

Scarlet Letters: Meat, Normality and the Power of Shaming

By Nicolas Delon

In 2018 and 2019, a series of attacks by vegan activists struck meat-related businesses in France. Deemed “extreme” and “violent” by butchers, these actions invite us to reflect on the ethics of activism. Is it ever morally permissible to engage in illegal activism? Are tactics such as shaming even effective?

As of this writing, a butcher shop in Paris was just vandalized, allegedly by vegan activists. From November 2018 to February 2019, a series of attacks struck meat-related businesses in the north of France. The damage included broken windows, fires at butchers’ shops, fishmongers, and restaurants, inflicted on nocturnal raids where activists also scrawled slogans such as “Stop Speciesism” and “Assassins”. Last June, butchers wrote to the interior ministry a letter to request increased protection, worrying about the consequences of “excessive media hype around vegan lifestyles”, and that vegans wanted to “impose their lifestyle on the immense majority of people”. Two animal rights activists were recently convicted of criminal damage by a court in Lille. “We needed an example to be made of them so that these actions by small groups with extremist and profoundly violent ideas come to an end,” said the head of the local butchers’ federation, Laurent Rigaud.

France is no stranger to protests but the attacks shocked many in a country where gastronomy takes pride of place in culture. The attacks took place against the background of growing discussions around meat, animal abuse, veganism and speciesism, fueled in part by a string of undercover investigations led by the animal rights organization L-214 in slaughterhouses. Eating habits are also shifting, if slowly, with sales of meat and animal products dropping and an increasingly popular animal rights movement. As L-214 co-founder Sébastien Arsac remarked, “We condemn all violence” and, if meat sales are decreasing, it is not because of the (at most) 5% of vegetarians in France but more likely because of a majority of people who are considering cutting down on their meat consumption.¹ Butchers seem to be seeking publicity, public sympathy and governmental support on the basis of a very limited number of reported incidents. And while a legislative bill to require schools to provide a vegetarian meal at least once a week was dropped, food producers have been fighting the use of terms such as “steak”, “bacon” and “sausage” to refer to meat substitutes.

Many activists are also no strangers to civil disobedience, challenging the boundaries of the law in pursuit of what they consider a just cause.² Animal activists are no exception and sometimes engage in uncivil disobedience as well. Animal liberation can be pursued in many ways, from the saboteur of the Animal Liberation Front to the peaceful protester to the reasoned lunchtime debater. Goals also fall along a spectrum between, crudely, welfarism (i.e. incremental reforms) and abolitionism (i.e. the end of all forms of animal exploitation). There is also a range of questions one might want to ask. Is it ever morally permissible for them to engage in *illegal* activism? What are the most *effective* tactics, and should different tactics be combined? Also, what populations should one *target*? Butchers represent an economically vulnerable line of work, and are quite unable to enact major changes on their own, unlike large agribusiness corporations. What seems to truly preoccupy the industry is bad publicity, as revealed by undercover investigations but also direct action that seeks to shame, humiliate, stigmatize perpetrators of violence to animals. In the remainder of this essay, I explain in what sense anti-speciesism, animal liberation and veganism are extreme, in contrast to the normality of eating meat. I then explain what I mean by normal and how the norms of ‘normality’ constitute

¹ Reliable data are hard to come by but most studies suggest that there are around 5% of vegetarians in France, some of which arguably keep eating fish. The number of vegans rarely exceeds 0.5% across studies. That said, the market for vegetarian and vegan products, along with the flexitarian trend, has grown significantly. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vegetarianism_by_country for statistics by country.

² See Utria (2009) for a discussion of animal liberation as justified by self-defense and/or just war theory. On the history and sociology of animal activism, see Carrié and Traïni (2019).

obstacles to social change. Next, I discuss use of shame and shaming as an effective tool of social change, or way to challenge social norms, introducing insights from Jennifer Jacquet's 2015 *Is Shame Necessary?* Throughout, I will not be presupposing (though I personally believe) that anti-speciesists are correct about our moral reasons. My only assumption will be that we have some reasons to question the *status quo* and its underlying social norms.

