

# The Ethics and Politics of Meat Taxes and Bans

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## **Abstract**

Policy change is needed to adequately address the harms of animal agriculture. But there is substantial disagreement about what policy changes would be ethical and effective. For example, should we focus on relatively moderate interventions, such as informational and procurement policy changes, or should we also focus on relatively radical interventions such as meat taxes or bans? In this chapter, we consider the principled and practical pros and cons of meat taxes and bans. We argue that, to the extent that these interventions are (a) necessary to prevent massive and unnecessary harm and (b) can be implemented without violating basic rights, governments should implement them. We close by suggesting that a mixed approach involving taxes, bans, and other interventions will likely be best in many contexts in the short term.

## **I. Introduction**

Industrial animal agriculture and fishing are two of today's most harmful industries. In particular, industrial animal agriculture kills more than 100 billion farmed animals per year, consumes vast amounts of land and water, produces vast amounts of waste, pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions, and creates the ideal conditions for zoonotic diseases to develop and spread. And

industrial fishing kills between 1-3 trillion wild animals per year and damages and destroys aquatic species and ecosystems on which humans and nonhumans alike depend.<sup>1</sup>

These harms are not only massive but also unnecessary, since more humane, healthful, and sustainable plant-based food systems are available. Thus, the question is not whether we should reduce the harms associated with animal agriculture and industrial fishing, but rather how we can do so ethically and effectively. Importantly, there are many possible answers to this question, but a common theme among these answers is that we need to substantially phase down industrial animal agriculture and fishing and phase up plant-based alternatives.

Broadly speaking, strategies for achieving these goals can be categorized as either individual or structural. Individual interventions such as vegan outreach seek to change the production or consumption decisions of individual actors within the current socio-political, economic, and technological context.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, structural interventions, such as policy changes in governments or industries, seek to change the socio-political, economic, and/or technological context within which individual actors make production and consumption decisions.

In general, we should pursue individual and structural interventions at the same time in order to make these interventions more effective than they might otherwise be. For example, the more we persuade individuals to eat plant-based foods, the easier it will be to set policies that make plant-based foods affordable and desirable. And the more we set policies that make plant-based foods affordable and desirable, the easier it will be to persuade individuals to eat them. Thus, the question is not which kind of change to pursue, but how to pursue them both well.

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<sup>1</sup> Sebo, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Schlottmann & Sebo, 2019, p. 213.

While we might disagree about the answer to this question, we should at least agree that we need to pursue many interventions at once within the categories of individual and structural change. For example, on the structural side, we might consider educational strategies like informational campaigns about the harm of meat production and the benefits of alternatives, economic strategies like shifting subsidies from meat production to alternatives, and technological strategies like research and development for new alternatives.<sup>3</sup>

With that in mind, our goal in this chapter is to examine the ethics of two particularly controversial structural interventions: taxes and bans. These can range from *narrow* taxes and bans that target *some* animal products, such as veal or foie gras, to *wide* taxes and bans that target *all* animal products, including meat, dairy, and eggs.<sup>4</sup> Given that these interventions are both controversial and potentially important for positive change, it will help to consider under what conditions they might be morally acceptable.

We will start by considering the ethics of meat taxes and then turn to the ethics of meat bans. In both cases we will consider principled as well as practical arguments for and against these interventions, and in both cases we will draw a similar conclusion: These interventions are not only permissible but also required under some conditions. Specifically, to the extent that these interventions are (a) necessary to prevent massive and unnecessary harm and (b) can be implemented without violating basic rights, governments should implement them.

Before we begin, a caveat: We will focus on meat taxes and bans in this chapter for the sake of simplicity. We expect that many of these arguments will apply to taxes and bans on other animal products as well, including food products like dairy and eggs, and non-food products like

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<sup>3</sup> Schlottmann & Sebo, 2019, p. 214.

<sup>4</sup> Wellesley et al., 2015.

fur and leather. We will briefly consider these possibilities at the end of the chapter, but will mostly leave them for another day. What matters for present purposes is that we accept that taxes and bans on harmful food practices can be morally acceptable as a general matter.

