

Veganism: an ethical folly?

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Vegans need to get political. Currently, most Vegans are advocating a capitalist veganism, which not only precludes their objectives but also harms the prospects for success of other anti-exploitation, emancipatory, and equality movements. I will argue here that, although grounded in goodwill, central vegan themes, such as “vote with your wallet”, demonstrate that this self-titled ‘lifestyle movement’ is fundamentally exclusive and detrimental to its own aims and those of others’ in related fields. This is not ‘Vegan-bashing’ and I am not trying to say that they are in a hipster cult, this is a politico-sociological response to an increasingly influential cultural phenomenon within our society.

What is Veganism?

Veganism is both the practice of abstaining from the use of animal products and an associated philosophy that rejects the commodity status of animals. It is built on the ethical premise that

“man should live without exploiting animals” and therefore must not use animal products and by-products. People often cite a tripartite approach of health, environmental and ethical reasons as influencing their decision to go vegan. Obviously there are difficulties when discussing a group as heterogeneous as vegans and undoubtedly there will be criticisms of generalisations and misrepresentation. To slightly allay these concerns we can consider vegans as if on a spectrum. To one side there is a core anti-capitalist anarchist ethical Veganism apt at linking the specific struggle for nonhuman animals to greater exploitation structures that exist within capitalist society. On the other side we have Vegans who may have extended to environmental and ethical justifications in order to beef up their identity within the vegan tribe but who have originally been primarily concerned with image and health. Then we have all those in between who may be making links between the animal-industrial complex and unabated profit, deregulation and the free market, or, who may have had a severe emotional reaction to chilling films such as *Earthlings* (2005) and *Cowspiracy* (2014), and follow popular vegan methods of individualist consumer action based on that reaction.

Veganism has become increasingly mainstream in the 2010s and there has been notable publicity about vegan celebrities and athletes whilst vegan-inspired ‘food porn’ and hashtags have proliferated the message quickly on social media. A poll by Ipsos MORI in 2016 found that over half a million people in the U.K had adopted a vegan diet, which is a 360% increase in a decade and provokes further analysis of this flourishing cultural phenomenon.

Although there are branches of Veganism that build connections across related movements and philosophies in order to develop a stronger analysis of capitalism as the key driver of animal exploitation, most of this is diluted or non-existent in mainstream vegan literature. The majority of the information, especially from some of the biggest mouthpieces such as The Vegan Society and Vegan Action, centres around framing veganism as a ‘lifestyle movement’, and this type of movement places a central focus on individualistic consumer power, which is rooted within a framework of ‘choice’. Looking through the literature on both websites the emphasis is on the individual’s choice to live a vegan lifestyle, which takes the blame away from corporations who are responsible for the dire state of livestock farming and the slaughtering of animals for profit. The responsibility rests on the individual, which is exclusive in assuming that all individual’s have that choice to begin with. The Vegan Society states that it wants ‘a world where humans do not exploit non-human animals’. In order to achieve this they promote ‘a lifestyle that excludes...all forms of exploitation of – and cruelty to – animals’. Secondary to that, inferred by the use of ‘also’, they

want 'a just world for humans...where resources are utilised in a sustainable way...where no one goes hungry'. They conclude that at the heart of the food justice and sustainability agenda is plant-based food production and consumption, i.e Veganism, and their mission 'is to make veganism mainstream'. The movement is absolutist and quasi-religious in its rhetoric, for example PETA's claim 'that being vegan is the *only* way to solve world hunger'. This universality and lack of historical context does not help greater understanding of the factors and power involved in the food industry and its corresponding relationship with world food poverty. At the same time as not doing enough to achieve its ends, because without a critique and confrontation of capitalism and free market principles animals will continue to suffer, it removes any other option from the debate and action is centred around the questionable assumption that ethical consumerism can exist under capitalism. It misdirects the causality of the individual's action away from their desired goals so that they continue to finance other aspects of the system unquestioningly when it will inevitably feed into animal suffering. Furthermore, countless quotes from vegan action groups claiming that 'if the whole world went vegan, then world hunger would be solved five times over', is a white classist worldview. It arrogantly supposes we're all in the same boat when we aren't.

