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Don’t let COVID-Induced Racism Protect American Animal Cruelty

To save more animals, including humans, we must all work to dismantle racism alongside speciesism

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With many (though not all) of the first COVID-19 cases in humans linked to the since-shuttered Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan, the intertwined practices of eating “wild” animals and selling live animals for food are under renewed scrutiny, especially in China. The country has partially banned such trade, animal and environmental groups are calling for it to close further loopholes, and last week, a bipartisan group of senators and representatives, including vegan Cory Booker, called for a worldwide ban on the wildlife trade. Even Texas Senator John Cornyn seemed poised to join the fight last month, in a roundabout, racist sort of way, when he said “China is to blame” for the pandemic, because “the culture where people eat bats and snakes and dogs” makes the country “a source of a lot of these viruses, like SARS, like MERS, the swine flu.”

It’s tempting for vegans to view defeat for an inhumane system as a clear silver lining to a pandemic that’s worsening daily. But a good rule of thumb is that if you find yourself agreeing with John Cornyn — who enthusiastically supports industrialized pig-killing and rattlesnake-eating, so long as it’s American pig-killing and snake-eating, it may be time to reconsider. Cornyn’s nonsensical statement nonsense (China was the origin of neither Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) nor the H1N1 “swine flu” pandemic) was clearly intended to draw attention away from his own party’s bumbling failures on COVID-19.

However, he draws on a long history of anti-Chinese racism in the U.S., much of it fixated on food. And, as the rise in xenophobic attacks against Asian-Americans shows, Cornyn is not alone in returning to this history.

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We who love animals know well that scapegoating non-human animals — whether snakes, bats, or, as a New York Times headline suggested, vengeful pangolins — likely ends only with the death of innocent creatures. As other writers have detailed, such scapegoating does nothing to absolve us of the individual transgressions (eating animals) or the collective failures that have paved the way for SARS-CoV-2 (habitat destruction, environmental racism, unhygienic crowding in our factory farms and our nursing homes, and our politics’ inability to handle a public health crisis). But scapegoating a nationality is no better. The term “wet market” — which is roughly analogous to a farmer’s market — has now become a byword for cruel or unsanitary food, shielding the unfathomable cruelty of American factory farming behind a facade of shrink-wrap and white supremacy.

Global capitalism and animal agriculture together oppress humans and non-humans alike, and we must confront the inextricable histories of racism and speciesism together.

Killing animals is killing humans

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Headlines about the animal origins of COVID-19 refer to “exotic” meat, like pangolins and civet cats, but labeling a creature or a custom “exotic” says more about what we find strange or foreign than any shared characteristic. When European settlers arrived in the Americas, they brought with them “exotic” animals of their own — the cows, pigs, and fowl they had been killing and exploiting for food for millenia.

What followed was one of the deadliest pandemics in human history, and perhaps the most consequential. Smallpox, various influenzas, measles, and other diseases, spreading either directly from “old world” animals or from human hosts they’d adapted to, killed the majority

of people then living in the Americas, contributing to the many genocides on which the U.S. and many other countries were built.

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Europeans, thanks to acquired immunity and some familiarity with these diseases, weathered them, and vaccines and eradication campaigns have greatly diminished their danger today. This may help the industries slaughtering billions of farm animals each year pretend that their practice is safer, and even less cruel, than other ways of eating animals. It is not, of course, safer for the animals or for the human societies already destroyed by plague, but even the safety of modern humans is transient and conditional. New flu strains emerge with terrifying regularity from industrial farms, and reckless overuse of antibiotics threatens a bacterial outbreak invulnerable to modern medicine's molecular arsenal.

This illusion of safety in exploiting "'traditional" farm animals doesn't just shield the meat industry: it makes it easier to scapegoat "exotic" animals and customs for outbreaks like this year's. The definition of "wild animal" is blurry, and changes when convenient, as anthropologist Mei Zhan noted studying reactions to the SARS outbreak in China. Many of the "wild" civets slaughtered after their species was blamed for SARS, for instance, were in fact farmed, Zhan noted, and in some cases whether an animal was "wild" seemed to depend on whether it was sold alive.