## **II. Meat Taxes**

While the vast majority of people agree that taxes are acceptable as a general matter, people disagree about the details. For example, whether we see a tax as acceptable might depend on whether we see it as paternalistic or non-paternalistic, as well as on whether we see it as a tax on production, consumption, or other activities. It will also, of course, depend on both the intended and expected impacts of the tax in society. In this section, we will consider these issues and explain the circumstances in which we see meat taxes as both possible and desirable.

Consider first the distinction between paternalistic and non-paternalistic taxes. When taxes target harmful products or activities, part of the aim is to disincentivize harmful behavior. In the case of paternalistic taxes, often called sin taxes, the aim is to make people less likely to harm themselves, for instance through excessive consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and processed sugar. In the case of non-paternalistic taxes, often called Pigouvian taxes, the aim is to make people less likely to harm others, for instance through industrial pollution of the land, water, and air.

Pigouvian taxes can be designed to achieve “full-cost pricing,” i.e., to make a product’s price reflect its true cost. In some cases, they can also earmark tax revenue towards projects that reduce the product’s harm. For example, when a company pollutes the environment, the state can tax the company for the full cost of cleanup (to the extent that cleanup is possible, which it might

sometimes but not always be). This policy not only disincentivizes further pollution but also requires the polluter, rather than the general public, to pay for the cost of pollution.

With these categories in mind, how would we classify a meat tax? We could classify it in both ways. We can classify it as a paternalistic tax to the degree that meat consumption has deleterious health impacts,<sup>5</sup> and we can classify it as a non-paternalistic tax to the degree that meat consumption consumes land, water, and antibiotics and produces waste, pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions. We can also classify it as full-cost pricing to the degree that the meat tax would internalize previously externalized costs of meat production.

This reality makes a meat tax relatively easy to justify, since whether or not we think that paternalistic taxes are justifiable, we can still justify a meat tax on non-paternalistic grounds, noting that it aims to prevent harm to animals, public health, and the environment and internalize the costs of meat production. We can also cite international precedent along those lines: Taxes have been implemented in over 60 countries to shift consumption towards healthier and/or more environmentally friendly alternatives.<sup>6</sup> A meat tax would aim to do the same.

However, a lot will depend on further details, such as what exactly is being taxed. For instance, would a meat tax target all meat products? Or would it be narrower, targeting only some meat products, or wider, targeting other animal products as well? Similarly, would a meat tax apply at the production, distribution, or consumption stage? We address these questions below. For now, we will focus on a tax on all meat products at some point in the supply chain (excluding plant-based and cultivated meat), and we will discuss the details where they might be relevant.

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<sup>5</sup> Greger & Stone, 2018; Campbell and Campbell, 2006

<sup>6</sup> FAIRR, 2007

When we evaluate any proposed policy, we can evaluate it on both principled and pragmatic grounds. As we will use these terms, we evaluate a proposed policy on principled grounds when we evaluate the intrinsic or essential features of this property, for instance by asking if this policy violates rights or is otherwise intrinsically wrong. Whereas we evaluate a proposed policy on pragmatic grounds when we evaluate the extrinsic or contextual features of this policy, for instance by asking if this policy is expected to cause harm in a particular context.

We believe that the right kind of meat tax can be justified on both principled and pragmatic grounds. Consider first the principled pros of a meat tax. First, this kind of tax aligns with the harm principle, according to which the state is justified in preventing people from harming others. As noted above, animal agriculture and industrial fishing cause massive and unnecessary harm, and much of this harm is essential to these practices. All else equal, a policy that seeks to reduce this kind of harm is justifiable from a wide range of moral perspectives.

Similarly, a meat tax aligns with the polluter pays principle, according to which the entities who generate—and benefit from generating—a cost or harm should pay to address that cost or harm. As noted above, animal agriculture and industrial fishing not only generate massive harm, but they also externalize much of this harm by relying on the public to pay for any cleanup that might be possible.<sup>7</sup> All else equal, a policy that aims to both reduce and internalize this harm, by requiring the people who cause the harm rather than the public to address it, is good.

