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How ideology shapes consumption: The case of Oil Palm Industry and Red Meat Production

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Abstract

Investigative journalist Jocelyn Zuckerman traces sub-human conditions and downright evil practices among the industry-oriented oil palm farming along the Malay Peninsula. Oil palm which had a meteoric rise since the globe spanning outcry to ban trans-fat products following the discoveries published by FDA America. On the contrary, veganism or the plant-based diet are seeing a similar trajectory since the 90s, animal science specialist Dr Frank Mitloehner however displays genuine concern about the purpose of vegan narratives and how it's sold to the masses. Both trends have eerie similarities and both are in a race to counterfeit their way to the top of the consumerist chain. Discussion vitalised by the conflicting seas of opinion delivers more concerns than resolution. The very humane instincts to antagonise and point the evil yet to bore any fruit and many schools of ideas yet to illuminate the very roots of these conflicts, the exponential growth of processed food industry. This essay will therefore take an ideological discourse to traverse through this landscape of savoury sensationalism driven conflicts, and find logic among the gray corners of consumerism, climate politics and brand manipulation.

Keywords: Climate politics, oil palm farming, veganism, consumerism, food industry.

Palm oil had its origin in prehistoric west Africa especially along the coast of Ghana and Nigeria and later plants were exported to Malaysia as well as Indonesia, the plant specifically grows around 5° of the Equator. In today's day it can be in innumerable forms and factors but almost always they're sourced from the fats derived from the oil palm tree. (Zuckerman Jocelyn C. Planet Palm. Prologue. The New Press, 2021) Animal fats on the other hand have been used in highly processed packaged food and beauty products for decades now, they've been extensively used in food preservation ever since the dawn of civilization. Saturated fats that are naturally found in them enables better shelf life for the product; it's a natural preservative. (Ragusea, 2021) Palm oil on the other hand, is too highly saturated, both the kernel and the fruit yields highly saturated viscous oil, a fairly rare property to be found in plant-based oils. (Ragusea, 2021) Coconut palm on the contrary although having similar natural preservative properties yields nowhere near the oil palm (DutchPlantin, 2010). And since the highly efficient processing industry can't possibly sustain the use of animal fats in foods for a plethora of financial, social and even religious reasons, hydrogenated oils turn out to be the next feasible thing, otherwise oils like cotton seed oil, one that doesn't have naturally high saturation levels, are naturally liquid so often hydrogen atoms are added to them, that way crystallized hydrogenated oils are made, very viscous and shelf stable. Such oil had its fair share in use at making a range of processed food products, such as margarine or vegetable oil based butter replacements. In the 1990s however trans fats were discovered to be the worst form of fat, and they were traced mostly to be found in hydrogenated fats i.e. unsaturated fats went through layers of processing. (Ragusea, 2021) Since palm oil has naturally occurring preservative qualities it has witnessed meteoric rise. But this sudden shift can also be due to how economically effective utilising processed palm oil is.

This is where ideological discourses can be utilised in interpreting the crisis in the palm oil

industry. The dubious advent of it led to the growing socio-political concern around it, however the growing concern has bred into more chaos and perpetual miss information. Zuckerman states that the concern condensed among the consumer class, has yet to penetrate into the supply chain of oil palm. (Zuckerman, Jocelyn C. *Yale Environment* 360, 2021)

The oil palm has introduced to Malay Peninsula where the sole purpose was to meet the supply demand, gradually supplementing the pre existing natural rubber industries, also introduced by the same colonial powers, as synthetic rubber ate away the purpose of natural rubber, rubber tree has become ornamental, and following the trans fat ban by FDA and EU, oil palm industry boomed during late 2010s.

In the context of Malaysia and Indonesia however they acted as a poverty alleviation scheme as well, farmers were given free palm seeds to cultivate in their land by FELDA. (Alexander, Lynsey. 2021) However, since Malaysia has done considerably well in uplifting people from poverty, the economic development and the higher standards of living pushes Malaysia into preferring foreign migrant labours to function their oil palm business. Since oil palm is industry centered around remote locations and naturally strenuous as well as hazardous, Malaysia tends to look for foreign migrant labours who'd be willing to take up this least form of a 3d job. The reliance on foreign migrant workers is deep rooted in their colonial past, this has established lucrative recruitment systems often supported by the administration.

The bureaucracy systemically infused multifarious levels of corruption, leading to almost ignorance in developing a better working environment for these labourers, Zuckerman states that it's a secret that everyone knows. The poor implementation of labour laws, threat to environment and the overall flora and fauna, human trafficking, illegal land encroachment and even child labour are the horrid implications of market determining policies of ever growing Malay palm industry.

