match mainstream consumer expectations. Some farmers argued that indoor barns were more comfortable for birds and significantly reduced flock mortality, even though this conflicted with consumers’ expectations of happy outdoor hens. Seasonal realities compounded these compromises. Canadian winters make year-round outdoor production impossible, meaning that “naturally raised” chicken typically comes from indoor barn systems for most of the year. Larger operators were candid about what scale demanded. Once producers were managing thousands of birds, relationships necessarily became more impersonal. At that scale, the practical demands of controlling mortality, meeting consumer expectations for plump, inexpensive chicken breasts, and ensuring reliable supply increasingly displaced the pastoral ideal associated with happy meat. What becomes visible here is the narrative scale paradox in relational form: scaling up did not simply impose practical limits on happy meat production but required reworking the very practices and meanings that had made it seem ethical in the first place.

These production-side constraints matter all the more because they operate within states where overall meat demand remains extremely high. North America remains at the extreme end of global meat consumption: the United States approaches 140–145 kg per person per year, and Canada sits around 110 kg, roughly twice the world average (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2023). These high consumption levels persist even as

consumers articulate concerns about industrialized meat production. Against this backdrop, Scandinavian social democracies are often treated as more progressive cases, since they consume significantly less meat than North American eaters. Yet the contrast should not be overstated. In Sweden, for example, total meat supply remains approximately 80–90 kg per person, with a notable, but still modest downward trend over the past decade. These levels remain well above the world average, and the decline is gradual rather than indicative of a major dietary shift. In this context, the promise of “better meat” is constrained not only by how it is produced, but also by the sheer scale of meat demand it would have to displace in the absence of any substantial shift toward eating less meat. Put differently, the “less meat” side of the formula remains far less developed than its moral and cultural appeal might suggest.

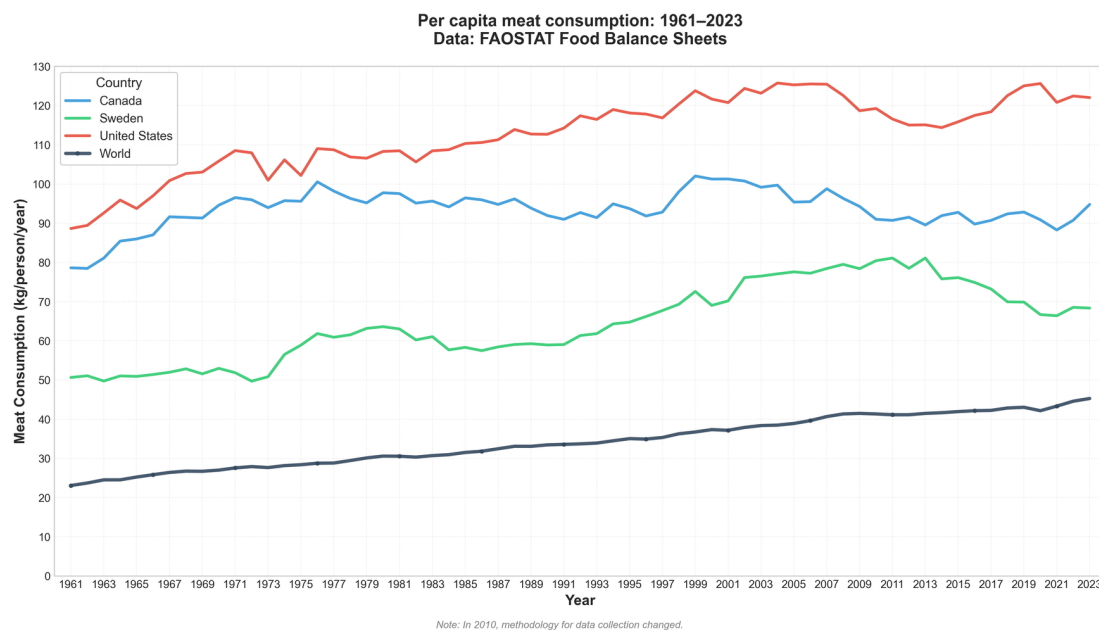


Figure 1. Long-run per capita meat consumption (1961–2023)

Figure 1 visualizes these long-run consumption trajectories, showing persistently high per-capita meat consumption in North America, levels well above the global average, and modest declines in Sweden. The figure underscores the narrative scale paradox: even where ethical food cultures and sustainability norms are relatively strong, they do not necessarily translate into substantial reductions in aggregate meat demand. This figure suggests that cultural endorsement of high-quality or more ethical meat is unlikely, on its own, to overcome the structural drivers of affluent meat consumption.