Of course, some externalities are more easily addressed through mandating full-cost pricing than others. For instance, full-cost pricing might be an adequate response to harms that we can address with increased revenue, such as some kinds of pollution. But it might not be an adequate response to harms that we cannot address this way, such as farmed animal suffering and

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<sup>7</sup> Sebo, 2018, p. 162

death. In the latter case it matters more that we prevent the relevant behavior in the first place, rather than allow the behavior and work to mitigate harm after the fact.

Now consider some practical pros of a meat tax. First, we have reason to expect that a meat tax can work. Meat taxes are based upon similar taxes with proven track records, such as smoking taxes,<sup>8</sup> and studies about meat taxes provide grounds for optimism as well. For instance, one study found that meat taxes could prevent an estimated 222,000 deaths and save 41 billion dollars of healthcare costs annually,<sup>9</sup> and another found that taxes on emissions-intensive foods, including animal products, could reduce global emissions by approximately one billion tons.<sup>10</sup>

Second, and relatedly, we have reason to believe that meat taxes can, in fact, be implemented, at least in some contexts. While seemingly a nonstarter a decade ago, the idea of a meat tax is currently gaining momentum around the world. From associations of leading medical professionals<sup>11</sup> to intergovernmental panels,<sup>12</sup> institutional support for meat taxes is on the rise. And because the rationale for a meat tax is similar to the rationale for existing taxes that voters already support, it might be that many voters would support a meat tax as well.

The current momentum behind meat taxes is worth emphasizing. German, Danish, and Swedish governments have all called for meat taxes at varying levels—with German lawmakers proposing raising the value added tax on meat from 7 to 19 percent— and New Zealand is set to become the first country to include livestock emissions in a carbon tax scheme.<sup>13</sup> Granted, calling

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<sup>8</sup> WHO, 2017; FAIRR, 2007; Royo-Bordonada et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2019

<sup>9</sup> Springmann et al., 2018

<sup>10</sup> Springmann et al., 2017

<sup>11</sup> Carrington, 2020

<sup>12</sup> Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2020

<sup>13</sup> FAIRR, 2020; FAIRR, 2007

for meat taxes is different from implementing them. But these calls are still a positive step, and implementation might be tractable in at least some cases, particularly in Nordic countries.<sup>14</sup>

Now consider the principled cons of a meat tax. Broadly speaking, principled objections to meat taxes can fall into either of two categories: the idea that meat taxes are too radical, and the idea that meat taxes are too conservative. In the first category, one can argue that a meat tax is anti-liberal, anti-democratic, and/or anti-capitalist. In these cases one would be arguing that a meat tax is morally wrong on the grounds that it interferes with individual liberty, that it interferes with the will of the polis, and that it interferes in the free market, respectively.

However, while these critiques might carry weight against paternalistic taxes, they do not carry weight against non-paternalistic taxes. The state has the right to prevent people from causing massive and unnecessary harm to others in a liberal democratic system (including harm to animals, as animal cruelty laws illustrate), as well as internalize externalities in a capitalist system. And in any case, to the extent that these systems permit unnecessary harm in particular contexts, we can question whether we should accept these systems in these contexts in the first place.<sup>15</sup>

In the second category, one can argue that a meat tax is too permissive of harmful behavior. Suppose that the state responded to interpersonal violence by taxing perpetrators and using the revenue to support healthcare costs for survivors. We would respond that this “violence tax” is too permissive of interpersonal violence, and we would call for a “violence ban” instead. On this view, we should take a similar stance to many of the harms caused in animal agriculture and industrial fishing, including and especially violence perpetrated against nonhuman animals.

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<sup>14</sup> FAIRR, 2007, p. 2

<sup>15</sup> Di Paola and Jamieson, 2012

However, while we are sympathetic with this critique, we think that a meat tax can still be justifiable in many cases in practice. First, even if a meat tax might not be an adequate response to some harms, such as animal suffering and death, it can still be an adequate response to other harms, such as some kinds of pollution. Second, to the degree that a meat tax (coupled with other reforms) can at least reduce harm in the short term and build momentum towards more radical changes in the long run, it might be worthwhile for those reasons too.

