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Looking backward/ moving forward.

Articulating a “Yes, *BUT...*!” response to lifestyle veganism, and outlining post-capitalist futures in critical veganic agriculture

EuropeNow

By Richard J. White

Introduction

In recent years a ‘remarkable’ rise of veganism within mainstream society, certainly evident across Western Europe, continues to gather momentum. The numbers of individuals who now consider themselves ‘vegan’, and the rapid rate at which this has happened is certainly striking. In the UK alone, a 2016 IPSOS Moray poll conducted for The Vegan Society (2018) found that:

There are 600,000 vegans in Great Britain in 2018, or 1.16% of the population. The number of vegans doubled from up to 150,000 (0.25%) in 2014 to 276,000 (0.46%) in 2016, and – incredibly - doubled again from the 276,000 (0.46%) in 2016 to 600,000 (1.16%) in 2018.

That veganism is becoming ever more publically popular, visible and acceptable can be interpreted one on level through the number of articles featured in the media. Significantly, in addition to the BBC News (Lowbridge, 2017), positive appraisals of veganism have transgressed traditional political ‘right’ or ‘left’ orientations of both broadsheet - *The Guardian* (Hancox, 2018), *Independent* (Petter, 2018) *Daily Telegraph* (Quinn, 2016) – and tabloid – *Daily Mirror* (Jarvis, 2018), *The Sun* (Sheen, 2018) and *Daily Star* (Buchanan, 2017) newspapers. Here many reports cite a diverse range of motivations to account for this current “food” phenomenon, of which ‘health’, ‘environmental sustainability’, and broader ‘ethical reasons’ are key. This favourable climate - in which veganism is marketed and packaged by the mainstream media is - of course key to informing a public imaginary. As Jasmin De Boo, CEO of The Vegan Society acknowledges (in this quote frequently cited in media articles):

The positive portrayal in the media has contributed to its changing image; documentaries on the shocking realities and consequences of animal agriculture have gained prominence; delicious-looking vegan recipes have multiplied online and on social media as society becomes more health-

conscious; and top vegan athletes keep proving that you can be fit and healthy on a plant-based diet. (cited in Moss, 2017)

For many who come to 'be vegan' predominantly on ethical grounds, the relative abundance of vegan foods and drinks, the absence of pejorative vegan stereotypes, and positive endorsement surrounding veganism is embraced wholeheartedly. However, a critical appraisal about what veganism actually entails, and will possibly achieve, at this moment of unprecedented mainstream popularity is conspicuous by its absence. In particular, it is timely to pose the question "What...", if anything, "has been compromised or lost as a consequence of veganism's shift from a rather peripheral position at the fringes of society to this more central role?"

Problematising veganism: articulating a critical "Yes, but!" position.

Focusing on this question, the main argument here that that the way in which veganism is being promoted and embraced by mainstream society comes at a significant cost. More specifically, viewed as a profitable vehicle for corporate profit, contemporary "lifestyle or foodist" approaches to veganism is bereft of the ability to usher in a more ethical, peaceable, and non-violent world into being. In contrast, if veganism is understood and embraced on a deeper, and altogether more critical and holistic levels, it had the potential to do help realise these. In short, set against the rise of veganism, the essay proposes a critical "Yes..." (*that people engaging with veganism is welcome*), "But..." (*we urgently need to re-couple veganism back to its radical origins as strategy of resistance, one which promises to advance social and spatial inter-species justice and environmental sustainability*) stance. To understand why this might be a logical and persuasive reading I invite you to consider two things. First, the way in which the demand for vegan food and other products is influencing 'meat' and dairy food production and, secondly, the truth-claim that going vegan is to equivalent to living 'cruelty-free'.

A decade ago, Erika Calvo (2008, 32-33) wrote that:

The largest animal populations in the West, [are] those used for "food"...From conception until death, the lives of these animals are shaped by their location as potential food, and billions of animals are transformed into a multiplicity of "meat products" each year."

In the intervening years, given the ‘remarkable’ rise of veganism in Western Europe and beyond, and with it the relative abundance of, and appetite for ‘vegan’ foods, surely we might be confident to assume that there has been tangible reduction in “meat” and dairy-based products. Yet this has not happened. As Nibert (2017, xi) notes:

The oppression of other animals as food is [still] unquestionably the deadliest practice [of human exploitation]; globally, more than 65 billion land-based beings are killed to be consumed as food every year, while the water-based other animals killed for food number in the hundreds of billions. The physical and emotional suffering from such horrific treatment experienced by each individual being, multiplied by the billions of individual animals who undergo it, results in a degree of severe distress and pain—every second—that defies comprehension.