Extreme Perspectives

Consider this simple fact: the consumption of animal flesh and products is perfectly normal. Anti-speciesism, the view that species membership, by itself, should not make members of some species (here, human beings) morally more important (or their interests more significant) than others, is therefore inevitably extreme. By denouncing meat-eaters, and animal exploitation more generally, anti-speciesist are aiming at shifting existing norms—demanding that one no longer see and treat sentient animals as mere commodities, edible bodies, sources of selfish or ritually shared pleasure, mere means for the satisfaction of human interests—things that most of us do most of the time. What if anything can be more extreme than challenging the core foundations of the global food system as well as a tenet of many gastronomies and cultures?

Most animal advocates do not see meat-eaters, farmers, slaughterhouse workers, and butchers as evil or legitimate targets of violence. However “extreme” one takes their position to be, it need not condone violent tactics, despite misconceptions conveyed by the meat industry and the media, which frame the debate as a battle between ‘murderer’ butcherers and vegan ‘terrorists’. Most animal advocates and vegans are innocent, well-intentioned, and reasonable and yet some people conflate them with, and blame them for, the wrongdoing of a handful of violent activists; meanwhile, most meat-eaters and workers of the industry are innocent, well-intentioned, and reasonable and yet some people conflate them with, and blame them for, two things: (i) the wrongdoing of a handful of violent workers who do really abuse animals and/or (ii) the systemic and collective harm that enables animal abuse.

The confusion results from the extreme nature of the challenge: on the one hand, that social norms normalize and thereby legitimize practices that animal activists consider harmful and

unjust (rightly so, in my view), and so turn a large number of agents into the visible faces of the industry; on the other hand, that social norms treat significant deviations as violations and thereby delegitimize attempts to challenge them. In other words, the social structure of our relations to animals inevitably leads each party to perceive the other as extreme. Were it not normal to eat meat, anti-speciesists would be perceived as less extreme, and meat-eaters as more legitimate targets of shame or indignation. In fact, anti-speciesists would be upholding social norms. Butchers would be the challengers, anti-speciesists the enforcers, and radical meat-eaters would be confronting diners while they're eating a plant-based burger! But in the current state of affairs, butchers are simply the enforcers of widely embraced social norms (thus, hardly blameworthy as individuals), whereas anti-speciesists are the challengers (albeit, from their own perspective, the champions of just norms).

Is meat murder, dairy rape? Do butchers deserve scarlet letters? What anti-speciesists want us to believe, is that there is no difference between killing a cow and killing a human that is significant enough to routinely morally justify one and not the other. This is not to say that one act is necessarily as morally weighty as the other, or that cows should be treated like humans. Anti-speciesists are challenging the normality of eating meat that arbitrarily excludes animals from the scope of application of the concept of 'murder'.

The Meaning of Normal

But what does it mean for something to be normal? Social norms can be an obstacle to moral progress, but their "joint acceptance" structure can be harnessed to foster change through shared reasons (Tam 2019). I've explored the question of social norms elsewhere (Delon 2018), but three main points bear emphasizing here.

2.1. *The normalization trap.* Social norms both generate and rely on beliefs that a behavior is normal. Adam Bear and Joshua Knobe conducted a series of experiments examining the folk understanding of normality. They found that people tend to combine a sense of what is typical with a sense of what is ideal (Bear and Knobe 2017). Normal is a statistical-evaluative complex. One of their examples is, "What is the normal / average / ideal number of hours of TV for a person to watch in a day?" Participants answered differently for each version: "normal" (about

3 hours), “average” (about 4), and “ideal” (about 2.5). This suggests that judgments of normality deviate from the average toward an evaluative standard and illustrates an intriguing feature of our minds: that in ordinary thinking we often cannot separate the average from the ideal, the descriptive from the prescriptive. Moral norms impact the acquisition of normality; normality (perceived social norms) impacts the acquisition of moral norms. “The consequences can be serious,” the authors noted in the New York Times (think of the normalization of previously outlandish behavior by President Trump). The flipside is that formerly controversial institutions or practices that become widespread can be seen as legitimate, such as same-sex marriage. In sum, the “normalization trap” can be a source of concern as well as positive change.

