

NEOLIBERAL APOLOGETICS: The fallacy of boycotting meat to save the Amazon

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Smoke billows during a fire in an area of the Amazon rainforest near Porto Velho, Brazil, on August 21.

PHOTO: UESLEI MARCELINO/REUTERS

This week, the tragic news that massive wildfires are raging in the Amazon has shocked the world. As photos of burning trees, fleeing animals, and Mordor-like skies over São Paulo flooded media, a palpable sense of urgency spurred us to search for ways we ourselves could perhaps contribute to solving the crisis. It is no wonder then that very soon my Facebook newsfeed became overrun with articles proclaiming “the Amazon is burning because you eat too much meat; if you want to help, stop eating meat”.

These articles argued since these slash-and-burn fires were set in order to clear land for cattle ranching, if only you and I could stop eating meat, the fall in demand would hamstring the cattle industry, thereby saving the Amazon. To do further justice to this line of thinking, it is worth noting that livestock, especially beef, is indeed responsible for very high greenhouse gas emissions—of the 14.5 percent of total emissions that cattle account for, beef contributes nearly 41 percent. So the idea of you and I boycotting beef to protect the earth appears, at first sight, to be sensible. In the following paragraphs, I will argue that it actually isn’t.

The belief that individual action, such as boycotting meat, is the key to solving world problems is very typical of neoliberal apologetics. It succeeds in putting the onus of “world peace” on powerless individual consumers, who then feel ineffectual guilt. We see the same inane logic employed in the garments industry too—if only shoppers boycott clothes from egregious offenders like Walmart and Primark, these apologetics preach, disasters such as Rana Plaza can be averted. In fact, such calls for “taking personal responsibility for global problems” are actually a diversion

from the real challenges. It shifts the onus of regulating global industries to the helpless man on the street instead of where it belongs: Western governments who actually have the power to regulate the offending industries.

Unsurprisingly, the demand for meat is highest in the wealthiest countries—the most recent data from 2013 shows Americans and Australians devour over 100 kilogrammes of meat per person. And despite protestations to the contrary, US and EU meat consumption has actually increased in recent years. The harsh truth is we in the West can eat so much meat because it’s cheap. If the supply of cheap meat stops, we will stop eating it. Similarly, we, in the West, buy cheap clothes because it’s cheap. If the supply of cheap clothes stops, we will stop buying it. Instead of accepting this simple truth and, consequently, foregrounding government regulation, neoliberal apologetics attempt to foist the responsibility of regulation on millions of individual consumers doing billions of individual transactions, thereby rendering effective regulation a pipe dream. The demand that we, the individual consumer, must each develop a higher informed consciousness about supply chain ethics so that we must do something as counterintuitive as buying the more expensive product when faced with a cheaper option every time we shop is ridiculous. The minimum wage earner who doesn’t have the luxury to overspend on “ethical”, “fair trade” products is made to feel as if he is responsible for Rana Plaza, blood diamonds, the Amazon, and the latest outrage. Seriously?

Detractors will say that the market for cheap products develops in response to the demand for such products—successful boycotts would surely wipe out

the demand. Leaving aside the fact that successful boycotts of the scale needed for this strategy to work is extremely unlikely, the presence of consumer demand is no excuse for the presence of that product in the market. If that were so, why regulate drugs or guns? Just leave it to the consumer to not buy them. The fact that Western governments don’t see products with unethical supply chains as demerit goods, like they do drugs or guns, is the problem. That won’t be solved by shaming individuals for buying clothes or eating meat. It can perhaps be solved by making this issue something Western voters care about. For that, we must employ better tactics than shaming said voters and making them resentful of our prescriptions.

So am I saying you should guiltlessly go on a shopping spree? No, there is no reason we must indulge in these industries. For example, much to the delight of *dorjis* back home, despite living abroad, I avoid buying clothes in Western countries whenever possible. I do so knowing though that this act is a matter of personal ethics—between me and God—which has zero impact on industry practices. If we think we are pouring our energy into our diet or fashion in order to change industry practices, we should entertain the very real possibility that we are wasting our efforts on a misguided strategy. If we’re doing it because we don’t personally want to partake in something we consider unethical, that’s a different issue. We can’t do the latter but insist we’re doing the former—the goal of why we’re doing something must be clear.

The clarity in goals is especially important for the audience of the outlet I am writing this for: the English-speaking, urban elite of Bangladesh. This crowd

(i.e. you and I) regularly share both bread and bed with the denizens of the halls of power in Bangladesh. Our proximity to the policymakers of our motherland means our voice is louder than the average citizen’s. When we speak, we are more likely to be heard. In these circumstances, if we are really interested in saving the environment, we have better weapons at our disposal than pointlessly depriving ourselves of meat. For example, you can use your formidable social clout to shame your peers (the family of MP X and Minister Y or, better yet, MP X and Minister Y himself) for the environmental disaster that will be the Rampal power station. The rainforest of the Amazon is far away—the mangrove forest of the Sundarbans isn’t. The Western governments are beyond our reach, our government isn’t... or, at least, it shouldn’t be. Our government can easily choose to protect the Sundarbans if it wants to, but it refuses to. If we are indeed willing to boycott something for the sake of our environmental activism, we can boycott these powerful individuals and their families—boycott their dawats, boycott doing business with them, boycott social interaction with them. Treat them as the criminals they really are. In short, socially shame them to bring them to their senses, since nothing else is working. Let’s be principled in our boycott. If we can do this, it will show real courage instead of hashtag courage. This boycott may not be as sexy as #meatlessMonday—in a country where the vast majority is #meatlessdaily!—but its impact will possibly be far more palpable. The Sundarbans will thank you.

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