Indeed, though uneven, future trends all suggest that demand for meat and dairy will continue to increase. Globally, “Worldwide meat production has tripled over the last four decades and expanded by 20% in the past decade” (Stoll-Kleemann and O’Riordan, 2017, 35), and within the European Union projections are confidently predicting further increases. As the European Commission (2017, n.p.) notes, “The quantity of EU fresh dairy products in net trade (the difference between exports and imports) is projected to reach just over 1.08mt in 2030, compared to 1.05mt in 2017”.

Second, the idea that being vegan equates to being “cruelty-free”, which is a popular rhetoric employed by animal advocacy campaigners and vegan advocates, is highly problematic. Consider fruit and vegetables for example, which are surely unequivocally vegan and “cruelty-free”? Adopting a more critical vegan approach would involve investigating the wider (hidden) networks of production, exchange and consumption that underpin these foods, and evaluating these on ethical grounds. By doing so, many inconvenient and ugly truths come to light: deeply undermining the ‘cruelty-free’ pro-vegan propaganda. Harrowing stories of the UK and European agricultural workers involved in the fruit and vegetable industry surface with an alarming regularity. Two, of many recent examples to consider would be the research by Letizia Palumbo and Alessandra Sciarba (2015), who drew attention toward the labour and sexual exploitation faced by Romanian female in the agricultural sector Sicily (Italy), and Kennedy’s (2015) report on the (120,000) migrant workers in El Ejido, Spain, who help produce “nearly three million tonnes of fruit and veg every year for export to Britain and across northern Europe”, and who experienced misery, suffering and exploitation. Such uncomfortable truths about contemporary veganism surely begs the question: if veganism is not having a positive impact on human or nonhuman animals, and indeed is contributing to greater levels of suffering

and exploration then what, or indeed for whom is 21st century veganism of the greatest value and use for?

Looking Backwards: Differentiating ‘Activist’ from ‘Lifestyle’ Veganism

One way to approaches to this question involves identifying and teasing apart two rather crude-but-important approaches of veganism. One approach is rooted in the ‘original’ definition for veganism, which emerged in the UK in the 1940s. I will refer to this as ‘activist’ veganism, one which inspires a more radical vision for veganism, encouraging greater critical reflection, awareness and commitment to social justice issues than ‘the other’ type of veganism, namely ‘lifestyle’, or ‘corporate’ veganism. It is this lifestyle veganism is very much in the ascendancy across mainstream society, being very much focused almost exclusively around questions of food, but which, crucially, is uncoupled and detached from related actions relevant to inter-species social justice. Deprived of any ability to challenge capitalism, lifestyle veganism is very much endorsed and promoted by corporate interests and investment. It is, almost exclusively been the type of veganism that has been introduced and commented on in these opening reflections. Additional reflections on the problematic geographies of lifestyle veganism will be made later, before then the critical geographies associated with ‘activist’ veganism are considered.

Defining ‘Activist’ Veganism: Looking Backwards

While there are undoubtedly a tremendously rich history relating to people and communities across the world who have taken deliberate decisions to neither eat the flesh of other animals, nor drink their milk, it wasn’t until 1944 that the word ‘vegan’ was officially coined (The Vegan Society, n.d). When the UK Vegan Society became a registered charity in 1979, the Memorandum and Articles of Association defined “veganism” as:

[...] a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of humans, animals and the environment. (The Vegan Society, n.d.)

Thus, in this earliest conception and understanding about what veganism stands for, we can clearly appreciate its intent to capture practical ‘as far as possible and practical’, but still critical, emancipatory and visionary spirit. Of particular interest here is its appeal to intersectionality, namely “for the benefit of humans, animals and the environment”. Another excellent early example of an intersectional framing of veganism, and a commitment to non-violence, was articulated by Eva Batt. For Batt (1964):

“Veganism... is an everyday, fundamental way of life concerned with *living without hurting others...* There are several roads to veganism and many individual views of it, but veganism is one thing and one thing only – a way of living which avoids exploitation whether it be of our fellow [hu]man, the animal population, or the soil upon which we all rely for our very existence.”