Finally, we can briefly consider several related pragmatic cons of meat taxes, which critique meat taxes for being unachievable, counterproductive, classist, and racist. First, one might argue that a meat tax is unachievable. Yes, a meat tax is relevantly similar to other taxes that voters accept. And yes, many people support the idea of a meat tax. But voters care about meat in a way that they might not care about other taxed goods, and however much support there is for a meat tax, there is likely to be at least as much, if not much more, resistance to the idea.

However, we believe that this concern is overstated. We grant that a meat tax might be harder to implement than other taxes, and we also grant that a meat tax might be harder to implement in some jurisdictions than others. Clearly, policymakers should take all such factors into account when deciding which initiatives to pursue. But we maintain that a meat tax is achievable in some jurisdictions in the short term (particularly jurisdictions with progressive electorates), provided that policymakers think strategically about how to implement it.

Second, one might argue that a meat tax, if implemented, will be counterproductive. In particular, it will not disincentivize meat production and consumption as much as a meat ban would do. And it would make a meat ban harder to achieve, since it would consume social, political, and economic capital that we could otherwise invest in a meat ban, and since it would suggest to the

public that the meat industry is acceptable with appropriate taxes and regulations.<sup>16</sup> Thus, one might argue, even if we could achieve a meat tax, we should not attempt to do so.

Again, we believe this concern to overstated. We agree that in cases where a meat tax and meat ban are equally tractable, a meat ban is preferable all else equal. But we also expect there to be cases where a meat tax is more tractable than a meat ban at present. And in these cases, we believe that insofar as the state frames a meat tax in the right kind of way, as an incremental step towards transformative change, a meat tax can function to build momentum towards a meat ban, or, at least, can avoid sapping momentum from this further change.

Third, one might argue that a meat tax would have classist and racist implications. One reason is that a meat tax would likely take the form of a flat-rate sales tax, which applies to everyone equally regardless of income. And in order to be successful, this tax would need to increase the cost of meat consumption enough to shift consumer demand. So, given that this kind of tax disproportionately impacts low-wealth individuals and, in many areas, BIPOC communities, it can be expected to have classist and, in many areas, racist impacts.<sup>17,18</sup>

Another reason that a meat tax might have classist and racist implications is that it would disproportionately impact low-wealth and marginalized workers. The majority of factory farm and slaughterhouse workers in the United States come from BIPOC communities, and many are undocumented migrant workers, do not speak English as their first language, and have not

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<sup>16</sup> Others have argued that a meat tax could perversely increase meat consumption by decreasing intrinsic motivation for reducing one's own consumption (Katare et al). That is, that a meat tax could give consumers the false impression that the issue is being addressed, and that their consumption can thus move forward absent ethical constraint.

<sup>17</sup> Wiehe et al., 2018, p. 19

<sup>18</sup> This critique becomes even more salient when we consider that people on low incomes already tend to have the poorest diets nutritionally (Baggini, 2019).

completed a high school level education.<sup>19</sup> So, insofar as a meat tax reduces meat production levels, it might take away sources of not only food but also income in these communities.

We agree that a meat tax can have these impacts all else equal. But we have two responses. First, the state can mitigate these impacts. For example, insofar as the state shifts subsidies from animal-based to plant-based foods, it can ensure that everyone has access to humane, healthful, sustainable foods (as well as ensure that the prices of animal-based foods more closely reflect their true costs). And insofar as the state expands access to income, healthcare, housing, employment, and other such basic goods, it can further mitigate risks to marginalized communities.<sup>20,21</sup>

Second, we need to compare the harms of a meat tax with the harms of the status quo. As we have seen, the meat industry harms animals, workers, consumers, and the general public via public health and environmental impacts that disproportionately impact marginalized communities as well. And when we compare the harms of a meat tax with the harms of the status quo (holding constant other interventions that might be helpful), we think that the latter are much worse overall, including and especially for marginalized communities.

