

Article deals with issue of veganism as a political movement, addresses some common criticism of veganism coming from the left, and tries to argue that vegan and communist movement have common ground, and common enemies. Veganism and vegetarianism is in the article sometimes confounded, due to literature and research on the topic often operating within eating meat vs not eating meat dichotomy, and does not differentiate veganism and vegetarianism.

Lifestylism

Veganism is from the left attacked on grounds of lifestylism, engaging in individual practice without connecting it to organized action aimed at changing social order. Criticism goes, veganism ignores complexities of food production, the inherent exploitation of such production within capitalist system, namely of farmers in 3th world countries and immigrant labour, and that “ethical” consumer choices are a privilege of those affluent enough to be able to afford to make them, further enforcing hierarchies between those who practice “morality” and those who don’t. Individual consumer choices are further painted as irrelevant and impotent when it comes to enacting social change (Haenfler et al., 2012).

First to get the simplest argument out of the way, affordability. People making it presumably themselves shop groceries and as such are aware of the costs of different foods. Vegan diet is consistently cheaper across the world, despite the massive governmental subsidisation of animal products, while poorer countries consume less meat (Pais et al. 2022; Bach et al., 2023; Springman et al, 2021) This is not to dismiss the fact that some people do live in food deserts, with extremely limited choice of food available in stores within reasonable travel distance, or that some poor people in rural regions do need to rely on animal husbandry for food. To use existence of people who for whom animal-free diet is not a realistic option as an argument against veganism is disingenuous, as vegans could be blamed for this condition, exact opposite, as will be discussed further in this article, vegan movement has have been fighting for more just food system that makes healthy food available to all, and animal agriculture is to be (along with other political and economical forces) blamed for restricting access of poor people to food.

Vegans by no means limit their activities to mere consumer choices. From its modern inception, veganism was primarily not about diet in itself, but to quote founder of the term and of UK’s The Vegan Society Donald Watson, “to seek an end to the use of animals by man for food, commodities, work, hunting, vivisection, and by all other uses involving exploitation of animal life by man” (The Vegan Society, n.d.). Even when we consider veganism as a diet, it still is not confined into realm of consumer choices, but can engage in organized political action, such as The Vegetarian Society negotiating food ratios for its members during World War 2 (The Vegetarian Society, 2006), or European Vegetarian Union lobbying for proper labelling of vegetarian and vegan food items (Domke, 2018). Vegan scholarship shows that the lifestyle choice is not used as a replacement for collective action, food is merely a starting point from which discussion shifts to broader topics of complexities of food production, animal-human relationships, social justice, socio-economic inequalities and environmentalism. Organisations such as Food Not Bombs offer vegan and vegetarian food while protesting against wasteful food system that allows for hunger and poverty and against politics that enforce it (Giraud, 2021; Kalte 2020). The anti-vegan lifestylist argument constructs a dichotomy between personal and political sphere, which positions private consumer choices inherently as amoral and apolitical, an attitude which in itself is a product of liberal ideology. While businesses might use veneer of ethics, environmentalism and social justice in their marketing, conscious consumption is incorporated only defensively as a reaction to backlash, to shield itself from criticism, with preferable state being customers whose consumption habits are unrestrained by such matters (Pellow, 2014). Individual and collective action are by no means in competition with each other, simply switching to different food requires no greater time

investment than what is already dedicated to food preparation, and in fact conscious consumption choices positively correlate with active political engagement for the cause (Stolle et al., 2005). Motivation-wise, the question arises why would a person actively engage in collective action, while refusing much less demanding individual adjustment, or even to not actively go out of the way to financially support the opposition. Individual change disrupts the norms, assisting in systemic change. Humans have a tendency to match their behaviour and attitudes with others, social approval and disapproval are an important driving force behind peoples actions. Seeing people around engage in individual or collective action makes a person more likely to follow in stead (Nyborg et al, 2016; Sunstein, 1996). One of the central tactics of vegan activism is revealing hidden parts of society's treatment of animals – conditions in which they live and die, food processing, medical experimentation (Kean, 1998). Organisations such as Anonymous for the Voiceless utilise disturbing imagery of cruelty routinely inflicted on animals as a shock tactic to spread awareness. Making animal lives and death visible, the hope is to unsettle norms, categories and practices that naturalise usage of animals for human benefit (Stephens Griffin, 2014). Even individual “lifestylist” action helps denaturalise current ideological orthodoxy, expose is as merely a contemporary social arrangement rather than necessary part of “nature” (Joy, 2011). Part of this effort is expansion of vocabulary with which we speak about diet. Introduction of word “carnist”, to describe a person eating meat, serves to undermine normativeness of this diet as an unnamed default, and veganism as a restricting deviation. Vegan culinary communities share recipes, experiment with novel ingredients, helping them penetrate into mainstream and combat perception of veganism as restrictive, as a “normal minus...”, so to speak. Taking into consideration a costs and benefits, simply going vegan is an effective tool for social change, because while impact of one person is miniscule, the costs are practically non-existent.

