

# The British Miracle Meat: How banning repugnant choices obscures the real issue of poverty

August 3 2023, by Renaud Foucart

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A provocative Channel 4 satirical program, "[The British Miracle Meat](#)," has led to [hundreds of complaints](#) to media regulator Ofcom. The mockumentary depicts ordinary Britons facing the cost of living crisis selling thin slices of their tissue to an innovative factory that uses it to grow lab meat.

The show was inspired by Jonathan Swift's satire "[A Modest Proposal](#)" (1726), in which the author of Gulliver's Travels suggests poor Irish people sell their children for food. The Channel 4 show's creators wanted to [make viewers think](#) about the effects of the cost of living crisis, [as well as the future of food](#).

Viewers were left baffled, however, seeing the show as [promoting cannibalism](#). In the UK, it is illegal to sell [human organs and other tissues](#). But in economics, we teach our students the theory of "[repugnant markets](#)"—those in which disgust or distaste lead governments to ban certain transactions rather than tackling the underlying economic reasons for them.

If an individual chooses to do something extreme to make money, they must consider the alternative of living in poverty even worse. So why do we find the former less acceptable than the latter? Repugnant markets are typically forbidden by law and research by Nobel Prize winning economist [Alvin Roth](#) shows it is because people tend to be more keen to

make some voluntary transactions illegal than to think about the causes of these transactions, whether that's poverty or discrimination.

## Repugnant markets

Perhaps the most famous real-life example of a repugnant market is the French case of "dwarf-tossing" bans. [In 1995](#), Manuel Wackenheim, a French performer who measures 1.14 meters, was banned by local authorities from selling his services to bars and discotheques—he would allow customers to compete to throw him as far as they could.

There were no concerns about his safety—Wackenheim was using helmets and padded clothing. Rather, the French [Conseil d'État](#) and the United Nations Human Rights Committee [rejected his appeal](#) of the ban because they felt that allowing someone to let others toss him in exchange for money was "contrary to human dignity".

In a [2014 interview](#) with French newspaper Liberation, Wackenheim—unemployed and living with his mother after losing the appeal—complained that no one cared about the fact that he suffered from discrimination and was rejected from every job he applied to. People only tried to protect him when he had finally found a way to pay his bills.

Underneath the initial shock about certain transactions, what people find repugnant in some markets seems to be what they reveal about poverty and the choices it forces people to make. For example, [a study shows](#) that encouraging people to participate in clinical trials is perceived as less ethical when the subjects are paid, and even less acceptable when poor people are offered a lot of money to join.

The logic seems to be that payments are only acceptable if they do not influence the choice to join the trial. But poverty forces people into dire

situations all the time and little is done to help. For financial reasons, many people have to live somewhere with lower air quality, for example, which may [cause health risks](#).

There is also little done to counteract the pressure on poorer people to feed their children badly. For example, 13.5% of 10–11 year-olds [living in the least deprived areas](#) of the UK are obese, compared with 31.3% in the most deprived areas. This is a massive source of inequality, in terms of health and [life expectancy](#), but also for future labor market outcomes—[obese people tend to face wage discrimination](#).

Arguably, these choices made under the constraint of poverty are just as detrimental to health as [selling a kidney](#). But because they do not involve money directly changing hands, many people aren't as immediately driven to call for action from the government.

## **The price of everything**

The same could be said for markets for pollution and environmental taxes, which put an explicit price on the right to pollute. This is another example of a "repugnant" market because it's [often perceived as unethical and unjust](#) to allow rich people to simply pay to be able to do things that cause pollution.

The standard economic approach to fighting [climate change](#) is to put a price on carbon that corresponds to its [social cost](#). Governments, businesses and individuals must then pay for the cost their pollution imposes on society. But the [current price of carbon](#) in the EU (around £80 per ton of CO<sub>2</sub>) and [in the UK](#) (around £45/t) only applies to a small subset of industries.

One reason is that paying for the right to pollute is often seen as a repugnant transaction. [Taxing aviation](#) for instance, would make flying

much more expensive. This could mean poor people fly less or even completely stop. Yet, the wealthiest people would still be able to use their private jets, as long as they pay very high taxes for their journeys. The repugnant [market](#) here would allow people to pay for the right to pollute.

Of course, it could encourage calls for a [ban](#) on private jets. But once again, this would obscure the real problem—poverty—while the very wealthy could continue to spend their money on other [highly polluting modes of transport such as superyachts](#).

It is possible to tax pollution and to [use the proceeds to redistribute](#) from rich to poor. In a world where [tax evasion](#) and avoidance means [the super wealthy contribute very little](#), taxing carbon in this way could actually be a major source of government revenue and reduce inequality. In contrast, banning private jets may just displace pollution to other activities and deprive the government of much-needed revenue.

The economic case to allow [poor people](#) to sell their flesh for meat is the same as the one for letting rich people use their private jets. You probably don't want to live in a society where some of us are so desperate for money that they are willing to sell part of their body. Similarly, you may not want to live in a society where fighting climate change means a share of the population can never go abroad while others travel the world in single occupancy planes.

If you find these transactions unacceptable, what you may actually dislike is the economic inequality that makes them possible, and that's the problem the government should be doing more to solve.

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