
GETTING TO THE MEAT OF THE MATTER

To combat climate change, we need to do more than just stop burning coal, oil, and gas. We also need a change in other areas, such as our diet. Eating meat also harms the climate, yet most politicians are hesitant to intervene here. Lawyer Saskia Stucki explains why food is a taboo and how the state could effectively intervene.

14

The meat question – whether, how much and what kind of meat we want or ought to eat – is traditionally considered a private matter. Our diet may reflect our culinary, cultural, religious, or even moral predispositions, but whatever the reasons are, this is a personal decision made by the consumer. The idea of political intervention in this area of the private sphere makes people uneasy and quickly leads to accusations of overregulation or government overreach. A perfect example of this is the Veggie Day controversy in 2013, when Germany's Green Party proposed the introduction of a vegetarian day in government canteens, sparking fears of a “meat ban” and stirring up a hornet's nest.

Nevertheless, the conception of our freedom of consumption and the knee-jerk reaction to constraints placed upon it are short sighted. This is made clear by even a cursory glance at the externalized costs of our unbridled meat consumption. Its harmful effects on public health, animals, and the environment are well documented. Animal husbandry is a breeding ground for global health risks, such as the emergence of zoonotic diseases and antimicrobial resistance. Our meat consumption also comes at the expense of the 750 million animals slaughtered annually in Germany, many of which live their short lives in the dismal conditions of industrial factory farming. Animal husbandry is also one of the main drivers of worsening environmental crises: climate change, loss of biodiversity, deforestation of rainforests. These detrimental impacts on public health, the environment, and animal welfare signify that the meat question can no longer be regarded as a purely personal matter – it has become political.

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VIEW POINT

SASKIA
STUCKI

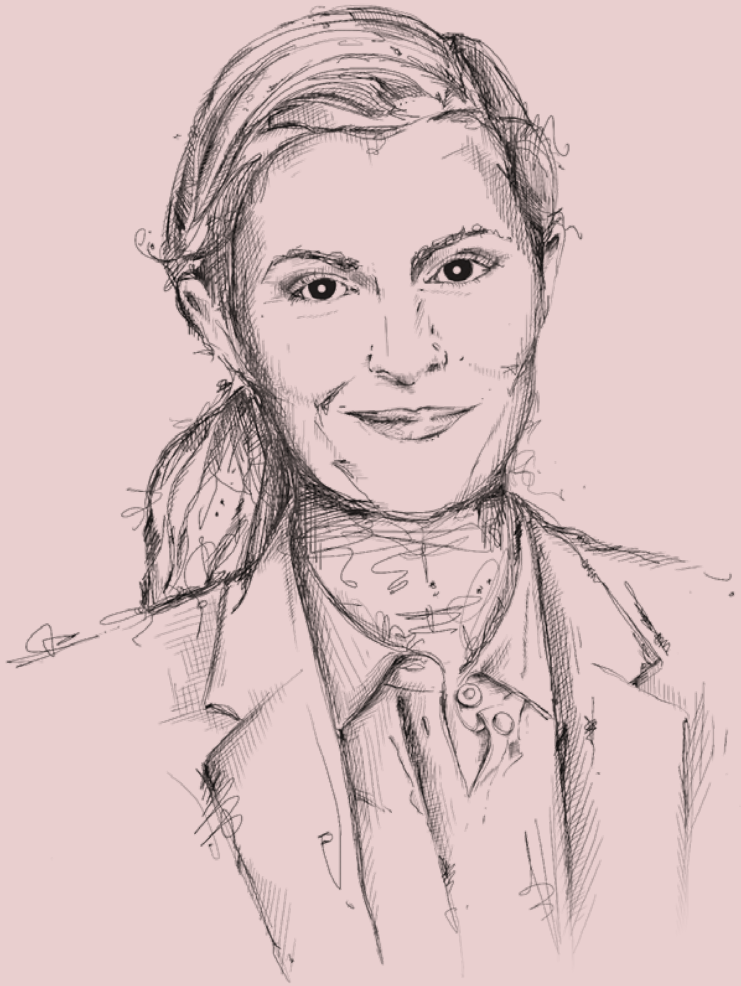


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CLIMATE POLICY CANNOT IGNORE THE MEAT QUESTION

The climate crisis has contributed significantly to the politicization of meat. The top priority of climate policy is to achieve climate neutrality by 2045 in Germany and 2050 in the EU. Rapid and drastic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions are required in all sectors, including agriculture. Globally, the food system causes 21 to 37 percent of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions (depending on the estimate), with up to 80 percent of that coming from animal production. In order to reduce agricultural greenhouse gas emissions, it seems logical to start with their primary source: meat production.

