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Religious animal slaughter, immigration and global trade in a post-Brexit Britain



*The EU's 2009 Slaughter Regulation that requires all animals to be stunned before slaughter gives a "religious exception" for halal and kosher meat. As debates about the rights and place of minorities are increasing in post-Brexit Britain, anti-halal sentiment is also growing with issues of religious slaughter often conflated with wider concerns about immigration and integration. Here **John Lever** argues that increased transparency in the meat supply chain will help improve public understanding of the underlying debates of religious animal slaughter as well as help the UK to make the most of emerging trade opportunities.*

Anti-halal sentiment has been growing in the UK for some time and **post-Brexit emotion is likely to increase the underlying debate** about the rights and place of minorities in British society. This is nothing new, but as we move forward into a new post-EU era these debates have the potential to hinder global trade and export opportunities.

Jews immigration and religious meat slaughter

Opposition to immigration has a long history in the UK. As the first Jewish community grew and became established during the 18th century, **Christian hostility** towards immigration and an increasingly visible 'Jewish alien' intensified. Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and Russia were held to be responsible for industrial ills such as unemployment, housing shortages, and the increasing cost of poverty and they soon became scapegoats for problems that they were not entirely responsible for. Anticipating Nazi propaganda, sections of the media argued that Jewish immigrants were carriers of disease, had un-English customs, wore strange clothes, and worked for lower wages than indigenous workers.

A new journal called *Spy* was published in Manchester 1891. Until the journalist involved was successfully prosecuted for libel it promoted crude anti-Semitism and fierce xenophobia. More

mutated critiques portrayed Jews as hardworking, religious and family minded, but argued that their number was increasing to such an extent that they should no longer be allowed into the country – a similar argument is often made against Muslim refugees today. At this time, *chevroth* (small religious societies) were appointing rabbis and arguing for the right to conduct independent *shechita* (Jewish) slaughter and become fully recognized synagogues: many raised finance by controlling the production and sale of kosher meat. **The London Board of Schechita** – endorsed by the Chief Rabbi – was first given authority to grant licenses to immigrant Jewish slaughterers (*shokhtim*) in 1868. Over the coming century this was to facilitate an at times ferocious debate over *shechita* **that still continues today.**

When the Manchester Schecita Board (MSB) was formed in 1892 to coordinate independent *shechita* across the city it had to quickly defend itself from wealthy merchants and patrons of the local RSPCA. The MSB initially made a number of concessions to their gentile neighbours to protect the image of the Jewish community and in 1896 they considered using some form of anaesthetic to desensitize animals prior to *shechita*. This was strongly opposed on the grounds that it would then be difficult ascertain the exact cause of death, thus rendering the carcass of animals *trief* (unfit) under Jewish law. At the turn of the century the MSB found itself stuck between the two camps and in 1902 they formed an official **Beth Din** to provide full-time rabbinical advice and religious supervision for its slaughters and licensed retail outlets.

The issue was still controversial over a century later. When the national body **Shechita UK** was set up in 2003 to protect Jewish interests it was soon called upon to respond to a **Farm Animal Welfare Council** report calling for a ban on all slaughter without stunning. Vigorous opposition and sensitive relations with Muslim communities **forced the UK Government to retract** their endorsement of the recommendation. Yet as the halal market has continued to expand over the last 15 years there have been **repeated calls** for a ban on slaughter without stunning.

Muslim immigration and halal meat

Immigration from Britain's former colonies, including a number of Muslim countries increased significantly in the 1950s and 1960s. The commonwealth connection made migration easier and prior to the **Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962** citizens of British Commonwealth countries could migrate to the UK unopposed. Throughout this period, migrant workers from the Indian subcontinent, including Pakistan helped to resolve labour shortages in the steel and textile industries, while doctors were recruited to work in the National Health Service. Mirroring developments in the Jewish community over a century earlier, by the 1980s Muslims communities had become more established in the UK and they began to **agitate for greater clarification of their rights as British citizens.**

From this point onwards, Muslim communities became more engaged in the public sphere. This was most evident in **campaigns for better provision for Muslim education and for halal meat in schools**, with concern over halal slaughter subsequently growing in intensity throughout the 1980s. Compassion in World Farming came out strongly against demands for **"separate meat"** at this time, arguing that it was the thin edge of a wedge that would encourage "racial segregation". Muslim agitation continued unabated and this eventually facilitated the rise of the **Halal Food Authority** in 1994, which emerged to protect Muslim interests and supervise the provision of halal meat nationally.

In the intervening decades the growing availability of halal meat in shops, restaurants and public institutions in the UK has become a reoccurring feature of public debate. Muslims (as well as Jews) are exempt from **the legal requirement to stun animals prior to slaughter** and it is often wrongly assumed that most halal meat in the UK is produced without stunning animals. In reality, **80% of halal meat comes from stunned animals.** In 2003, in line with rapid changes in global politics and attempts to reinforce Muslim identity, the **Halal Monitoring Committee** emerged to promote 'non-stunned' halal meat as being of a more **'authentic' and 'traditional'** quality.

In recent years this has become increasingly controversial. As commercial sensitivities about the provision of halal meat have grown 'stunned' halal meat has become **almost invisible in the food supply chain**. In 2014, for instance, imported halal lamb from New Zealand was **sold in UK supermarkets** without being labelled as such, which only added to the confusion about the volume and type of halal meat (stunned and non-stunned) being sold and provided in shops, restaurants and public institutions: **it also lessened trust amongst Muslims consumers**.

Immigration, integration and trade opportunities

Recent calls for a ban on slaughter without stunning by the British Veterinary Association, Compassion in World Farming and the RSPCA have **intensified the underlying debates**. It has been argued that public concerns over halal meat and religious slaughter are as much about **Islamophobia** as they are about animal welfare considerations. There is further evidence that public concern about the availability of halal meat and methods of slaughter is linked to wider concerns about **immigration and integration**, which are often perpetuated and enhanced by the media. Indeed during the refugee crisis misleading stories have emerged in the right wing press about **Muslim migrants refusing food because it is not halal**.

These debates are not going away any time soon and in the post-Brexit period the global halal market will present significant trade and export opportunities for the UK. The value of the halal food market alone has been estimated at **\$632 billion annually** and the market continues to **expand and diversify** in new directions. With the Muslim population projected to increase globally from **1.6 billion to 2.2 billion by 2030** the potential benefits to be accrued are vast.

While there are widespread public concerns about animal welfare in the UK, discursive media constructions about immigration and integration have – combined with a lack of accurate information about the availability and volume of different types of halal meat – added to the anti-immigration and anti-Muslim rhetoric. Enhancing public understanding of the underlying debates by increasing transparency in the meat supply chain will help the UK to make the most of emerging opportunities.

About the author



John Lever is Senior Lecturer in Sustainability at the University of Huddersfield. His research interests revolve around international migration and sustainable food systems. He is increasingly interested in the relationship between religion, migration and food; and in political ecologies of meat. He is currently finalising research on globalising kosher and halal markets for a new book from the University of Manchester Press with Johan Fischer.

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