An exclusive movement

Veganism is in essence elitist and does not do enough to 'check' its race and class privilege. Furthermore, with the lifestyle movement's lack of long-term strategies that target greater exploitation structures responsible for creating such inequalities, it is not working meaningfully towards inclusion. Veganism, in its current manifestation, is Western centric and advocated within a context of food excess, vegans have the *luxury* of prioritising nonhuman animal rights.

In developing countries people often have to go without meat products because they're too poor to afford these and if they are able to consume them it is a welcome source of protein and nutrition. Furthermore livestock are essential to many of the world's poorest people, for example, 60% of sub-Saharan Africa, is covered by drylands where raising livestock is the main or only land use option available. In most parts of the world, a vegan lifestyle is simply not sustainable: foods, fuels, and materials for clothing and tools would have to be imported. What vegans are advocating with these empty universalising statements is a dual system that reflects the imperialism of the past. The ex-colonial populations are able to enter a new moral utopia of green, clean, and cruelty-free eating whilst resting on the cheap labour, bad conditions and malnutrition of developing

countries that they are doing nothing to alleviate. This is straight out of the Victorian philanthropy textbook.

In developed countries, we can think that people are afforded the choice of what they will or won't eat but again this is only true to a certain extent. Once you divide members of the developed world into groups of class, choice becomes restricted by price and availability. The natural health food stores and massive supermarkets that offer a wide selection of foods are all in affluent neighbourhoods, **food deserts** exist and disproportionately affect communities of colour and low-income areas. Similarly having the time available to make every meal from scratch is a lot harder when you're working multiple jobs or facing long hours in physically demanding roles. Again a distinction of class. Although vegans do claim that their lifestyle can be adopted on a budget, this only accounts for the monetary side of wealth whereas if we think along degrees of time, money, responsibility, and dependence it's not such an easy lifestyle to access. It presupposes a societal position and a certain scope for choice that many people do not have. Campaigns like "voting with your dollars" completely ignore structural limits to people's ability to engage with the vegan movement.

Blogs like Vegans of Colour highlight how the language used in vegan campaigns also excludes on cultural grounds. First, as pointed out by black Vegans or black would-be Vegans, until we live in a post-racial society, encouraging people of colour to fight for animal rights when their own welfare is dubious is a gross order of operations. It is communicated from a white worldview, which must also abandon promoting veganism as a strictly nonhuman animal rights issue. Humans are exploited and enslaved in food production, and humans are suffering and dying from eating the products, particularly at-risk populations. This includes illegal migrant workers, people of colour, and the poor. When Veganism is solely communicating its moral obligations to nonhuman animals it is implying that the suffering of vulnerable humans doesn't matter as much. This attitude to going vegan "for the animals" is entirely from white and class privilege, its something white middle class populations have the luxury of prioritising.

What further exacerbates this exclusivity is the insensitivity of a lot of vegan publicity material. A disturbing image that has been consistently surfacing on social media juxtaposes an image of a man, presumably African-American, hanging from a tree, with a pig strung up in the same way. The captions reads: "Then we had racism: Now we have speciesism". It is hugely insensitive to appropriate another group's history of brutal oppression. Vegans can still make their point about

animal exploitation without they themselves exploiting the persistent trauma of slavery and the horror that it inflicted on black bodies. A black vegan identity is not triggered by these images, it exclusively resonates in a white space. Using imagery like this erases black experience by exploiting the imagery of black people's enslavement and suffering, which still continues today. At the core of the ideologies that justified that system of enslavement was the relegation of black people as subhuman. To then casually use this imagery and the accompanying argument that continue to compare nonhuman animals to black ancestry is offensive and exclusive. The imagery not only makes the same offensive comparison but erases black contemporary experience where such comparisons continue to justify oppression in our society. White Vegans see little problem with stealing imagery that is deeply personal and traumatising to black populations in order to again compare their history with nonhuman animals. This racism is so casually delivered and designed to add shock value and trigger a lifestyle change but really excludes an entire cultural population.