The scientific literature is in broad agreement that the urgently needed sustainable food transformation requires a massive reduction in animal production and consumption, given that the emission intensity of animal products consistently exceeds that of plant-based foods – many times over in fact. This is especially true of beef and milk due to methane emissions from ruminants. Moreover, animal husbandry is increasingly viewed as inefficient because of its extensive use of land and resources. A large-scale dietary shift would offer two-fold potential for mitigating climate change. First, a primarily plant-based diet has by far the greatest potential to reduce direct agricultural greenhouse gas emissions. Second, it can also have indirect effects by renaturing land no longer used for feed cultivation and pastureland, which could function as a natural carbon sink.

The climate transition will not succeed without a dietary transition – meaning that climate policy cannot avoid the issue of meat. The meat question today vacillates in an ambivalent state of limbo between politicization and political marginalization. The term “meat paradox” is a reference to the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance in social psychology; knowledge of the harm caused by meat consumption does not prevent people acting as if this were not the case. This contradiction has also manifested itself in our paradoxical collective approach to the meat issue. Although we are aware of the massive problems for humans, animals, and the environment, as well as the need for systematic meat reduction, there have been few government measures aimed at reducing animal production; on the contrary, we continue to preserve and promote it.

On the one hand, for example, the EU’s “Farm to Fork Strategy” – a focal point of the “European Green Deal” – aims at a comprehensive transformation of the food system and emphasizes the importance of a predominantly plant-based diet for health and sustainability. The climate protection measures in agriculture developed by the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture also mention the promotion of sustainable dietary habits as

one of their ten priorities. On the other hand, such goals coexist and compete with far more powerful structures that point in the opposite direction. Compared to other sectors, the livestock industry remains under-regulated in terms of its ecological costs. At the same time, it shares with the oil industry the dubious honor of being the largest recipient of environmentally harmful subsidies. Estimates in Germany range from five billion euros (solely through value-added tax reductions for animal products) to thirteen billion euros per year. Such climate-harming subsidies undermine climate goals, as the German Federal Audit Office (Bundesrechnungshof) stated in its 2022 report on climate protection management in Germany.

There is fundamental agreement that the necessary dietary transformation must be framed, facilitated, and expedited by political and legal measures. The state's previous failure must now be rectified through the development and implementation of a coherent set of meat (reduction) policies. What is meant here is nothing so crude as the dreaded meat ban. Rather, the state has a whole range of instruments at its disposal to implement a more sophisticated and transformative meat governance (aligned with dietary transformation). This spans a mix of soft and hard measures – including voluntary efforts, fiscal tools, regulations, and bans.

17

THE STATE
CAN STEER
INDIVIDUAL
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TOWARDS
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ABILITY

For example, the state has various means to steer individual consumption decisions towards greater sustainability. These include, for example, information campaigns, dietary recommendations, sustainability labels or green nudges. However, fiscal measures are likely to be more effective, such as repurposing agricultural subsidies by diverting them away from animal production and investing them in plant production instead. Another option is to establish the true cost of meat by internalizing ecological costs in market prices with an environmental tax on animal products (meat tax). Public procurement – in government canteens, cafeterias, and hospital kitchens, for example – can also be more geared towards sustainable diets. Recently, the city of Freiburg decided to offer only a uniformly vegetarian menu in kindergartens and primary schools. A ban on meat advertising, as announced recently in the Dutch city of Haarlem, is also conceivable. Finally, alternative proteins – such as plant-based alternatives to conventional animal products or cultured meat – are a real cause for optimism here. Their (ongoing) development can be specifically promoted by state investments and the reduction of regulatory obstacles. Market analyses suggest that, with the right political and legal framework in place, Europe could reach “Peak Meat” – the point from which the consumption of animal products declines – as early as 2025, while preserving individual consumer choices, of course.