(Ragusea, 2021)

Zuckerman however have unfortunate news for the raised eyebrowed concerned consumers, since palm oil is fractionated in innumerable forms, it's too ingrained in average modern household and a consumer no matter how extensive the measures taken are can't positively consume their way out. Approaching to then project our guilt as a consumer to one ingredient or one company who happened to be a bit more generous with their publicly available data is pretty unreasonable, leading us to a decline on a moral ground. Visualising a mortal villain, who can be terminated through our literal or metaphorical efforts is comforting, however they might also hinder our ability to cogitate our own role in this grave system. (Ragusea, 2021)

However moral degeneration may not be only prime time problem that needs sudden commencement of all our attention. Profit maximization and government prioritising large scale agricultural enterprises are deeply rooted into neo-liberal ideological landscape (Crowley, Megan Z. SEARCA, 2021) as an adverse effect of the post war global fallout, companies mostly led by pro capitalist USA, used the insecurity of the predicament of losing the status of superpower as an effort to get away from the moral questions. Developmentalism prioritise industries that can generate high export revenues, since government believes in such idea, they'd unquestionably generate policies and subsidies that'd felicitate big industries, while making communal or individual ideologies less capable of interfering among the state apparatus.

In the case of countries trying to revitalize from the colonial scars concentrated in privatisation with minimal government intervention or environmental concerns, in any case the state will safeguard the industrial tycoons. (Crowley, Megan Z. SEARCA, 2021)

However, it's not always a choice for a nation state to choose between a more controlled market and a open economy invaded by invasive companies, in post colonial era states were often

incapable of fortifying its economy, and sustain its economic goals. In the case of Liberia it was the brutality of the civil war that had engulfed it from 1989 to 2003, taking some 250,000 lives in the process (Zuckerman Jocelyn C. Planet Palm. Prologue. The New Press, 2021), a country shaped by warmongers, and exploitation might often fail to justify its independence.

In the case of cow slaughter and animal flesh consumption however the world is split between various fractions of beliefs varied by their individualistic internalisation of the consumption. In the west, where religious beliefs had their roaring phase long gone, moral codes play a huge role in people's interaction with their community, where individuality is encouraged, social expectations are often high, one is more likely to be expected to show allegiance to the shared sentiments of a nation. (Maskara, Shreya. 2021) This speaks to itself as we draw a realistic approach to understand what is often overstated and exaggerated claims of welfare being done just by shifting to veganism.

Dr Frank Mitloehner with his job to research ways to reduce livestock's environmental impact, he states that the reduction in emission will be stagnant around 2.6% if the entirety of the us population decides to shift to veganism in permanence, however it'll be an absurd overestimation if we think that'll ever happen (White, Robert R and Mary Beth Hall, 2021).

Red meat production however involves a lot of water, if we account to all the added measures that're taken before putting a processed portion of red meat on our plate, it'll look really inefficient, and overall a waste to the finite water resources, but typical cow's water footprint measures the green water as well, i.e. the rain water, ignoring the fact that, the rain water consumed by cattle will be accessible for other species of plants and animals as well, the water that'll be constantly cycled by periodical consumption and excretion, therefore the water will ultimately be

unleashed into the nature, however over 70% of world's freshwater irrigation goes to irrigate crops , 53% to wheat and rice (Mekonnen, Mesfin M. and Arjen Y Hoekstra, 2012).

Although beef produces cattle per quarter pound does take a bit more of the non green water than rice of the same amount, red meat is far more protein and mineral dense, a simple fact yet it is just too significant to be ignored (What I've learned, 2021).

"Cow's eating out resources" is also a readily debunkable myth, around 86% of all the livestock feed around the world is non-human edible, the consumers of human edible livestock are monogastric animals such as chicken and pork, the entire population of cattle are actually up cycling the nutrients taken from what's otherwise non edible for humans and therefore would normally be wasted, cattle consume the byproduct too such as husks, hulus, shells and turn them into high quality efficient source of protein (USGS.Gov)

Ruminates are also associated with greenhouse gas emissions and therefore global warming, estimates suggest around 15% of all greenhouse gas emissions are from the meat industry, but often minute details are overlooked in order to settle for a generalised understanding, broad topics are often subtracted into loose attempts of vague generalization (Patel, Zoya. 2020). Professor Mitloehner however suggests that global averages are hugely ineffective in contributing to the understanding of these problems, since cattle emissions vastly vary among many countries with a functioning meat industry. Not accounting for these variables meant that the solution would obviously choose a different path. USA bovine population amounts around 87.2 million whereas it's 308 million in the case of India,(What I've learned, 2021) a stagnant number of ruminant population is considered positive since methane emission is directly proportional to the carbon taken up by grasses and shrub, if the cattle population remain unchanged the methane originating from natural cycle won't actually add to the warming. (What I've learned, 2021) In the case of

America, sadly crop production is ignored in this empathy driven discourse, which accounts for at least 4.7% of all the greenhouse gases in the USA, compared to the 3.9% emissions led by livestock's (Mottet, Anne. 2017). This however differs when we shift India while wielding a similar statistical approach, with a higher and ever-growing population of cattle, Indian dairy is highly inefficient and actually contributes in a big part to the aforementioned red meat emissions narrative. USA like other developed nations should shift their focus to automotive and machines that are constantly eating away finite fossil fuels and hugely contributing to the global warmings, Laura Tobin on the morning show suggests that performing a meatless day a week is equivalent to not driving for 6 months, Mitloehner suggests it's a irresponsible statement and an example of ignorance from the consumers end (What I've learned, 2021) Another evident ignorance can be found in the question of food wastes. It's concerning how a third of the world's total food production ends up as a waste (Kurzgesagt, 2018), while some of it does get treated in industrial composting plants, and provided to animals (before getting rot), biofuels and water treatment facilities, these require significant infrastructure, which unfortunately the developing still isn't entirely equipped with (Mekonnen and Hoekstra, 2011).