The upshot is that a meat tax is justifiable on principled grounds, since it aims not only to prevent people from harming themselves but also to prevent people from harming others and to internalize the many currently externalized costs of meat production. And a meat tax is also justifiable on pragmatic grounds, provided that policymakers motivate and implement this tax properly, and particularly if policymakers combine this tax with other interventions designed to support people who currently rely on the meat industry for food and income.

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<sup>19</sup> McConnell, 2019, p. 18-19; Missouri Coalition for the Environment, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Springmann et al., 2017

<sup>21</sup> This work is already being done by groups like the [Agriculture Fairness Alliance](#), [Mercy for Animals](#), [PETA](#), [The Rancher Advocacy Program](#), and many more.

### **III. Meat Bans**

As with taxes, many people agree that bans can be acceptable as a general matter, but they disagree about the details. Once again, whether we see a ban as acceptable might depend on whether we see it as paternalistic (as we do with many other food or drink bans, such as bans on trans fats or large sodas) or non-paternalistic. It will also, once again, depend on other details, such as the intended and expected impacts of the ban. In this section, we will consider these issues and explain why we take the case for meat taxes and bans to be similar and complementary.

Consider first the distinction between paternalistic and non-paternalistic bans. As with taxes, part of the aim of bans is to disincentivize harmful behavior. In the case of paternalistic bans, the aim is to make people less likely to harm themselves; for instance, this is part of why drugs such as cocaine and heroin are currently banned in the United States. In the case of non-paternalistic bans, the aim is to make people less likely to harm others; for instance, this is part of why interpersonal violence is currently banned in the United States.

Can bans also function to internalize externalities? This depends in part on our enforcement mechanism. For example, if a ban on harmful behavior is enforced through incarceration, then it might not generate revenue that we can use to address the relevant harms. But if, instead, a ban on harmful behavior is enforced through fines, then it might generate revenue that we can use to address the relevant harms. In these latter cases, the main difference between taxes and bans might simply be how steep the penalty is, as well as how the penalty is socially framed.

As we will see, there is a tension between these options, since, on one hand, a meat ban enforced through incarceration would socially signal that meat production is as unacceptable as,

say, interpersonal violence in our present context, but it would also cost money and reinforce mass incarceration. On the other hand, a meat ban enforced through fines could raise money and avoid reinforcing mass incarceration, but it would also socially signal that meat production is more acceptable than, say, interpersonal violence in our present context.

With these categories in mind, how would we classify a meat ban? As with a meat tax, we could classify it in all of these ways, depending on our enforcement mechanism. This once again makes a meat ban relatively easy to justify, since we can provide paternalistic, non-paternalistic, and, in some cases, economic justifications. We can also, once again, cite international precedent, since many countries, states, and cities already ban particular kinds of meat out of concern for humans or nonhumans, and many others are now considering doing the same.

However, as with a meat tax, a lot will depend on further details. For instance, would a meat ban target all meat products? Or would it be narrower, targeting only some meat products, or wider, targeting other kinds of animal products as well? Similarly, would a meat ban apply at the production, distribution, or consumption stage? We return to these questions below. For now, we will once again focus on a ban on all meat products at some point in the supply chain, and we will discuss the details where they might be relevant to our analysis.

With that in mind, consider some pros and cons of meat bans. This discussion will broadly take the same structure as our discussion about meat taxes, for a simple reason: Many of the pros of meat taxes and bans are similar, and many of the cons of meat taxes and bans are similar as well. But there will also be important differences between the two. We will attempt to emphasize the similarities as well as the differences, though we will also move somewhat faster through material that we already discussed in the context of meat taxes.

First, a meat ban can have both of the principled pros of a meat tax. A meat ban aligns with the harm principle, since part of the aim is to prevent people from harming others against their will. And if a meat ban is enforced through fines, then it also aligns with the polluter pays principle (which, in this context, we might instead describe as the perpetrator pays principle), since part of the aim, or at least part of the effect, would be to generate revenue that we can use to support humans, nonhumans, and the environment.

