CHAPTER FOUR

SLAUGHTER WORKERS AND THE MAKING OF MEAT

They use everything about the hog except the squeal.
Upton Sinclair, [1906] 2002: 2

For those who choose to eat meat, the death of other animals is a necessary part of life. However, in much of the modern world, the brute facts of animal death are hidden from us by industrial levels of production, bureaucracy and organization. The fact that meat comes from animals is very easily forgotten during shopping trips to the supermarket, spaces where bright lights and endless refrigerators seem to defer any sense of attachment between living animals and portion-sized packs of meat. The combination of industrial scale food production alongside other factors like religious and cultural norms, and even the Darwinian notion of survival of the fittest may help to account for the lack of emotions expressed about, and the silence surrounding, the killing of millions of animals each day. But what of those whose job it is to minister this death—how do they feel and talk about it?

In this chapter, we seek to understand animal death through the eyes of those who are specifically employed to manage it. Organizational scholar, Gibson Burrell, argues that “all organizations are involved in death, partly because all organizations are involved in life itself and there is always the presence of death amidst life.” For Burrell, when humans organize they draw upon what he terms a ‘death-suppressing impulse’ to exert control over the world around them. In doing that, however, “we tend to forget that to organize is to kill” (Burrell, 1997: 150). In this chapter, the notion that ‘to organize is to kill’ is apparent in a literal sense for the function of slaughterhouses is to do precisely that—to kill (McCabe and Hamilton, 2012).

If it is the case that in the modern world death is hidden from us then it seems appropriate for Sociologists and other commentators to subject death and the discourses surrounding it to scrutiny. A recently televised documentary on slaughterhouses called ‘A Bloody Business’ shown in Australia by the current affairs show ‘Four Corners’ attempted to do so by providing a graphic account of what happens to some animals in Indonesian abattoirs (May, 2011). It became clear from blog, chat-room and
television coverage that viewing audiences were shocked and emotionally traumatized by what they saw. Many people even claimed that they had stopped eating meat as a result, and the public interest in this documentary gave form to a huge political campaign by pressure groups such as Animals Australia and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). This political activism led to a short-term ban on live animal exports from Australia to Indonesia and, at the time of writing (September, 2012) the effects are still being felt as the issue of live exports continues to have a significant media presence in Australia and elsewhere.

Making the Strange More Familiar

In a straightforward way, publicizing what happens in abattoirs is a powerful way to encourage humans to reflect upon their treatment of other species, a point often made by the philosopher, Peter Singer. Recent successful attempts by policy-makers in a number of regions in the United States to ban undercover recording of slaughterhouses (the so-called ‘Ag-gag’ Bills) suggests that many more share his view and are concerned by the potential backlash and social stigma that their work accrues. But slaughterhouses and the practices involved in meat production are important for considering significant issues, for example, the links between human identity and food; a debate that Carol Adams frames in terms of gender and ‘the sexual politics of meat’ (Adams, 1990). It is also helpful to consider ways in which meat can add dimension to issues of racism and ethnic differentiation (Gouveia and Juska, 2002; LeDuff, 2003) as well as considerations of modernity, work and capitalism (example Young Lee, 2008). Thinking about meat work even sheds light on the links between meat production and violence to people (Fitzgerald, Kalof and Dietz, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2010; Richards, Signal and Taylor, forthcoming). These are just some of the intriguing issues that emerge from the slaughterhouse.

There are also obvious interests for scholars of Organization Theory at the slaughterhouse, and according to Burrell “the metaphor of the abattoir is very strong in its suggestiveness for the organizational world” (Burrell, 1997: 149). But it is a mistake to assume that slaughterhouses can be thought of as factories like any other. They deal with a unique product, one which turns from living to dead, unlike environments where conventional and—more importantly—inanimate items are handled; cars (Beynon, 1984; Danford, 1998), steel (McLoughlin et al., 2005) or aircraft