So veganism, in its earliest conception, was never just about food choices: it was a radical activist praxis (both theory and action) of a manifest desire to act in a way that prefigures an inter-species politics of justice and total liberation. At it is *this* critical vision for what it is to “to be” vegan which is in danger of being entirely lost to the lifestyle veganism embraced by contemporary (Western) society.

While embracing these original visions identified for veganism, the ‘activist’ vegan praxis (i.e. theory *and* action) considered here also draws inspiration from a critical animal scholarship, one rooted in activism and animated by a socio-spatial politics of total liberation (see, for example Cudworth and Hobden, 2018; Gillespie and Collard, 2015; Nocella et al. 2014, Nocella et al, 2015; Pellow, 2014). If this is to displace lifestyle activism, and re-assert veganism as a potentially radical emancipatory praxis then, fundamentally, the popular imaginary around veganism must recognise that:

"...veganism is more than ‘just a diet’ and is better seen and practised as a systemic and intersectional mode of critical analysis and a useful lived philosophy counter to anthropocentrism, hierarchy and violence" (Twine, 2012, 19)

Or, as Harper (2010, 5-6) argues we must be mindful of the fact that:

“Veganism is not is just about the abstinence of animal consumption; it is about the ongoing struggle to produce socio-spatial epistemologies of consumption that lead to cultural and spatial change.”

Two fundamental commitments consistent within a critical vegan praxis to note are (a) its appeal to intersectionality, in recognition of the fact that “the oppression of humans and other animals

has been deeply entangled" (Nibert, ix, 2014), and; (b) its deep commitment to building spaces of peace and inter-species justice through non-violence.

Conscious of this original definition of veganism, it becomes striking to observe how veganism in the mainstream media and populist culture repackages veganism in ways that strip out all the radical inter-species claims for justice and nonviolence. Instead we have a light veganism, one which is invariably framed as: "one of Britain's fastest growing lifestyle movements" (Moss, 2018) or a "diet trend" (Jarvis, 2016). In this way, eliminating 'meat' and dairy products becomes less a profound statement of bringing social justice through action in the world (*vegan-as-activist*), but packaged as one choice among many (*vegan-as-consumer*). The latter is illustrated in the following reflection:

"European *consumer* interest in alternative protein sources is on the rise, with a growing number of shopper mindfully working to reduce their meat consumption." (Askew, 2017 *italic added*)

Importantly, this 'new' commodified version of veganism is consciously aware about what (activist) veganism had sought to represent. A toxic combination of a deeply speciesist culture, and the false truths perpetuated by the propaganda of the meat and dairy industry, meant that Western vegans were traditionally marginalised, vilified and demonised by mainstream society. Vegans were caricatured as anything from weird, irrational, 'extreme' in their attitudes and belief, to individuals who loathed society, were misanthropic, and intent on pursuing violent forms of direct action and liberation. Now uncoupled from its radical heart, articles promoting 'lifestyle' veganism emphasise that veganism this is no longer 'extreme'. The focus consequently shifts toward promoting the health and lifestyle benefits of "going vegan!", and either neglecting or diminishing ethical motivations, (framed exclusively as animal welfare issue, never animal rights). Indeed, rather than re-brand and 'sell' 'veganism', 'vegan' is often dropped in favour of the euphemism with 'plant-based-diet'. In doing so the removal of any semblance of 'activism' through veganism is complete. Zarling (2018) captures this well here:

"More than 80% of those surveyed by California-based food consultant Mattson say they prefer the term "plant-based" to "vegan" when describing a diet that avoids meat, dairy or any animal products, according to Food Navigator. Respondents said the term "100% plant-based" is more flexible and offers more for the consumer, and describes food that tastes better and is healthier than those labeled "vegan."

Barb Stuckey, Mattson president and chief innovation officer, told Food Navigator this is because consumers see "plant-based" as a positive food

choice, but consider "vegan" a lifestyle including deprivation, allegiance to a self-defining cause — animal rights or environmentalism — and serious commitment, said. Changing the conversation can change make food taste better in the eyes of consumers, she suggested.