2.2. *Rationalizing meat.* Jared Piazza et al. (2015) **drew on** psychologist Melanie Joy’s Three Ns theory of “carnism” — i.e. that beliefs that eating meat is *necessary, natural, and normal* are the main justifications that people give for eating animals. The authors recruited omnivores in the U.S. and asked them “Why is it OK to eat meat?” They found that people actually offered Joy’s three Ns but also frequently a fourth N: eating meat is *nice* (i.e. good/tasty). They also found that individuals who endorsed the 4Ns tend not to be motivated by ethical concerns when making food choices, are less proud of their animal-product decisions, consume meat and animal products more frequently, and are highly committed to it. The 4Ns can have a strong rationalizing power for omnivores—often replacing arguments in justifying their behavior when questioned about it. While ‘normal’ appears to be just a subset of the main justifications, I suspect normality as just described underlies all four justifications, which all involve a blend of descriptive and prescriptive elements.

2.3. *The problem of conformity.* People tend to calibrate their actions to what they believe is common behavior. People do not just pick up on what they are told they should do, they respond to what they are told most people do. For instance, in littered environments, people are more likely to litter. In some cases, pointing to the norm—how little other teens drink or how much energy neighboring households use—can move people’s behavior toward the norm (see Bicchieri 2017 for a review of the evidence). The problem is when the norm is not good (e.g. when most people consume too much of a thing) or when people mistakenly believe that others routinely transgress the norm or worse, approve of a norm that they in fact all disapprove of (a phenomenon known as ‘pluralistic ignorance’). As Cristina Bicchieri puts it, “updated empirical expectations easily bleed into the normative realm. Disclosing information about how common some ‘bad’ behaviors [e.g. illegal downloads or bribing] are is counterproductive.” (p.

86) Examples of bad behavior are corrosive and contagious. What matters most, for better and worse, is comparison to one's reference network.

The descriptive norm is clear: most people eat meat; the resulting social norm is no less clear: most people believe it is acceptable, even desirable. Because of normalization, general conformity signals endorsement by the reference network, which triggers even more conformity. So, meat is normal. Meanwhile, animal activists endorse divergent norms to blame meat-eaters and -producers. They rely on common social cues associated with violence, prejudice, murder, rape, etc., to lead observers to infer that butchers and others are violating implicit moral norms. By doing so, they hope to align social norms more closely with the latter. But this form of blame is closer to shaming than proper interpersonal blame. Is it justified and/or effective?

The Power of Shame

Shame is tied to social norms; it seeks to restore compliance with an existing norm or to promote adherence to a new norm. Jennifer Jacquet has defended shame as a tool for solving some large-scale problems, especially environmental collective action problems such as climate change and overfishing. "We're all in it together," she writes, "shaming might become more acceptable as a means of social enforcement, because the audience is also a victim of the transgression and because we have very few other options of punishment." (Jacquet 2015: 26)

Jacquet denies the efficacy of "green guilt": "guilt-ridden consumers today buy dolphin-safe tuna, compact fluorescent lightbulbs, hybrid cars, and Ethos Water ... Carbon offsets share the greatest kinship with indulgences and are often framed in religious terms." (p. 45-46) Labels can be lax, vague, misleading and lead to "undesired complacency" (p. 49). Jacquet cites work on moral licensing indicating that people who buy eco-products can more easily justify subsequent greed, lying, and stealing. Jacquet is skeptical of the business philosophy of stores, such as Whole Foods in the U.S. "Voluntary standards, eco-labels, and consumer choice are what give Whole Foods its business edge ... If every grocery store were required to sell organic or sustainable foods, Whole Foods would have to find some other way to distinguish itself." (p. 52) Moreover, Whole Foods caters to a small fraction of mostly conscious consumers. Labels

can only shift industry norms at the margins unless they reflect *already-existing* social norms. Markets depend heavily on entrenched social norms (e.g., Northern Americans' taste for cars and meat), more so than regulation (of the car or farm animal industries). Because norms constrain what markets can do, and markets signal social norms, markets may not on their own initiate social change.

