

TRANSITION TO PLANT-BASED DIETS WILL HELP US FIGHT PANDEMICS

The disheartening first half of 2020 was definitely far from what any of us were hoping for. Yet, it would be dishonest to say that what we are facing right now is something completely unexpected. Already in 2007, researchers from Hong Kong tried to raise awareness of the fact that “the presence of a large reservoir of SARS-CoV-like viruses in horseshoe bats, together with the culture of eating exotic mammals in southern China, is a time bomb” [1, p. 24]. Unfortunately, the power of eating habits often seems to trump facts. Now we are witnessing the consequences.

The new coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, responsible for the current pandemic, was first identified in Wuhan, Hubei (China), on December 1st 2019. Recent research points out that it seems to have originated from consumption of bats or other infected wild animals.[2][3][4] The first human infections were linked to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, where live animals were being sold. Due to the outbreak, China recently made eating wild animals illegal in the country, aiming to prevent future zoonoses [5].

It did not take long for the first xenophobic statements and accusations to spread and the new coronavirus was soon being described as “the Chinese virus”[6]. Although the disease likely spread because of the human consumption of animals not commonly found in the Western diet, people tend to conveniently forget to see the risks and harms associated with their own cultural habits. According to the FAO (the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), “about 70 per cent of new diseases infecting humans in recent decades have come from animals” [7]. The industrial animal

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agriculture sector imposes a high danger, since large monocultures increase the risk of mutations to rapidly spread. The deforestation of wild animal territory by agricultural corporations also forces contact between domesticated and wild animals, increasing the risk of diseases to spread from wild animals to humans, using domesticated animals as a bridge [8]. Since we, as societies, are very much still considering other animals as food and resources, a new virus could have appeared anywhere in the world.

The living conditions of most animals used in the animal industries, even before they are shipped and slaughtered, are appalling. This, in itself, should be reason enough for us to initiate an urgent change of our consumption habits. If you are still not aware of what animals are facing because of the demand for animal sourced products, like meat, eggs, dairy products, leather and fur, you may want to check some documentaries, such as “Earthlings” (2015) and “Dominion” (2018), and/or information provided by NGOs working for animal rights/welfare, as the Animal Equality UK. However, since our society is still based on and motivated by anthropocentric standards and values, the primary focus of this text is to point out the negative effects that these exploitative practices have for our own species.

A quick look at some of the diseases we have faced shows that many of them are linked to exploitative practices involving other species. As pointed out by the report “World Livestock 2013: Changing disease landscapes” [9], “the emergence of human immunodeficiency virus 1 (HIV-1), bovine spongi-form encephalopathy [“mad cow disease”], severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and novel influenza viruses [e.g. the “swine flu”] can all be traced back to the consumption of animal-sourced foods, involving both wild meat and livestock products”. As we can see, the emergence of zoonotic diseases is not exclusive to the consumption of wild animals.

Our animal consumption not only causes new strains of zoonotic viruses, but it also boosts other dangerous pathogens and increases the environmental crisis. For example, the indiscriminate use of antibiotics on animals is stimulating the appearance of multidrug resistant bacteria. As exposed by a recent study, antibiotic resistance in

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livestock has tripled since 2000 [10]. Furthermore, the IPCC report from 2019 [11] points out that 50% of emissions of methane, the most potent greenhouse gas, is due to cattle farming and rice cultivation and our current food system is responsible for 20% to 30% of greenhouse gases [12][13]. A vegetarian and plant-based diet has been suggested by, among others, the IPCC report, as a possible solution for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and mitigating the consequences of climate change [14][15].

Regarding the health aspects of a plant-based diet, in 2016 the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics stated that vegetarian, including vegan, diets that are properly planned are not only healthy and nutritionally adequate, but also may provide health benefits for treating and preventing certain diseases [16]. In addition, there is an increasing interest in the dual health and environmental benefits of reducing the amount of animal-sourced food in our diets, where a shift toward more plant-based diets can lower incidents of noncommunicable diseases, such as diabetes and cancer, and contribute to meeting sustainability targets [17]. A study from the University of Oxford, which explored the health and environmental consequences of dietary change, found that the monetized value of the improvements in health due to more plant-based diets could be comparable with, or even exceed, the value of the environmental benefits [18]. There is, therefore, inevitable importance that national dietary guidelines are adjusted in accordance with these findings, and that action is made to make plant-based foods more accessible to everyone.

There is, of course, no singular magical solution that will prevent all possible future pandemics or other crises. However, transitioning to veganism appears to be a critical stepping stone towards not only decreasing the risk of novel zoonotics, but also mitigating climate change - a topic that the scientific community has been trying to raise awareness of and that we, as a society, keep avoiding for the maintenance of old habits and short-sighted financial profit. Moreover, stopping the consumption of animal products would put an end to the immense suffering that other sentient beings are enduring for the sake of trivial and fleeting human pleasures, creating a world where our

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daily decisions can be based on empathy and compassion, and not the opposite. It is high time to admit that our animal consumption is rooted in harmful traditions, and not necessity. The sooner we acknowledge that these practices are upheld through discriminatory moral assumptions about other species, the sooner we will be able to dismantle the psychological defense mechanisms that maintain status quo, including psychological numbing, deindividualization and objectification.

There is no doubt that what we are witnessing at the moment is not only one, but several crises following in the wake of the new coronavirus. Besides all the tragic deaths, global economic crisis and potential permanent damage to survivors' health, the pandemic also gives rise to serious social and psychological consequences due to unemployment and isolation, principally affecting the most vulnerable in our societies the hardest. However, this crisis provides us with an important opportunity for change. People are discussing significant societal issues actualized by the COVID-19 pandemic, as the importance of emergency readiness, resilience and universalized healthcare. But let us not stop there. The central role of animal exploitation for the emergence of this pandemic is painfully clear. Yet, up until this date, few initiatives have been made by decision makers to acknowledge this connection and to work for a transition towards plant-based alternatives.

Although unpleasant, social distancing and quarantine are teaching us an important lesson: habits and routines can quickly change if necessary. Now, more than ever, is the time to phase out animal-based production systems and begin the transition to a plant-based diet - for our own health, for the animals, and for our shared environment. We request governmental support for farmers to make this transition and a shift to plant-based food in all public sectors such as schools, universities, and other workplaces. We also call for a ban on the global wild animal trade and the worldwide exploitation of wild animals' habitats.

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