

Ecological Public Health, Policy for Health, Social Justice and Sustainability Fringe at The Green Party Conference organised by The Vegan Society

Professor Molloy: Thanks, Amanda. As Amanda said, I come from a very specific focus here and I think it is worthwhile just sort of laying that out first, explaining that my own research interests are really located in the places where media, film and what we call animal studies meet. A large focus of what I do is on media, culture and social practices and specifically those that involve animals and more broadly speaking, nature. So that's where my position is. And I suppose the way that I want to feed into this is by saying something straightforward; that our relationships with animals are incredibly complex and never more so than when it comes to our food systems. Of course, the species that we consume varies from culture to culture, some species are taboo, as we know. It is because of these differences that we understand that our eating habits are culturally determined. They become normalised. But, of course, this doesn't mean that they are normal, natural or inherent. The practices come about, they are established due to various different drivers and whether those are social, economic, cultural, political, and so forth, there are various influences that contribute towards what ends up on our plate. This also means that our habits change over time and so while we might think that what ends up on our plate is normal, it is, of course, a consequence of all those different factors. And some of those factors come from the industries themselves in the form of media, marketing and advertising. That is not to say that those tell us directly what we should or shouldn't eat but they certainly play a really important part in establishing those norms of cultural consumption. The norms of cultural consumption I want to suggest need to change, for a range of connected reasons, are ethical, environmental and the focus of the panel today, health reasons.

On the basis that a plant-based diet can be ethical, sustainable and contribute to global health and wellbeing as a solution, I want to concentrate on three main points: first of all, we have become consumers rather than citizens and we need to redress that balance. We need to reconnect consumption to ethics. Secondly, despite being unsustainable and requiring immediate large scale structural change, there are barriers to a radical overhaul of global corporate food systems. Thirdly, changes cannot be made through consumer choice alone. They require regulatory and policy change. In this regard I think that The Green Party policy statements are very much with accord with the changes that are necessary to alter the food system to benefit humans, human health and also animals. So that is sort of where I am coming from in a sense. I do want to, sort of, I suppose, set the bigger context and obviously I know Geof will pick up on the specifics of ecological public health but I want to set this broader context in terms of the focus that has been recently on global food production systems. There are certainly a lot of good reasons why we are starting to refocus on this and it bears mentioning a few here, and excuse me while I do trot out some numbers and I know you will be familiar with a lot of these already.

Of course, estimates now predict that the global human population is going to be in excess of nine billion by 2050 and, of course, that presents us with problems. How do we feed this global population? The other problem is, at what cost? And the environmental cost is huge. Food systems in developed countries contribute around 28% to overall greenhouse gas emissions, currently taking into account the agricultural production, processing, distribution, retailing, home food preparation and waste. Alongside that, agriculturally induced deforestation is a main cause of worldwide biodiversity loss, it also contributes significantly to water scarcity and it is a major cause of water

pollution. Within that system, that global food production system, the meat and dairy industries are the largest source of food related greenhouse gas emissions and the main sector specific source of water pollution. Also, a cause for concern is land usage. Much arable land now is used to raise cereals to be consumed by those animals. Some studies claiming that up to 50% of the global cereal crop is now fed to livestock. Meat and dairy consumption is increasing, certainly in countries such as India and China and we are seeing the expansion of unsustainable consumption practices now across different cultures. This parallels, unsurprisingly, increasing corporate penetration and associated marketing and advertising that goes along with that as corporations move into developing countries. We should not forget that developing countries are perceived as developing markets for corporations. Anticipated growth in the global population is going to exert ever greater pressure on our natural resources and that environmental burden is only going to grow. I have argued in a number of different places that neo-liberalism and the idea of neo-liberal pleasure plays a huge part in sustaining this current system. Pleasure, of course, can refer, in this case, to taste and obviously that is cited by a number of studies as underpinning a lot of resistance to reductions of meat consumption. But, I think there is also a more, kind of, elastic way of thinking of neo-liberal pleasure, and that's a type of neo-liberal pleasure that has been promoted by the corporatisation of the food system. And which positions us as consumers first and citizens maybe second, but maybe that doesn't come into it at all.

Neo-liberalism is an ideology and it is an economic model. It shifts power from the public and the state to markets. It favours de-regulation, the liberalisation of trade, the privatisation of public services and the unrestricted movement of capital. Its logic of ever increasing profit accumulation and continual growth is prefigured on this problematic and unsustainable myth of infinite resources that are underwritten by this exploitation of nature and labour. So neo-liberalism is fostering a kind of 'common sense idea' that the markets rule and consumer choice expands and that consumer choice somehow equates with personal autonomy and freedom. So within neo-liberal thinking, citizens are consumers first and their individual right to choose and consume is both encouraged and necessary. Pleasurable consumption, I would argue, has become this really potent re-configuration of liberal personal freedom. There is a cost and that is that the economic interests of specific sectors, financial, agricultural, corporate food sectors are promoted at the expense of societal interests.