A meat ban can have another principled pro as well. Bans typically have a more ambitious practical and expressive purpose than taxes: They typically aim to disincentivize the relevant behavior more than taxes do, and they also typically aim to condemn the relevant behavior more than taxes do. To this extent, a meat ban would be more likely than a meat tax to aim for the right outcome, all else being equal: a state of affairs where meat production no longer occurs at all at scale, and where people generally see this activity as unacceptable.

Of course, how well a meat ban can play these roles will depend in part on the details. For instance, as we have already seen, the extent to which a ban condemns and eliminates a particular practice will depend in part on the enforcement mechanism, as well as in part on a wide range of other factors that we will consider below, such as social uptake. As we will see, it might be that in some cases a tax will be optimal, in other cases a “weak” ban will be optimal, and in still other cases a “strong” ban will be optimal for such reasons.

In many cases, a meat ban can also have both of the pragmatic pros of a meat tax. First, we have reason to believe that this kind of ban can be implemented in some contexts, and second, we also have reason to believe that this kind of ban, if implemented, can be successful in some contexts. After all, many cities, states, and countries have already implemented targeted meat bans,

such as foie gras and veal bans, and these bans have been an effective deterrent.<sup>22,23</sup> We can expect that more general meat bans will be similarly tractable as opposition to meat increases.

A meat ban can have another pragmatic pro as well. As noted above, whereas a tax suggests that a particular practice is tolerable in moderation, a ban suggests that a particular practice is intolerable. This is why a ban on violence makes more sense than a tax on violence in principle, and it is also why a ban on violence is more likely to reinforce the right attitudes than a tax on violence in practice. For this reason, a meat ban is more likely to reinforce the right attitudes regarding violence against animals than a meat tax in practice, all else equal.

The tractability of meat bans is worth emphasizing. Meat consumption was generally avoided in Japan for more than 12 centuries, and several kinds of meat consumption were banned in 675 AD.<sup>24</sup> Meat bans have been present in India for millennia, and most Indian states still ban the slaughter of cows.<sup>25</sup> And meat bans are becoming increasingly popular in the US, the EU, and other regions. Again, many cities and states in the US now ban particular kinds of meat production, as well as practices such as keeping hens in cages or sows in gestation crates.<sup>26,27</sup>

Now consider some principled cons of meat bans. As we have seen, meat taxes can be attacked in either of two ways, since some people might see them as going too far and others might see them as not going far enough. In contrast, meat bans are more likely to be attacked in the former way than in the latter way. That is, people are more likely to frame meat bans as going too

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<sup>22</sup> California Proposition 2, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Grant, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Allen, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Hindustan Times, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> California Proposition 2, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Grant, 2009.

far, on the grounds that they restrict practices that many people value, including members of both mainstream and marginalized cultural and religious groups.

With that said, some people might still attack particular meat bans as not going far enough, depending on the details. For instance, one might attack a targeted meat ban on the grounds that we need to ban all kinds of meat (or animal-based products), rather than only some kinds of meat. Additionally, one might attack a meat ban with a weak enforcement mechanism, such as a modest fine, on the grounds that a stronger enforcement mechanism is necessary to achieve the expressive and practical aims of the ban, that is, to both condemn and eliminate animal slaughter at scale.

As with meat taxes, we think that the first critique is not compelling. Violence might be acceptable in some cases, such as cases where violence is necessary for survival or self-defense. But violence is not acceptable as a general matter. In cases where humans are causing massive and unnecessary harm to vulnerable others against their will, this violence can and should be banned in a liberal democratic society no matter how many humans value it. And while current anti-cruelty laws are a start, these laws are not sufficient to protect animals from this violence.