Can shame be more effective? One virtue of shame is its ability to scale, hence to influence groups. Shame is tied to how others see us and many groups care about that—even though they cannot *feel* shame, groups can be publicly shamed. And since “small changes made by big institutions can make a serious difference” (for better or worse), shame may be much more effective than consumer guilt in collective action problems. A few powerful corporations can be “bad apples” and “spoil the whole bunch.” Well-organized interest groups have the power to influence the economic and social norms governing consumer behavior, which in turn reinforces these groups' position and inhibits change by making deviance riskier or costlier. For instance, large corporations in industrialized countries effectively locked us into the fossil fuel economy through aggressive lobbying against regulation, shifting subsidies, taxes, international agreements. Comparably influential interest groups probably locked us into industrial animal agriculture through similar means (see Singer and Mason 2007; Wolfson and Sullivan 2004). The disproportionate influence of agribusiness and artificially low prices mold consumer preferences. Bad apples also incite group members to stop cooperating. The industrial food system makes cooperation toward a better system costlier and more uncertain, for both deviant companies and individual consumers.

In the context of common goods such as public health, social welfare, and natural resources, or on widely shared values such as human rights or animal welfare, people would be more motivated to enforce cooperation if they perceived that bad apples are compromising shared benefits that they themselves care about. But as noted, bad apples are large actors—typically, corporations or interest groups, not individuals. So, shaming should focus on them. Research also shows that shaming might help reduce undesirable consumption of unhealthy foods, “not by shaming the consumers, but by shaming the foods, that is, singling out the most egregious products that they might purchase.” (Jacquet, p. 107) Accordingly, shame should be directed toward food producers rather than consumers. In other words, paint a scarlet letter into our representation of meat, not on the storefronts of butchers.

Boycotts can help to shift norms. Consider a famous example, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, spearheaded by Rosa Parks. Jacquet notes that “Shaming was one tool used in the fight to

change the norm of who got to sit where—as well as the much bigger norm of discrimination.” (p. 79) Recently, the animal advocacy group The Humane League launched a public campaign singling out McDonald’s for animal abuse and cruel practices in its supply chain. The campaign’s effectiveness turns on the overlap between its audience and the company’s consumers and their sensitivity to the norms whose violations is being exposed. Focusing on egregious violations, The Humane League has singled out an offender that many people would recognize as standing to be shamed. In France, groups like L-214, Compassion in World Farming and Welfarm have engaged in similar shaming campaigns incentivizing large companies to align with at least minimally decent standards, singling out suppliers, stores and brands with whose customers they are aligned. But some companies are more susceptible to shaming than others because they are more concerned about what their consumer base thinks of them, or because particular campaigns are more in line with the customer base’s values. In fact, it may be easier and more worthwhile to shame companies that have already shown sign of norm-alignment than those that appear impervious to change.

At the same time, offenders must be allowed to reintegrate the group by realigning themselves. Nonprofits that engage in corporate outreach as well as public shaming campaigns rank, honor and reward those that make efforts and show concrete signs of commitment, and those that move up the ranks. On a smaller scale, The Humane League offers ‘Thank You’ cards that customers can leave in restaurants that offer vegan options, which say: “I ate here because you serve vegan options.” Stores can brag about their rankings, restaurants about their reviews on the online review site *Happy Cow*. Restoring or preserving one’s honor within one’s group, where the audience of shame matters to you, can be a powerful motivation.

Knowing which tools to use is one thing, using them effectively another. Ideally, shaming only exposes a fraction of a population, typically the worst offenders, the target behavior is modified in response to the simple threat of exposure, and shaming restores compliance by moving group members closer toward the norm. In chapter 6 of her book, Jacquet enumerates “seven habits of highly effective shaming”³ which suggest that corporate shaming campaigns geared toward corporate change and public policy are more likely to be more effective, and perhaps legitimate, than direct action led by non-trusted individuals against individual targets or small groups who have little influence on the system. Transgressors (corporations) are sensitive to the source of

³ 1. The audience responsible for shaming should be concerned with the transgression. 2. There should be a big gap between desired and actual behavior. 3. Formal punishment should be missing. 4. The transgressor should be sensitive to the source of shaming. 5. The audience should trust the source of the shaming. 6. Shaming should be directed where possible benefits are greatest. 7. Scrupulous implementation.

shaming (consumer). They do not want to be seen as severely misaligned with consumer values. Customers can ensure that retailers live up to pledged standards. Nonprofits can hold corporations publicly accountable. The more powerful the entity, the more justified but also the more effective the shaming.