Eating 'clean' or being vegan is a unique privilege that only a few specific groups of people can subscribe to. Instead of spouting the science and health benefits Vegans should first acknowledge that eating according to your convictions is a privilege. Second, they should do more to help other people into the lifestyle as structural inequality doesn't just sort itself out, and so the vegan movement will plateau pretty soon once everyone in the middle classes has adopted the lifestyle. At the moment, Vegans only provide solidarity to each other, which is a bit warped, as they're usually already privileged.

The problem with individualistic consumer action

The other main problem with mainstream Veganism is its method and accompanying discourse. It communicates an individualistic consumer morality that mirrors an individualistic, capitalist, consumerist society. The self-limiting attitude that accompanies it is that inward, personal lifestyle changes are not just necessary and sufficient, but the only possible changes we can strive for. Here, Veganism is in tune with the rest of what we can call the 'self-care archipelago' of white yogis, fitness and wellness enthusiasts firmly putting all responsibility for one's position in life on the individual and claiming that working on 'self' is enough to make the world a better place. This kind of morality cares more about what 'feels good' and conscience clearing than reality and results. It encourages non-participation which absolves the non-participant from taking responsibility for the world that they belong to. By distancing yourself from the 'bad stuff' through individual consumer

choices you have done enough, seems to be the logic. Opting out is a wonderfully privileged choice and does nothing to undermine the system except abandon those more vulnerable who cannot join you. Veganism, in its current form, supports the system that is creating the conditions for the cruelty and exploitation that it is against.

Vegans need to hold accountable the true cause of our broken food system and the systematic exploitation of nonhuman animals: free-market capitalism. Contrary to popular belief, consumers do not drive the market, capitalist companies are adept at creating demand for their products and limiting choice. Whilst Veganism only tackles consequences of capitalism it will always be insufficient, if it is focused on the product but not the mode of production, it will fail. As shown above, Vegans often say that 'if everybody became vegan...' but that is never going to happen merely from the middle classes shopping at Planet Organic instead of LIDL. Thus the fate of animals currently rests on a hypothetical situation that cannot succeed without another dimension to it. Not until we remove the unregulated profit motive that rests on the exploitation of humans, animals and nature, until we get political.

Our food system is steadily becoming owned by corporations instead of traditional small farmers, and this is driven by free market principles of exponential growth, deregulation and unabated corporate profits. A consumer boycott like the one Vegans promote just pushes the evil downstream, onto more vulnerable populations, it absolves one of perceived responsibility and that is it. In that sense, it does more harm than good. The fetishisation of avocados is directly making people's lives in Mexico worse since the industry has moved into the hands of drug cartels and the huge drain on resources needed to grow avocados means its harming the planet. So now the misery white middle class people were causing with their nights out on cocaine in the Gen X years, they are causing with their 'ethical' gorging on photogenic avocados as Millennials. Your organic bananas are built on modern-day slavery. The deforestation of swathes of land for soy decimates forests and their populations, causing deaths to hundreds and thousands of animals, not to mention the air miles needed to support the vegan diet.

Instructive is the ease with which capitalism has accommodated vegan choices in wealthy countries, but do you think the companies' profits are taking a dip? No, that will be picked up by something vulnerable, whether that be a human population, animal population, or the planet.

Vegans need to get political, individualist consumer action is not enough, and can be damaging to the long-term realisation of vegan aims and other movements. Short-term, universal solutions are

rarely the answer to the worlds highly complex and context-specific problems. As a further rule of caution, if the system accommodates you, if it makes your 'sacrifice' easier the way capitalism is accommodating middle class white Veganism, it probably means your action is not going where you want it to. Whilst we have Trump, do you really think the world is going to be a better place for humans and animals? You need politics.

Food deserts - Food deserts are defined as parts of the country vapid of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods, usually found in impoverished areas. This is largely due to a lack of grocery stores, farmers' markets, and healthy food providers.

Picture: [Morguefile.com](https://www.morguefile.com).