In contrast, we think that the second critique might be compelling, depending on the details. If we accept that our goal should be a total meat ban, then in the same kind of way that we might see a meat tax as falling short of that ideal, we might also see a targeted meat ban, such as a veal or foie gras ban, as falling short of that ideal. But if a targeted meat ban is the best we can do at present, and if we implement this ban thoughtfully, then it can still be worthwhile, since it can still reduce some harm at present while building momentum toward reducing more in the future.

Now consider some pragmatic cons of a meat ban. First, as with a meat tax, some people might think that a meat ban is unachievable. Many people are strongly opposed to meat bans, to the point where if a policymaker even suggests that it might be good to, say, eat less meat for

health or environmental reasons, political opponents frame them as supporting a meat ban in order to punish them politically.<sup>28</sup> So, we might once again worry that a meat ban will often be a nonstarter, and that pursuing it will often be a waste of scarce resources.

But we think that this concern is overstated. Granted, a total meat ban might be unachievable in many cities, states, and countries at present. But, first, targeted meat bans might be achievable in these jurisdictions at present, since, after all, many such bans have already passed. And, second, a total meat ban might be possible in these jurisdictions in the future, once we build momentum towards this goal through a combination of taxes, bans, and other strategies. So as long as we pursue meat bans selectively and strategically, they can be worthwhile investments.

Second, as with a meat tax, some people might think that a meat ban is counterproductive. In order for a ban to be effective, it requires a critical mass of support. Otherwise it will produce a backlash, where people refuse to enforce it, work to repeal it, and generally become more hostile to the worldview that produced it. Given this reality, we might think that we should pursue the end of animal slaughter not through meat bans, but rather through less coercive means such as education, advocacy, and research and development of alternative proteins.

But we think that this concern is overstated too. As with the previous concern, some meat bans might produce this kind of backlash, and others might not. If we pursue bans thoughtfully, by building momentum in other ways, implementing targeted or weakly enforced bans at the right moment, and then implementing more general or strongly enforced bans later on, then we can achieve the expressive and practical aims of particular meat bans while mitigating the risk that these bans will be unachievable or unsustainable in practice.

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<sup>28</sup> Beauchamp, 2021

Third, as with a meat tax, some people might think that a meat ban is racist and classist. Some of the reasons will be the same as before. While many people might value meat, low-wealth people (and, in many areas, people of color) are more likely to depend on the current meat industry for food or income. So, if we implement meat bans in a straightforward manner, then we might reduce harms associated with meat production and consumption, but we might also increase harms associated with social, political, and economic disruption.

There is an additional reason why a meat ban can be classist and racist (which can apply to meat taxes too). In some cases, policymakers might ban kinds of meat production that are associated with minoritized groups (such as a ban on slaughter methods associated with halal and kosher meat in the EU<sup>29</sup>), while continuing to permit kinds of meat production that are associated with mainstream groups. If so, then even if this strategy is motivated by reasonable concerns, the result is still that the state is disproportionately restricting the behavior of minoritized groups.

But we think that this concern is overstated too. First, we can mitigate the risk that a meat ban will be classist or racist by implementing it thoughtfully and contextually. For instance, to the degree that we pursue a just transition in our food system by ensuring that everyone has access to food and income throughout, we can mitigate the risk of harm to vulnerable groups. And to the degree that we ban mainstream and minoritized forms of violence alike, we can mitigate the risk that we will be selectively restricting the behavior of minoritized groups.

Second, we once again have to compare the harms of a meat ban with the harms of the meat industry. Every policy is going to benefit some individuals and harm others. But the meat industry causes much more harm to humans and nonhumans (including many vulnerable humans)

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55344971>  
<https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-states-can-ban-kosher-and-halal-ritual-slaughter-court-rules/>

than a transition to a plant-based food system would cause. So while we can and should work to mitigate the harms of this transition, we should not allow the possibility of these harms to prevent or (significantly) delay this transition. There is simply too much at stake for all of us.

