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Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter And The Politics Of Sight (Yale Agrarian Studies Series)



Synopsis

This is an account of industrialized killing from a participant's point of view. The author, political scientist Timothy Pachirat, was employed undercover for five months in a Great Plains slaughterhouse where 2,500 cattle were killed per day—one every twelve seconds. Working in the cooler as a liver hanger, in the chutes as a cattle driver, and on the kill floor as a food-safety quality-control worker, Pachirat experienced firsthand the realities of the work of killing in modern society. He uses those experiences to explore not only the slaughter industry but also how, as a society, we facilitate violent labor and hide away that which is too repugnant to contemplate. Through his vivid narrative and ethnographic approach, Pachirat brings to life massive, routine killing from the perspective of those who take part in it. He shows how surveillance and sequestration operate within the slaughterhouse and in its interactions with the community at large. He also considers how society is organized to distance and hide uncomfortable realities from view. With much to say about issues ranging from the sociology of violence and modern food production to animal rights and welfare, *Every Twelve Seconds* is an important and disturbing work.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Every Twelve Seconds will be of interest to anyone concerned about food safety, the exploitation of workers in modern industrialized society, and the abuse and mistreatment of animals. *Every Twelve Seconds* is a first-hand account of the gruesome operations of an Omaha slaughterhouse. The author, Timothy Pachirat, is a professor in the Department of Politics at The New School University,

and he obtained an entry level position at the slaughterhouse in order to see and document exactly how cattle are killed and processed. He worked in several different areas and was able to see the entire scope of the operation in the five and a half months that he worked at the abattoir. As a vegan, I am predisposed to be sympathetic to Pachirat's project, but were I someone who eats meat, I have no doubt that I would still be horrified by what is revealed in the pages of *Every Twelve Seconds*. First, if you eat meat, you should definitely cook it at as high a temperature as possible to kill the bacteria that are present. There is no question that most of the meat that is eaten is tainted with fecal matter and other contaminants, which explains why we often see outbreaks of E. coli-based food poisoning. Additionally, your meat comes at a high cost to the workers who produce it. As the title of the book indicates, the slaughterhouse where Pachirat works kills a cow every twelve seconds. Speed, rather than quality, is the primary driving force in the slaughterhouse: the longer it takes to process a cow, the more hours that the company must pay the workers, and the more hours that the workers work, the less profit the company makes. With speed being of primary importance, USDA inspectors are viewed as the enemy.

Every Twelve Seconds is divided up into two discrete pieces of non-fiction. It starts with a theoretical outline, in the first three chapters, where Pachirat sets out to detail how a cow becomes an industrialized food product, and how this is possible. The politics of sight at a large-scale slaughterhouse are evident in Pachirat's account, as he highlights the many ways in which such a facility maintains its operations by virtue of obscuring the costs and consequences from consumers and workers. He provides a detailed description of the disassembly line and the requirements of each unique but narrow job on the line. This account is supported by detailed maps showing the facility's workflow through all 121 jobs. Pachirat is careful to describe the industrialized processing of the slaughterhouse in morally-neutral terms, as he lays out how a cow is processed. The raw details, however, overcome this by providing a stark, sad visual of the nature of the facility. This section is punctuated with descriptions of the phenomenological details of disassembling a cow, and this is best appreciated when he presents us with workers' instinctual reactions to their part in the processing. The remainder of the book is spent investigating this narrative first-hand, where Pachirat recounts his time as a slaughterhouse worker over the course of a number of months. This more anecdotal account provides contextual support to the thesis Pachirat advances in the first section. His experience as a worker in various positions within the institution gives you a sense of just how compartmentalized slaughterhouse processing is, and how difficult it is to appreciate the scope of what's being accomplished there, given the focus required for

each individual position.

This is one of the best books I've read in years. Not best dissertations. Not best academic books. Just best books. Period. Every Twelve Seconds is about industrial slaughterhouses and what the author calls the "politics of sight." The title refers to how often a cow is slaughtered in the factory the author worked, about 2500 over the course of a day. As he reminds us in the introduction, however, it is not a book about animal rights. It is about violence and society. In his words, it provides "a firsthand, contemporary account of industrialized slaughter, and does so to provoke reflection on how distance and concealment operate as mechanisms of power in modern society." But I think that sells the book short. It's part The Jungle. It's part Fast Food Nation. It's part Dominion. It's part a how-to guide for ethnographic research. And it's part a golden roadmap for how to write relevant and engaging contemporary political theory. But mostly, it's a brilliant narrative that recounts not only the industrial process of turning cattle into packaged meat and the political and social structures of the world in which that occurs, but also what it feels like to be a human cog within that world. A world where men must necessarily come face-to-face with endless violence, at all times. And how, in response, that world must be designed.

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