Given how the branding of ‘veganism-as-lifestyle’ is being rolled out across mainstream audiences, it is of little wonder to understand how veganism is also complicit in the ongoing exploitations of human (as workers) and other animals. It is here that we might ask: ‘what’ or ‘who’ then stands to benefit from this ‘unstoppable’ rise of sanitised veganism. In short, the answer is capitalism and capitalists: the growth of “the western vegan consumer” presents a huge financial opportunities and competitive advantage to exploit. For example there are numerous business columns focused explicitly around questions about “How can retailers capitalise on the growing vegan trend, as illustrated in the following:

“In 2014, only 1% of the population classified themselves as vegan, rising to 3% in 2017, according to a report by GlobalData. With over one million more consumers demanding vegan products, this offers retailers a prime opportunity to capitalise on a trend that continues to gain popularity. However, while there is an established market for vegan products in food, there is also a growing opportunity in categories such as clothing and beauty.” (GlobalData Retail);

The following quotes perfectly illustrate the excitement and sense of (future) opportunity: “The global meat substitute market size is expected to be valued at \$7.5 billion by 2025, registering a CAGR of 7.7% during the forecast period (2018- 2025)” (Prasannan, 2018). It is abundantly clear that a corporate -endorsed veganism can never begin to challenge or subvert the powerful intersectional systems of exploitation, dominant and violence that both human and nonhuman animals suffer through the production, exchange and consumption of vegan products. As Dominick (2015, 27) argues:

"[Lifestyle] Veganism is not a counter-power movement. It involves at most a hint of strategy and lacks even the pretence of an institutional alternative to decrease human impact on nonhuman animals!

More ethically problematic still is the fact that significant profits of ‘the vegan industry’ directly benefit corporations who (traditionally) invest in animal exploitative industries. For example, focusing on just vegetarian and vegan burgers and sausages, Ethical *Consumer* (reported that

“Hain Celestial (Linda McCartney’s), Nestle (Tivall), Dr A. Stoffel Holding AG (Granovita), Monde Nissin (Quorn and Cauldron), and all the supermarkets, sell meat in addition to vegetarian and/or vegan options.”

Following up this report, The Independent interviewed Mackenzie Dentaer, a research at Ethical Consumer. Tellingly in the context here, Dentaer was quoted as saying:

“We’re sure that many vegans will be horrified that they are unwittingly supporting the milk and dairy industries. The good news is that there are many vegan brands on the shelves that have no links to animal exploitation and have been championing vegan lifestyles for many years.

“The bad news is that as the vegan revolution rolls on we can expect many more companies who have no interest in ending animal exploitation scramble to get a slice of the vegan market. (Butcher, 2018)

Given this complex and complicated relationship with ‘lifestyle’, or corporate-endorsed veganism, what possibilities exist for veganism to (re)claim a radical emancipatory praxis? Focused explicitly on food production, it is to this final question, that we now consider.

Moving Forward: Sketches of Post-Capitalist Adventures in Veganic agriculture

Is it possible to produce anything, let alone vegan food, in industrialised capitalist systems, with all the repertoires of violence and exploitation that are intrinsic to it (Springer, 2016, Nibert, 2017) Adopting an unequivocal “no!” response to this question, necessitates looking for alternative economic models to embed a veganic food systems within. Such a challenge though, happily, is not a utopian one. When invited to look carefully, there are many diverse examples of vegan food production which are rooted in social and spatial justice. One on end of the scale, we should not overlook the fact that many individuals and communities already engage in forms of direct action to grow their own food. This is particularly evident through self-provisioning (from simple acts as growing pots of herbs, or vegetables in the house or garden), or through more community-based gardening initiatives (see Perry, 2015 for several UK, European and USA initiatives). The desire to grow local food for reasons of sustainability, personal and community empowerment is certainly increasing, with demand in places vastly outstripping supply. For example The National Allotment Society drew on figures to suggest that “there are approximately 330,000 allotment plots in the UK, but to meet the current demand we need in the region of at least a further 90,000 plots”. Moving forward, there is certainly the need to

exchange knowledge and good practice, and draw on innovative and creative ways to secure access to (public) land, and tackles barriers to participation that local communities face. Some excellent resources are available here <http://www.urbanallotments.eu/fact-sheets.html>.