Taken together, these cases highlight a core insight of the narrative scale paradox: stories of “better meat” do important cultural work, but they cannot alter the basic arithmetic of massive demand for meat. Across our fieldwork and comparative analysis, happy meat narratives offer consumers reassurance and describe conscientious farming practices, yet they remain tied to forms of production and consumption that are misaligned with contemporary appetites. Even in Scandinavian settings with relatively strong sustainability norms, per-capita meat demand remains high by global standards. In North America, the pastoral imaginary surrounding happy meat circulates widely, but the material conditions of land, labor, climate, and market organization constrain how far such practices can spread. The narrative scale paradox, then, lies

not simply in a gap between a morally appealing story and a system that cannot generalize its ideals at scale, but in the fact that the meanings and material arrangements that make happy meat ethically compelling also tether it to forms of production whose reach remains structurally limited. Happy meat offers an ethically satisfying script for a small-scale niche market. In high-consumption contexts, however, reassurance without reduction risks functioning as a moral detour, allowing privileged eaters to resolve discomfort through specialized consumption without confronting the environmental consequences of high-volume meat consumption. To be clear, our aim is not to dismiss exemplary producers or shame consumers seeking better options, but to name a structural bind that recurs across ethical consumption projects in the Global North. The challenge is better and less, not better instead of less.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion: Paradoxes of Conspicuous Sustainability

Meat is the subject of considerable critique: it is a major driver of greenhouse gas emissions, it involves animal suffering, and certain forms of meat, especially red and processed meat, are associated with health risks. In response to these intertwined problems, hHappy meat has emerged as a cultural and market-based alternative framed as more ethical than conventional meat. Like other sustainable fixes, happy meat operates primarily as a product-based solution, offering a morally differentiated commodity rather than directly addressing the scale of consumption. It enables more responsible forms of consumer action, but it also requires the knowledge to locate trusted sources, the time to investigate production claims, and the income to afford premium prices. As a result, ethical meat consumption has become a high-status form of conspicuous sustainability (Baumann et al., 2022). Yet happy meat is not simply a better product; it is best understood as a deeply paradoxical ethical strategy. The moral privilege paradox and the narrative scale paradox help clarify the contradictory dynamics through which sustainable consumption is pursued and limited.

The dynamics surrounding happy meat have well-documented parallels in the energy sector. As York (2012 & 2017) shows, energy transitions since the Industrial Revolution have been largely additive rather than substitutive: oil and gas supplemented coal and wood, and renewables have, in turn, supplemented existing fossil fuels rather than displacing them. Cleaner energy alternatives expand the overall energy mix but do not necessarily reduce total demand. A similar dynamic characterizes ethical meat markets. Happy meat may offer a more ethically differentiated alternative, yet there is little evidence that its availability leads consumers to reduce their overall meat consumption. Instead, it is more likely to supplement existing meat practices than to displace them, a pattern consistent with the long-term consumption trends shown in Figure 1. In this sense, the narrative scale paradox is not only about the limited reach of niche alternatives, but also about the tendency for “better” options to be absorbed into high-consumption systems without reducing overall volume.

The additive logic of ethical alternatives helps clarify why paradox is a useful lens for understanding sustainable consumption, especially given that scholarly accounts of the topic often oscillate between dismissiveness and optimism. Using paradox as an analytic lens allows us to move beyond that binary by clarifying how ethical consumption can be both meaningful and limited. This becomes clear in the two paradoxes we identify. The moral privilege paradox shows that happy meat is not simply a status good or an expression of care, but a form of ethical consumption pursued through a field structured by unequal access, price, and distinction. Participants in our study often recognized aspects of this dynamic, as they described the pleasures of eating happy meat alongside discomfort with its exclusivity and classed boundaries. The

narrative scale paradox, by contrast, highlights how the meanings and material arrangements that make happy meat ethically compelling also tether it to forms of production and consumption that cannot readily displace mass demand. Happy meat yields small quantities of “better” meat, but in a policy and market environment where overall meat consumption is largely unchallenged, these premium alternatives can help sustain the legitimacy of high volumes of meat consumption rather than reduce how much is eaten. Taken together, the two paradoxes clarify how ethical consumption can express genuine moral aspiration while remaining entangled with the inequalities and limits that constrain its broader transformative potential.