Today, China's new ban on the "wild" animal trade excludes animals from fox and deer to mink and ostrich by categorizing them all as "livestock." The way we approach strange animals and strange customs doesn't just hurt cows and civets alike — it can damage animal activism too.

Race and cruelty

Portraying Chinese culinary practices as uniquely cruel and unhygienic has a long history in the U.S. In her book Dangerous Crossings, political scientist Claire Jean Kim shows how it doesn't require xenophobic cynicism like Senator Cornyn's for animal activism to veer into racial conflict. Much of the book focuses on the 1990s campaign to ban the sale of live animals for meat in San Francisco. Activist Patricia Briggs, who started the campaign, hoped to raise awareness of the suffering of even "the 'lesser' animals (which they are not)," she wrote at the time: "crabs, frogs, lobsters and the like." So she petitioned her city to ban the sale for meat of all live animals — including the crustaceans on Fisherman's Wharf. She hoped to help all animals, while also avoiding even appearing to single out markets in Chinatown, where more traditionally charismatic animals like turtles and birds were sold live as well.

The city, however, didn't dare challenge the money and power of Fisherman's Wharf, so it narrowed its focus to exclude crustaceans. Chinatown business-owners, now the main target of the campaign, quickly (and justifiably!) painted Briggs and her allies as racially motivated. It didn't help that, despite the activists' efforts, hearings on ban were peppered with xenophobic rhetoric. "The core animal advocates wished to have nothing to do with race," writes Kim, "but race still had something to do with them."

Though the city's Commission on Animal Control and Welfare eventually recommended the city ban selling live animals (except crustaceans and fish) for human consumption, the city's Board of Supervisors, loath to alienate a minority business community, refused.

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Kim argues that it was not only structural racism — Fisherman's Wharf having more power and money than Chinatown grocers — that made Chinese-Americans a target. The fact that Chinese-Americans killed the wrong animals in the wrong place, by white Americans' sensibilities, sharpened the racial valence of Briggs' campaign. What we see as cruel is wrapped up in culture and circumstance. "U.S. courts," Kim writes, "do not assess cruelty in farming based on whether a particular practice is intrinsically horrifying but rather by looking at whether it is standard practice in the industry, in which case it is deemed not cruel." What's true in law is true in culture too — it's much harder to portray a practice as cruel when it's baked into your society.

This history makes minority practices tempting targets for animal activists, while simultaneously shielding industrial animal agriculture from legal and cultural scrutiny. When it comes to who we blame for COVID-19, racism and speciesism work together to make exotic species and cultures ripe for blame.

The root of the matter

It's important here not to say that exploiting animals is immoral because it causes disease. Some animal exploitation is safe — for humans — and plenty of diseases don't come from farming animals. The next E. coli outbreak doesn't mean eating romaine lettuce is immoral (though the way it's grown and sold may well be). But to dismantle the systems that harm animals, it's helpful to see how they harm humans as well.

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One final example: Human indifference to animals not only creates the conditions for outbreaks but hampers our response to those that occur, says Laura Kahn, a physician and lecturer at Princeton University who studies the politics of epidemics. "That human, animal, and environmental health are linked might seem obvious," she says, "and it has been recognized by indigenous peoples around the world," but it's not how our institutions work in practice.

Kahn is no abolitionist — a prime research interest of hers is the safety and security of the world's meat supply — but she does see what she calls a "speciesist" blind spot in public health "where we only care about humans without thinking about the other animals. When we do that, we miss a huge part of our world" — including, perhaps, the next big pandemic. The same ideology that will destroy a forest or torture a farm animal to death for a few people's benefit will happily ignore the threat of a pandemic — or send people back to work in the midst of one — for the same cause.

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