To be blunt about it, neo-liberalism favours corporate food systems over public health. That's kind of the short hand way of saying it. We have seen a proliferation of authorities and a proliferation of choice, certainly since the 1970s or at least the illusion of choice, and consumers now seem to pick from an endless array of choices and the supporting opinions that go alongside them. And this has had the effect of sort of extending our ambivalence and a sense of uncertainty. I think this is part of this ethical disconnection that we have, this disconnection from our ethical obligations and the environment. How can we possibly locate a consistent ethical obligation amongst the ambivalence of multiple expert opinions? Diet and exercise gurus, doctors, nutritionists, television chefs, health promotion experts even us on the stage here today, all of us promote an array of opinions and, of course, the internet can be used too to justify all of these perspectives.

So what we have now is this kind of market-based relativism that neo-liberalism has fostered and that leaves us very little space for ethical reflection other than just a choice amongst a range of other choices. So you can choose to be an ethical consumer. Why don't we find that odd? That the ethical choice is a choice at all – surely it should be the default. Because, of course, within

contemporary culture, ethical consumer is actually a marketing category. It is a demographic to target green advertising and products. It is a way of, in a sense, just looking at another form of consumerism. We used to think that pleasures were previously thought to be driven by lack or desire. Pleasure came from satisfying a need but in the case of food consumption in developed countries, neo-liberal pleasure has been separated from fulfilling our needs and instead what we have now is that pleasure is turned wholly towards maximising market and individual interests. Compulsive consumption has now become in and of itself a form of enjoyment.

Now because of this, a plant-based diet seems to be a radical alternative. Veganism has been constructed through mainstream media as a practice of denying or withholding pleasure, something that obviously neo-liberal pleasure seems to promise us through consumer choice. Although studies have demonstrated that a plant-based diet would be sustainable in developed countries and also supply an adequate balance of key nutrients at a lower GHG cost than meat dominated diets, policy change to support that is a challenge, and that's due to various different factors, including, for example, lobbying by the meat and dairy industries, commitment to neoliberal economics and ideology and a widespread political concern about consumer sensitivities to things like demand restraint or choice editing. I think though that there are some changes happening.

There are things that are occurring which we should look towards. Over the last ten years, for example, there has been a trend for films which have had widespread distribution and have critiqued the food production system from an environmental, ethical, animal rights or health perspective. These films have been at least an intervention if not a disruption in the discourse on neoliberal global food. Films such as *Fast Food Nation*, *Forks over Knives*, *Food Inc.*, *Food Matters*, *Vegucated*, these films have an important role to play in re-shaping cultural understanding about corporate food systems. There also needs to be policy change and I think there are some changes that could be achieved – harnessing the ground swell of public opinion following food scares for instance which undermine public faith in food production, could be used as moments to promote change. Regulatory intervention in the control of prices by supermarkets needs public support, pricing obviously has an impact on consumer choice. And the need to have greater public scrutiny of the so-called 'waste' produced by our current system and by waste I am referring to waste in the broadest sense: everything from the food that is ploughed back into the land, the unseen waste on farms for example, right through to male calves and chicks from the dairy and egg industries and so forth. And the extent of this waste still has not been properly calculated in the UK. Public support for local sustainable food economies is also vital. One step towards this, I think, is the development of regional sustainable, ethical food charters.

Finally, I have suggested elsewhere that UK regulation that is already in place that prohibits the advertising of high salt, fat and sugar products during children's television programming should be extended to prohibit the advertising of meat and dairy products as well. In a pilot project that we undertook, we looked at how many images of fruit and vegetables occurred during peak family viewing times on television. Just to give you a snapshot of the results, we found that in 72 adverts, for example, 17 of which were for food products, only three included any image of fresh fruit or vegetables and two of those were as garnish on a processed meat product.

The media do not tell us what to think, but they do tell us what to think about. When images are shown regularly, we tend to attach more cultural or social importance to them. The opposite seems to

hold true as well. If we do not see images of fresh fruit and vegetables, they will figure much less in the public consciousness. So in addition to dismantling neo-liberalism, which I understand is a pretty big job, I am advocating a more realisable aim for regulatory change to food advertising to promote change and in doing so, I think, offer public health benefits. Thank you.