The Limits of Shame

Shame has—and should have—limits, though. First, like other punishments, shaming can be humiliating, stigmatizing, even dehumanizing, and strip transgressors of their dignity (Nussbaum 2004). However, as we saw, shame is best aimed at entities that cannot be dehumanized but to which reputation matters nonetheless—corporations and states. Even though they cannot *feel* shame, they can be *shamed* into altering their behavior. Scarlet letters do not make them ashamed, yet the effects of stigmatization on their behavior are real. Targeting groups can have a high pay-off. It comes with obstacles, though. First, targets of shame can avoid it. In the U.S., the farm animal industry eschews shame in three main ways.

A) *Legal means*. The 2006 Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, signed into law by President George W. Bush with the support of major agribusiness corporations, extended the scope of terrorism to include activity “for the purpose of damaging or interfering with the operations of an animal enterprise”, including by taking recordings of a facility as long as there is demonstrable intent to defame the facility or its owner. Along with ‘Ag-Gag’ laws⁴, the AETA keeps whistleblowers and undercover investigators from exposing animal operations—typically the only way for animal advocates to hold the industry to account. These legal means also undermine the public credibility of most animal advocates through linguistic and legal association with terrorism—mirroring the association of butchers with murderers. Felony convictions for activists amount to scarlet letters, which effectively bar them from traveling to many countries and other activities.

B) *Diluting or deflecting responsibility*—keeping a low profile, creating shell firms to deflect risk, or being part of larger groups where “defectors are also more likely to find fellow

⁴ ‘Ag-Gag’ are various anti-whistleblower state laws that forbid the act of undercover filming or photography of activity on farms without the owner’s consent. These laws emerged in the early 1990s in response to the underground activities of the Animal Liberation Front. Ag-Gag laws have drawn criticism and legal challenges.

defectors, which helps to normalize defection.” (Jacquet, p. 153). Large interest groups insulate producers from targeted shaming.

C) *Distance between cause and effect.* Groups are less susceptible to shame than individuals, and some groups have more group cohesion and ‘mindedness’ than others: e.g., McDonald’s or Tyson Foods vs. the abstract class of consumers of Big Mac or fried chicken. Because they are perceived to have more agency (e.g. planning) companies are considered more responsible (Waytz and Young 2012). Moreover, groups are held to different standards than individuals (e.g. profit-maximization, fiduciary duties to shareholders). So, while shaming groups is more effective than shaming individuals, groups can be “functionally less susceptible to shaming” (Jacquet, p. 159).

These are three ways *targets* of shame can be avoided. There are also ways the *enforcers* of shaming can err. The evolution of costly signaling (think of the peacock’s tail) helps us understand why. Reliable signals are costlier. Gossip and indignation evolved in the context of small groups, where people interacted personally and durably and cooperation was essential for survival. But our ancient taste for outrage makes it harder for us to resolve conflicts with self-control when the temptation of outrage is so pervasive online (Crockett 2017). Online shaming allows for the cheapest form of signaling, “a low-risk form of moral engagement.” (Jacquet, p. 124) The marginal effort and risk of “piling on” when thousands have already done so is very low, but the marginal benefit are proportionally uncertain. Shaming can also be disproportionate, widely publicized minor offenses eliciting greater punishment than major, unrecorded ones, and sometimes escalates into more formal and real-life consequences (revenge, employment dismissal, suicide). Recall the outrage surrounding Justine Sacco’s racist tweet or the killing of Cecil the lion in Zimbabwe by a dentist from Minnesota.⁵ Online outrage is not calibrated for nuance and sensible prioritization.

Psychologist Molly Crockett (2017) warns against the risks of online outrage. People experience few norm violations in person. On the other hand, they encounter a wide array online. Online platforms have changed the incentives of information sharing. Companies compete for users’ attention to generate advertising revenue, so algorithms push content that is most likely to be shared, “regardless of whether it benefits those who share it—or is even true.”

