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Game of Chicken

Global trade once made us rich. Now it unleashes a full-spectrum assault on our well-being.

What's wrong with chlorinated chicken? It's not as if chlorine is absent from our lives: we drink it in tap water every day. Surely it's a small price to pay for the trade deal with the US the British government seeks? There are several answers to this question, that range from the instrumental to the existential. Let's begin with the immediacies.

Washing chicken carcasses with chlorine allows farmers and processors to **save the money** they might have spent on systemic sanitation, throughout the chicken's life and death. You need only dunk the meat in a chlorine bath to kill any accumulated germs. Does it work? It is true to say that rates of foodborne illness are similar between the EU and North America*. But chlorine-washed chicken, remarkably, could be the least offensive of the US meat regulations a trade deal might force us to adopt. It has been pushed to the fore because it's less politically toxic than the issues hiding behind it.

While European Union rules, that currently prevail in the UK, take a precautionary approach to food regulation, permitting only products and processes proven to be safe, the US government uses a **providential approach**, permitting anything not yet proved to be dangerous. By limiting the budgets and powers of its regulators, it ensures that proof of danger is **difficult to establish**.

An investigation by Reuters discovered that chicken companies in the US use a wide array of antibiotics as routine feed supplements, both to prevent disease and as growth promoters. Among these drugs are some listed by the US Food and Drug Administration as "critically important" in human medicine. They're administered to the chickens in low doses, creating perfect conditions for bacterial resistance and the emergence of new superbugs.

Further reports reveal that chickens are **dosed with antihistamines**, to make their meat more tender. Some carcasses contain **steroids and ketamine**. A hormone injected into US cattle to fatten them more quickly, according to **the latest scientific paper** on the subject, "*promotes breast cancer cell growth*". And all this is before Trump completes his assault on the US regulatory system.

Trade agreements today have little to do with reducing tariffs, most of which have already been eliminated. Now they have two principal functions. The first is to extend intellectual property rights, that tends to raise prices and help the biggest corporations eliminate smaller competitors. The second is to "harmonise" regulations. When you have an asymmetric deal – between a very large country with low standards and a smaller one with higher standards – there is **going to be only one outcome**. We will end up with US standards. How many people in this country, offered a vote on the matter, would accept such a deal?

But there are still bigger issues in this game of chicken. On the day that the Adam Smith Institute published its misleading report, *the Guardian* carried an article by a consultant called Colin Cram, complaining that the UK is not engaging sufficiently in China's Belt and Road programme: a series a vast infrastructure schemes the Chinese government is funding *to facilitate its exports* (*Manchester's Airport City is one component*). The UK, Mr Cram claimed, "must" become a full participant in this programme,

"massively revitalising its infrastructure so that all parts of the country, not just the south-east, can engage with these huge markets".

That's because we suffer from a deficit of air pollution, noise, climate change and plastic waste. We must accelerate the *Gadarene* rush over the environmental cliff.

A study *published by researchers at the London School of Economics* last year discovered that the regions that voted most strongly for *Brexit* were those that had been hit hardest by *"the Chinese import shock"*. Anger towards immigration, they argue, became a proxy for the loss of manufacturing jobs and incomes: many of the strongest *Leave* votes were in places with the least immigration. Their data suggests that *Brexit* was globalisation's blowback. But our government wants to seize this opportunity to accelerate the process. So much for taking back control.

So the existential question the chicken issue raises is this: *why do we want more trade?* What is it for? The old promise was that trade led to prosperity. But what if we have enough already? What if enhanced global trade, far from promoting well-being, now undermines it?

To people of Mr Cram's mindset, rainforests and ancient woodlands, coral reefs and wild rivers, local markets and lively communities, civic life and public space *are nothing but unrealised opportunities for development*. Where we see the presence of beauty, tranquillity and wonder, they see the absence of palm oil plantations and soybean deserts, container ports and mega dams, shopping malls and 12-lane highways. For them, there is no point of arrival, just an endless escalation of transit.

Nowhere is a place in its own right: everywhere is a resource waiting to be exploited. No one is a person in their own right; everyone is a worker, consumer or debtor whose potential for profit generation has yet to be realised. Satiety, well-being, peace: these are antithetical to globalised growth, which demands constant erasure and replacement. If you are happy, you are an impediment to trade. Your self-possession must be extinguished.

So this is where the chickens come home to roost. Enhanced global trade now threatens our health, our sovereignty, our democracy. *Once, it made us rich. Today it impoverishes us.*

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* This article previously stated that the *Adam Smith Institute's* claim that the rates of *Salmonella* infection in the two continents were "not out of line" was false. I had failed to notice that an item marked *Non-typhoidal S.enterica* in the WHO report cited by the ASI referred to a *Salmonella* species. My apologies.