There is also an increasing interest and momentum gathering around veganic agriculture initiatives at much broader scales as well. In North America, for example, there is the San-Francisco based group: *Seed the Commons*, “a grassroots organization that works to create sustainable and just food systems that are independent of animal exploitation” (See <https://seedthecommons.org>.) Promoting veganic farming as a means of resisting and moving beyond industrial farming that exploits humans and nonhuman animals, *Seed the Commons* focus on how food sovereignty and empowerment can be achieved when communities reclaim control of (their) food systems.

In this context, reflecting the intersectionality of vegan praxis, brings to the fore question of access to food as well: who gets to eat? There are some inspiring organisations who share vegan meals to those who find themselves socially and economically marginalised. *Food not Bombs*, founded in the United States in the 1980s, offers some superb examples (see Giraud, 2015). Speaking to a truly global vegan politics of activism, the Food Not Bombs website:

Our website lists over 500 chapters, but we believe there are many groups that have not asked to be listed. We think there are over 1,000 chapters of Food Not Bombs active in over 60 countries in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia and New Zealand. We are active in nearly 500 cities in the United States and have groups in another 500 cities outside the United States. We have been told that there are over 60 groups in Russia but only have 15 listed. The same is true for many other countries.

It is also important to reflecting on other hidden connection between veganism and animal abuse, and one which inform that action of the UK based Vegan Organic Network (VON <http://veganorganic.net/>). Over the last twenty years the VON has strived to promote,

Vegan organic (also known as stockfree organic) methods of agriculture and horticulture throughout the world so that green, clean and cruelty-free food becomes widely available.”

Here the emphasis on “stockfree organic” also brings forward another troubling connection with industrial vegan agricultural systems. It is an uncomfortable truth to recognise that the cultivation of apparently “vegan” food is likely to have been facilitated by the use of manure from industrialised farmed animals, animal remains from abattoirs or fishmeal. This scenario

alone should cause us question how, in any meaningful sense, can people who eat food grown with ‘fish, blood and bone’ animal-origin fertilisers consistent with a vegan politics?

Final reflections: Looking backward/ moving forward.

To summarise, at the time of writing the growth of veganism and the availability of vegan foods across Europe appears to be on an ever-upward trajectory. However, when focusing on how veganism is being promoted and endorsed then, viewed from an ethical perspective, and focused mainly on the question of food production, many deeply problematic concerns are brought into view. In response to this it is instructive to distinguish between two specific types of vegan approaches. In this essay, a more “lifestyle” or corporate veganism has been juxtaposed against more critical ‘activist’ forms of veganism, and it is the latter which carries forward the radical praxis that ‘being vegan’ promises.

However, it is lifestyle veganism that is firmly ascendance at this moment, driven by corporate interests, and supported by largely industrial agricultural systems. This certainly brings with it some apparent advantages - which only decade ago would be unthinkable - such as the variety of vegan foods and dairy-free drinks readily available in supermarkets and restaurants, which in turn should make the opportunity to ‘go vegan’ more accessible to more people. Hence the response of the “Yes (this is welcome) but” position adopted here. Indeed the *‘but’* position is of such a fierce objection, that it should be written in CAPITAL LETTERS, and followed by an exclamation mark! The failure of lifestyle veganism to make a discernible difference to the known (and hidden) repertoires of violence suffering of human and other animals enmeshed in the capitalist agricultural systems that produce food, let alone begin to tackle broader repertoires of oppression and subjugation that exist in the world at large, are deeply problematic.

It is then the greater question of ‘how’ a this radical liberatory promise for both human and nonhuman animals envisaged through veganism, can come to the ascendancy and drive 21st century vegan geographies that is most urgent. The essay has focused on just a few examples to illustrate how veganism as a counter-power strategy is being taken forward and harnessed in the UK, western Europe and the US. The hope is that these will continue to develop momentum and prominence when it comes to making critical vegan ‘food choices’, and encourage further exit points away from the corporate-driven exploitative food production systems. Though we live in troubling and challenging times, there are many grounds for optimism and confidence that an activist vegan praxis can be harnessed in ways that directly tackle the profound intersectional crises that human and more than human communities face in the Anthropocene. Approached in

this way the paper should be taken as a starting point, one that has hopefully raised-consciousness around issues of veganism and agriculture, in ways that encourage greater levels of critical self-reflection in the reader, while also empowering them to make links with many other critical connections not addressed here, and raising the consciousness of others toward these.

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