However, while currently veganism stands in opposition to social norms, there is a danger of veganism being subsumed into green capitalism, depolitized, and should its growth continue in the future, itself becoming a normal part of social order which does not invite a challenge to status quo. This shift is exemplified in term “plant-based”, often used in marketing of vegan products, that serves as replacement for “vegan”, stripped of ethical or political connotations. Or emergence of “flexitarian”, effectively a carnist diet that seek to leach off the aesthetics of veganism while ignoring its moral foundation.

Carnism

Term carnism describes the ideology of meat consumption, a system of norms and cognitions legitimising eating of animal while denying the suffering caused. Eating meat is justified by appeal to nature, normalcy, necessity and taste (Joy, 2009). The reality of animal exploitation is hidden from public sight in a literal sense, by keeping the places where animals live and are killed hidden, and further by marketing, legal restrictions, cultural norms and psychological defences. Psychologically, in order to deal with cognitive resonance resulting from conflict between their own moral beliefs that hurting animals is wrong, the feeling of empathy, and the action of eating meat, carnists conjure rationalisations and attempt to resolve the dissonance by denying animals cognitive and emotional capacity in order to minimalise the value of their lives, or by rationalising it away through appeals to necessity, tradition, personal inability to give up meat or unavailability of killing animals. (Bastian et al., 2012; Loughan et al, 2014). Another defence mechanism is avoidance of any reminders of harm caused upon animals. Monteiro et al. (2017) argues that in addition to this way of coping with cognitive dissonance, labelled carnist defense, other distinct aspect of carnist ideology is carnist domination, consisting out of set of beliefs more overtly hostile to animals, that they are meant to be dominated and exploited by humans. Legitimation of exploitation of natural world as a consequence leads to naturalization of exploitation in general, through creation of normative attitudes towards it, expressed in common phrases such as “its natural”, “thats the way things are”, or justified through referencing evolution, intelligence, tradition. This in particular affects groups who considered somehow closer to nature – in particularly women, and in case of

colonial countries, indigenous people. Adams (1990) notes the intersection of patriarchal oppression of women with oppression of animals, the entitlement that breeds abuse, exploitation and degradation of both groups for the sake of using their bodies, usage of sexist imagery in advertisement of meat, and denigration of women's bodies into products. In television, the camera focuses on woman's body as a collection of body parts, "chops" it up in a way analogous to how animal bodies are presented. Category of animal, signifying a lower being, existing to be exploited freely, is contrasted with "human", as a being worthy of some level of concern for its wellbeing. This distinction is by no means reserved for human and non-human in biological sense, but also as a separation between different groups of humans, depending on their ethnicity, nationality, cultural affinity or class (Giraud, 2021). Even liberatory movement often operate within a framework of human-subhuman. Think of outrage at cruel treatment of other human beings expressed by phrases such as "treated like animal", "slaughtered like cattle", "beaten like dogs", or at the opposite site of the spectrum, from the mounts of those wishing to inflict cruelty, referring to their targets as "pigs", "roaches", "vermin", "animal". Both, implicitly in the case of the former, explicitly for latter, accept there are groups of entities that are part of their moral calculus, and those who are beneath it. In contrast, veganism seeks to disrupt this very dichotomy.

In this way, vegan ethics pose direct challenge to right wing ideology, which psychologically stands on two primary traits: right-wing authoritarianism, reflecting submission to authority, adherence to tradition and aggressiveness towards norm violators, and social dominance orientation, as a general anti-egalitarian attitude, desire for rigid social hierarchy with clearly defined ingroup and outgroup, and domination over those socially considered beneath them (Altemeyer, 1998). Furthermore, as food is an important part of cultural and individual identity, veganism is perceived as a threat to the values and norms of the dominant group, and to an individual sense of worth. Here connection of meat consumption with masculinity should be noted, meat is in a western culture portrayed as a symbol of power, masculinity, patriarchy and virility (Adams (1990), and this connection is often exploited in restaurant advertisement (Rogers, 2008). Vegetarians are perceived as lacking in masculinity (Ruby et al. 2011). Within right-wing discourse, veganism is considered in alliance with other forms of social justice, such as anti-racism, feminism or LGBT rights. Together, this would serve to explain the political polarisation of vegans, overwhelmingly leftist or liberal, with only a small minority belonging on the right of political spectrum (Martinelli & Berkmaniené, 2018), and the hostility of right-wing to veganism. Various alt-right group criticize and mock veganism for its illusory sense of moral purity, also arguing individual actions do not really have an impact on industry as a whole, and field animals such as mice are still killed during the harvest, therefore killing animals is unavoidable, in addition to portrays of vegans and vegetarians as unmasculine (Gambert & Linné, 2018). Similar criticisms are extended to other social justice and environmental movements. Connection between opposition to animal rights and other xenophobic beliefs is well documented. Belief in dominance hierarchy between humans and animals is positively correlated with also with such belief between groups of humans, with such individuals scoring higher on measures of authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, xenophobia, system justification, sexism and racism (Monteiro et al. 2017). People who score higher in right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation hold more positive attitude towards animal testing, fur industry and meat eating (Dhont & Hodson, 2014). According to Dhont & Hodson, only for taste or nutrition, but also as an expression of their belief in hierarchy between humans and animals. On the other hand, vegetarians are less likely to endorse social hierarchies (Allen et al., 2000), and experience more empathy towards both humans and animals (Filippi et al., 2010).