The two paradoxes outlined here reveal both the enduring appeal and the fundamental limits of green consumption as a strategy for social change. They highlight the seductive “double dividend” (Jackson, 2005): the promise that sustainability and individual satisfaction can be pursued together rather than traded off. Happy meat appears to offer precisely this alignment. Producers can raise animals in ways they understand as more humane and ecologically responsible, while consumers can derive satisfaction from choosing a product that feels morally and materially preferable. These gains are meaningful, including improvements in animal welfare and sustainability, but the paradoxes we identify show how such gains remain entangled with exclusion and scale limits. At the same time, these paradoxes also reveal the constraints of consumer-led change. Ethical meat production depends on resource-intensive, relatively small-scale forms of farming that cannot readily meet current demand and tend to produce high-priced, boutique products that remain marginal to most consumers’ everyday eating. More broadly, the promise of green consumption rests on the belief that sustainability problems can be solved through better products. The case of happy meat clearly shows the limits of that approach. Without significant reductions in absolute meat consumption, alongside improvements in meat production, major environmental targets will remain out of reach (Hedenus et al., 2014). Moving beyond consumer-responsibility narratives, therefore, requires holding onto the partial gains of the double dividend while recognizing that systemic change depends on reducing consumption as well as improving production.

In the face of an accelerating climate crisis, what does it mean to consume with conscience? Since at least the 1990s, sustainable consumption has been offered as a meaningful path for individuals seeking ecological reform. Our case study complicates that promise by revealing both the moral appeal and the structural limits of this path, limits that many consumers themselves partly recognize. In a cultural context where niche, high-priced goods confer status, sustainable meat consumption can reproduce inequality even as it enacts Soper’s (2007) “alternative hedonism”. The pleasure of eating ethically raised meat is real, but so too is the reflexive recognition that such pleasures are exclusive, available chiefly to those with the time, knowledge, and income to access them. Rising living costs further erode public attention to climate issues (Durdovic et al., 2025), while high-priced ethical goods risk deepening class resentment without offering a scalable route to sustainability. Happy meat can only become part of a serious response to the ecological crisis if it is paired with policies and collective changes that reduce total meat production and consumption. The efforts of ethical producers and conscientious consumers reflect a genuine desire for a more sustainable food system, but realizing those aspirations requires structural transformation alongside consumer change. To consume with conscience in the climate crisis, then, is to recognize the moral value of “better” while insisting on the collective necessity of “less” in the face of conspicuous sustainability’s persistent allure.

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**Josée Johnston** – Department of Sociology, University of Toronto (Canada)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4886-1809> |  [josee.johnston@utoronto.ca](mailto:josee.johnston@utoronto.ca)

Dr. Josée Johnston is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto (Canada), where she currently serves as Graduate Chair of the Tri-Campus Department of Sociology. Her research explores how culture, consumption, and environmental issues intersect with politics and inequality, with a particular focus on food as a lens into broader questions of class, gender, and power. She is co-author of *Happy Meat: The Sadness and Joy of a Paradoxical Idea* (Stanford University Press, 2025), with Shyon Baumann, Emily Huddart, and Merin Oleschuk, which examines the cultural contradictions and ethical tensions shaping how we eat animals today. Much of her work investigates ethical consumption and food politics, and she is recognized for her scholarship on foodie culture. Dr. Johnston is also co-author of *Introducing Sociology Using the Stuff of Everyday Life* (Routledge, 2026), with Kate Cairns and Shyon Baumann, a book that brings core sociological concepts to life through everyday material culture. Dr. Johnston is currently a co-investigator on an SSHRC-funded project led by Dr. Emily Huddart Kennedy, exploring affective polarization and climate action in Canada.

**Emily Huddart** – Department of Sociology, The University of British Columbia (Canada)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6723-4210>

 <https://sociology.ubc.ca/profile/emily-huddart/>

Emily Huddart is Professor of Sociology at the University of British Columbia (Canada), where she studies environmental politics, culture, consumption, and social inequality. Her research examines the motivations underlying environmental engagement and the ways that environmental beliefs and practices are shaped by social class, gender, political ideology, and collective identities. She is the author of *Eco-Types: Five Ways of Caring about the Environment* (Princeton University Press, 2022) and a co-author of *Happy Meat: The Sadness and Joy of a Paradoxical Idea* (Stanford University Press, 2025). Her current work focuses on the cultural dimensions of climate polarization in Canada, including how emotions, identities, and social divisions shape climate attitudes and policy preferences. She is currently leading research on affective climate polarization and the social barriers to building solidarity around climate action.