In most cases they end up in landfill sites, even more alarmingly the food waste is at least 42% made of non-animal wastes, researchers speculate giving away animal husbandry might result in more food waste. (What I've learned, 2021)

In a broad spectrum of being both oil palm as a plant or cattle as animals can't be positioned as the sole reliant of the collective rage, as mentioned earlier ideology shapes a lot of our view towards the dietary choice we make as well as how we perceive our role in the economic composition of present state-society.

As we know the rise of colonialism and mercantilism brought new goods and increased wealth to Europe, as the disposable income grew to the motivation to spend more on exotic drinks and habits became the cornerstone for early consumer habits, a shift from court centered luxury to broader consumer driven spending began.

Food has always been a natural communal act. Cooking, once an act out of necessity that transitioned into a cultural identity, has been a proud product of inheritance, and a safe precursor to delegate relationships and foster harmony.

Food has always been a part of a soft bonding, a subtle subculture of showing respect and appreciation. A condiment of many polite aggressions of cultural politics.

Food with all its socio-political attributes however has never been modified into a revenue Generator that'd sustain globe spanning ambitions of early 20th century states, in a post war world where freedom is worshipped as the epitome of a state's triumphs, ideological influencing has become the neo-colonist strategy, in culture and race politics one who has been most influential to other culture will be revered as a superpower.

Food as a medium emerged to gradually dilute and therefore wipe a country's history through the erasure of its gastronomic culture.

In the case of the USA or honestly any western country, consumerism made them believe the conveniences are to their own benefits, food used to retain a form of hierarchy in even the most primitive setting, however since liberalism has offered a higher quality of life among all sects of society, culture around food has become standardised, while still segregated in other ideological discourses, the idea of an ideal lifestyle that food brings has almost become impossible not to recognise.

Early marketing geniuses like Josiah Wedgewood who marketed pottery (Wedgewood:

An introduction) or Edward Bernays who successfully sold cigarettes to women with slogan torches of freedom (Mostegel, I. History Today. 2019), paved the way to create demand for product, animate or inanimate.

In many ways the distinct ideas we got sold to through advertisement, such as "urban living", "convenient cooking" or "trend" in general sells a sense of belonging and community (Courtney Sexton, K.B. Smithsonian. 2020).

Since our primitive senses strongly prioritise staying with the "herd", implanting a culture through a set of precisely curated advertisement was indeed formulated. A culture that is learnt and not adapted slowly becomes the identity of the modern world.

Both the subjects of oil palm and cow slaughter therefore plunge into the deep rabbit hole of suspicion and skepticism, when the rotten commercialization and adversities are exposed the mass conscience relies on condemnation, while heavily ignoring the individualistic involvement in this whole system.

Innovations will only happen when the convenience is questioned or rejected en-mass for the sake of a collective moral goal.

Moral codes can't be expected to be followed in a capitalist system as it doesn't fuel the machine very often.

So far, the atrocities in oil palm trees, which to be noted originated as a sustainable part of West African cuisine as well as in animal husbandry, which has contributed to the breeding of human civilization to an unfathomable depth, are rooted in the grotesque system of commercialization which inherently capital driven, with little scope of considering the measurements around safety and sustainability. They originate from the bare incessant demand of a growing demographic, safe to say thereafter people shall always wield the upper hand to shape

the core of the industry through moderating their own demands.

That means if a consumer is worried about sustainability, ethical business practices, safe working environment, animal protection etcetera, they too shall go a step further and should consider brands that openly prides in their sustainability and not most necessarily the most well priced one, but there's still a detrimental gray area as companies often go shallow with their information readily available for the public, in the past many have broken their sustainability vows and will forever find themselves conveniently switching to that path until grounded measures are taken from the consumers end (Toi. 2015).

The consumers can lead to some sort of deliberate yet necessary de industrialising movement in order reduce the reliance on big capital production machines that has little to know transparency, society might start re introducing small scale businesses with sole priority to maximize sustainability while becoming not very much financially incentivised that it'll require to add big machineries that'll irresponsibly increase chances of abusing the sustainability goals.

The society should hold sovereignty over the mode of production, and the system of production, this formation will only thrive if society keeps its stronghold over companies that supply necessary products (Govindu, V.M. Scroll.in, 2017).

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