Capitalist obstacle

The ability of mere conscious consumption to result in animal liberation is limited by number of factors. Obvious one is that without political enforcement of veganism, abolishment of animal exploitation would require complete cessation of demand, which is an unrealistic goal to strive for.

Number of land animals slaughtered each year for food lies in range of over 90 billion, growing each year, out of which overwhelming majority are condemned to spend their short lives in abominable conditions of factory farms (Kitty, 2023; Ritchie, 2023). For fish, numbers killed annually are in trillions (Mood & Brooke, 2024). There is no morally permissible reduction to such atrocity, even if 90% of population could be convinced to stop consuming animal products, it would still result in murder of billions. For complete abolition political action is required, however, people merely giving up animal products is not the same as becoming vegan, as their motivation can be convenience, cost, health or environmental concerns, or even social pressure, but not ethics, meaning they cant be relied on to actively support animal liberation. Still, more people eating plant-based does result in less people actively supporting animal exploitation, less resistance to political action on behalf of animals and general de-normalisation of consuming animals.

Now, while nothing inherently contradicts possibility of vegan laws and regulations putting stop to (legal) animal exploitation within a capitalist system, such effort faces massive obstacles. For one, nobody among our ruling classes has any vested interest in achieving such goal. The bourgeoisie has no desire to curtail a profitable market. Vegan food producing companies are an unreliable and short-term ally at best, they are first and foremost businesses, consumer has no control over where the money gained by selling vegan products will be invested to generate further profit. While right now vegan products are a growing market, should the growth stop (even if that stop is brought about by achieving dominance over the food market), inevitably they would seek to expand wherever they see possibility of making money, creating new lines of carnist products the same way dominant food companies started recently producing vegan ones. Furthermore, their involvement in vegan movement poses a danger of stripping it of its critical edge, removing politics and ethics in favour of pure aesthetics and culinary preferences. Prospect of phasing out animal agriculture through synthetic lab-grown meat is runs into same obstacle. The primary barrier here however lies in the carnist ideology, meat is not a mandatory part of diet, it already can be replaced by cheaper, healthier alternatives, in addition to synthetic meat carrying with it the stigma of artificiality. There is no guarantee that most consumers will make the switch, while there is a guarantee not all of them will, bringing us back to the necessity of political authority for abolitionism.

Both direct producers of animal products, and the farmers producing crops as animal feed do have vested interest in propping up status quo, and as an established power, do not have to play by the rules of the free market. Animal agriculture is a receiver of massive governmental support, for example the European Unions Common Agricultural Policy (itself a single biggest expenditure in EU's overall budget, taking 38% of it) allocates 80% of its 57 billion budget towards subsidising animal products, driving the cost of products deeply beneath what their market price should be (Aalberts, 2024). Agricultural lobbyists further influence governmental and non-governmental organisations to push animal products in dietary guidelines, in schools, prisons and other public institutions, and undermine environmental policies (Heid, 2016; Samuel, 2021).

Vegans are aware of classified and racialised nature of agricultural industry, with the low-pay workers and ethnic minorities being disproportionately present among farmhands and slaughterhouse workers, and there is an effort from some vegan activists to build solidarity with animal agriculture workers and farmers (Lockwood, 2021). Typically unsuccessfully, for recognition of animal life as valuable inevitably carries with it condemnation of those who make living by exploiting and murdering it. Slaughterhouse workers often deal with psychologically pressure of their job by depersonalising animals, resulting in sadistic tendencies. When it comes to farmers, similar efforts have been exerted (Giraud, 2021). For example Australian Animal Justice Party seeks to cooperate with farmers in helping them transition towards animal-free agriculture (Animal Justice Party, n.d.) , a doomed cause. Majority of all agricultural crops is grown as an animal feed, in a hypothetical scenario where entire world goes vegan the agricultural soil usage fall by over 70%, more in developed countries where ratio of crops grown for feeding animals is higher (Ritchie,

2021). Farmers cannot collectively simply phase out animals, because without the inefficiency of animal agriculture, they would not be able to stay in business. Furthermore, current food production system of expensive subsidies, massive food wastefulness and environmental damage, benefits nobody but farmers.