⁵ However, Jacquet notes, Delta airlines was pressured to announce they would stop allowing hunting trophies as cargo; US Senator Bob Menendez announced he would introduce a bill to discourage trophy hunting. The case also started a public debate about conservation, land reform, and whether such cases deserve more attention than other issues such as police shootings, mass incarceration, poverty, and factory farming.

(p. 769) Research on “virality” shows that people are more likely to share content that elicits strong moral emotions (Brady et al. 2017). Accordingly, violations encountered online incite stronger outrage than those encountered in person or via traditional forms of media. One possible consequence is *outrage fatigue*: “constant exposure to outrageous news could diminish the overall intensity of outrage experiences, or cause people to experience outrage more selectively to reduce emotional and attentional demands.” There is also the *boomerang effect*: exposing all polluters and abusers might signal that the targeted behavior is very common, thus normalizing it.

Expressing outrage is a way to signal one’s moral quality to others and “online social networks massively amplify the reputational benefits of outrage expression.” (Crockett, p. 770). Crockett recognizes that outrage can benefit society by holding violators accountable and signaling the unacceptability of the behavior. Online platforms enable “traditionally disempowered groups to check the behaviour of more powerful interests.” Yet these benefits are limited. First, social networks allow people to sort themselves into echo chambers (Brady et al. 2017), which prevent effective communication and may deepen social divides. Second, the threshold for outrage expression is lower online, so “people may express moral outrage without actually experiencing the degree of outrage their behaviour implies.” (Crockett, *ibid.*) Digital media thus blur the reliability of signals and senders’ ability to distinguish “the truly heinous from the merely disagreeable”. Third, “expressing outrage online may result in less meaningful involvement in social causes”. Together, these considerations cast some doubt on the ability of online shaming to shape social norms.

In sum, shame is a potent tool, but the case in its favor is mixed. Not because it is ineffective, but precisely because its power requires caution to serve its function. However, when wielded with care, successfully aimed at reputation-sensitive groups, and combined with other tools, it can be a force of social change—enforcing norms that are routinely violated and establishing new norms.

Conclusion

Should individual butchers be shamed? Probably not if one is concerned with effective and legitimate shaming. But this by itself doesn't tell us if and when we may paint scarlet letters on brick-and-mortar or virtual storefronts. Because not all companies are equally responsible and/or good targets of effective shaming. Moreover, the tactic might be effective toward other goals (long-term societal change) or justified on other grounds (civil disobedience). Other tactics than targeting shopkeepers are probably more defensible. Finally, shaming is just one piece of the toolbox, and it may well be that confrontational tactics—read: non-violent ones—are worth combining with tactics that are proven to be more directly effective and publicly acceptable. For we could be myopic about the true costs and benefits of radical activism. Jeff Sebo and Peter Singer (2018) note that the benefits of moderate tactics tend to be more direct and measurable than the costs, whereas the costs of more radical tactics tend to be more direct and measurable than the benefits. We thus risk overvaluing the former and undervaluing the latter. The history of social movements suggests that radical activism, by challenging oppressive ideologies, can shift the center of debate, thereby paving the way for moderate change in the short term and radical change in the long run. So, parallel to, say, *implementing* Meatless Mondays, vegan *advocacy* might cause more people to decrease their consumption of animal products, and by greater margins, than moderate messaging—and in the long run challenge the social structures of oppression. Simultaneous advocacy for multiple ideals, Sebo and Singer suggest, may achieve the best outcome. Ultimately, some audiences will be more receptive to moderate change than they will be to anti-speciesism. The key point is: different tactics need not be mutually exclusive.⁶ Following Lori Gruen and Robert Jones (2015), we can think of “veganism as an aspiration,” expressing both the inevitability of causing harm and the idea that sentient animals are not edible. Whether or not we should think of meat as normal or shameful, that much is clear: anti-speciesists aspire to a world where they are no longer extreme, where tofu is the new normal and *boucheries* only sell plant-based meats.

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⁶ These are empirical questions, which evidence-based charities such as The Humane League and meta-charities such as [Animal Charity Evaluators](#) or the [Open Philanthropy Project](#) are grappling with.

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