The upshot is the same as before: Meat bans, thoughtfully pursued, are justifiable on both principled and pragmatic grounds. The trick is to be selective and strategic about where, when, and how we implement them. If we act too fast, then we might not have enough momentum for the ban to be successful. If we act too slow, then we might miss our chance to build on the momentum that we have. But when we strike a balance between these extremes, we can pass meat bans that, together with other interventions, will succeed in ending meat production.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

There is no universal answer to the question whether a meat tax or ban is permissible, required, or ideal. It all depends on the context. What are the expected costs and benefits of each approach in each situation, both in the short term and in the long run? Here we need to consider the tractability of each approach, the human welfare and rights impacts, the nonhuman welfare and rights impacts, and the social, political, economic, and ecological impacts. It is highly unlikely that any particular approach will always be ideal all things considered.

This reality is important to bear in mind as we consider many of the specific questions that have emerged in this discussion. To reiterate some of the main questions: First, what should our goal be? Should we aim to tax or ban *all* animal products or only *some*? Second, what means should we take to this end? Should we attempt to achieve this goal all at once or one step at a time?

And third, what should the details be? For instance, what other policies should we implement alongside taxes or bans to mitigate possible harmful side effects?

With all that in mind, our general view is that we should *at least* aim for a total ban on factory farming, or factory farmed products. Factory farming is the most violent and destructive industry in the history of the world. This industry is also *essentially* harmful in these ways, and in a world with plant farming and other alternatives, it is also unnecessary. So, as a starting point, we can at least agree on the need to work towards a total ban on factory farming, and we can debate whether and to what degree to ban other uses of animals along the way.

Our general view is also that taxes as well as bans, narrowly as well as widely targeted, can be useful on the path towards that goal. In general, we should pursue a multi-pronged approach to food system reform, for instance by pursuing taxes or bans together with plant-forward informational policies, procurement policies, and regulations. We need to assess these approaches holistically, and we expect that when we do, we will find that taxes or bans – narrow at first, wider over time – will sometimes have an important role to play.

Finally, our general view is that we should, indeed, attempt to combine taxes or bans with social and economic policies meant to mitigate risks for vulnerable workers or consumers. But we should also be realistic. It will likely be impossible to pair each tax or ban with a policy that eliminates risks for everyone impacted. Instead, as we work to build more resilient and sustainable communities and food, energy, and transportation systems, we will need to think in general terms about how to provide a just transition for people impacted by all these changes.

Beyond that, we might not know yet exactly what kind of food system to build in the future. For instance, should a just future food system include plant-based and cell-based meats, whose production methods are currently much less harmful than factory farming but, at least in many

cases, much more harmful than the best kinds of plant farming? We might disagree or, at least, be uncertain about that. But ideally we can work together to phase down factory farming and phase up plant farming while we work to resolve these further disagreements and uncertainties.

Should we have hope that we can achieve these goals? The evidence is mixed. On the positive side, we know that many bans are more tractable than they initially appear. For instance, before we implemented smoking bans, they were highly controversial. But once we implemented them, they became increasingly popular – or, at least, accepted – over time.<sup>30</sup> When we consider the many harms that the meat industry produces, as well as the many benefits that plant-based alternatives provide, we have at least some reason to expect that the same will be true here.

On the negative side, meat taxes and bans are already becoming politically polarized, and they will likely become even more polarized over time. Indeed, anytime advocates or policymakers discuss the harms of the meat industry or the benefits of plant-based alternatives at all, many commentators accuse them of attempting to “take your meat away from you.”<sup>31</sup> Insofar as advocates or policymakers actually do attempt to reduce the availability of meat, we can expect that this commentary will become more frequent, intense, and persuasive to meat eaters.

In the same way that there is no universal answer to the question whether to pursue a particular tax or ban, there is also no universal answer to the question how optimistic or pessimistic to be. It all depends on the details of our goal, our strategy, and our context. But as a general matter, we can say that we should neither be fully optimistic nor be fully pessimistic. A total ban on these harmful industries is neither impossible nor inevitable. Instead, it is possible but hard, and all we can do is pursue it as thoughtfully and strategically as possible.

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<sup>30</sup> Fong, 2006

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2021/4/26/22403599/biden-red-meat-ban-burger-kudlow>

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