Argument could be made that liberation, or at the very least improvement in life, of other oppressed groups has been achieved within capitalism. But there is a fundamental distinction between veganism and causes such as anti-slavery or labour movement is in the nature of exploitation. A slave can be freed and turned into a wage worker, and wage worker's condition can be elevated through labour regulation or welfare program, but for animals the surplus is not derived from mere exploitation of their labour, but literally of their flesh. No reform, no welfare program, no "humane" treatment can change the fact the value is derived from their death.

Communism as a path to world free of animal exploitation

More fundamental objection might arise on the question of, why should communists care about animals at all? Communist movement is after all supposed to be build upon material interests of proletariat, not moral preaching. Most workers are not vegan, have very little concern for well-being of animals (at least as long as they themselves don't have to personally witness the mistreatment), and while the same can be said about other issues such as LGBT or ethnics minority rights, those groups are themselves mostly composed of workers. Animals are not political subjects at all, and have nothing to bring to communist movement. Injecting such moralism into communist politics might be painted as a degeneration of scientific socialism into utopianism. Marx's argument that proletariat has no need to hide their self-interest behind morality might hold water under conditions of absolute destitute where winning political struggle is a matter of survival, but when a capitalist exploitation is made bearable through intervention of social welfare state, class interest is clearly not enough to get people moving. We argue the motivation for communist politics (more specifically, for communist movement as it is now, weak, not in power, not able to utilize force of authority and conformity upon the masses) is, for the most part, moral, or in more fundamental terms, emotional. The proletariat as a class might have material interest in establishment of communism, but if it is a material comfort what a person seeks, they would have much greater luck expending their effort into crawling the social ladder within the existing system rather than trying to overthrow it. The second argument for communist movement based on moral principles is that achieving any meaningful success undermines the conditions for its existence. If people revolt purely because of no jobs, no bread, their expected quality of life unfulfilled, the revolt stops at the point of social-democratic compromise, or even before that, at a hope of one. This issue is especially pronounced when it comes to leadership, who in case of movement's success, find themselves in upper echelons of society, and as such, their material interest come into opposition to egalitarian politics. Furthermore, material interests tend to themselves in praxis manifest in moral terms – rights, justice, theft, exploitation, concepts with clear moral charge. The argument we are making here is that if morality is part of communist movement, then there is no reason why moral treatment of animals shouldn't be part of the agenda. Marxism as a science is supposed to help look beyond the superficial appearance of things, reveal the social relations existing behind the commodity form. Meat and animal products exemplify this veil especially. To an average urban person, unused to seeing animal death, witnessing acts such as chopping chickens head off is disturbing, while the realities of industrial slaughterhouses, with its unspeakable cruelties and mass slaughter, unbearably sickening, yet still participates in it because what they buy is not torture and killing of animal, but beef, pork, poultry, a commodity which hides the real nature of its productions.

Elimination of profit incentive would lead to elimination of marketing and cover ups of cruel realities of meat production, driving down the demand for meat. On the supply side, in the planned

economy where cost are counted not in money terms, but in material resources or labour, production would gravitate towards maximum efficiency required to satisfy population's consumption demands. Many times more calories, and consequently crops, fertilizers, agricultural machinery, human labour and soil usage, with all the resulting environment impacts, are needed to be spend to produce relatively small amount of calories in form of animal product. The conversion ratios vary from animal to animal, the most efficient being chicken, at 11%, cow the least, around 1%. In other word, in order to produce 100kcal of chicken and cow meat, they need to be fed 1100kcal and 10 000kcal of food respectively. Protein contend fares a little better, with conversion ratios at 20% for chicken and 4% for cows (A Well-Fed World, 2015). Furthermore, slaughterhouse work has been linked to negative health outcomes, such as trauma, anxiety, paranoia, stress, shame, guild, depression and psychosis. Controlled for all other variables, slaughterhouse workers are more likely to commit crimes, sexual offences and rapes being particularly disproportional (Fitzgerald et al., 2009; Jacques, 2015). Given these facts, a socio-economic system in which well-being of workers and society at large are taken into consideration would be trying to avoid such outcomes.

None of this is to say that communism would automatically lead to veganism. Old ways of life wont instantly disappear, demand for animal products can still be part of production plan, however, in capitalist system there are material incentives to keep animal exploitation going, to create the demand for commodities, and through public subsidies keep production afloat even despite falling demand. While not completely impossible that through combination of consumer boycotts, activism and political pressure vegan society might be achieved within constrains of capitalism, but it would be achieved despite of its natural tendencies. As outlined above, the situation is reversed for communism, due to abolishment of commodity production, also on the cultural level, due to its ideological opposition to conservatism, making it easier to done away with past modes of thinking and eating.

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