

Veganism is a consumer activity

Peter Gelderloos

2008

Contents

...and a moral highground approaching religious proportions	7
Is animal liberation an oxymoron?	8
In conclusion...	10

The fact of the matter is, capitalism treats animals horribly. While many civilizations have normalized abusive behavior towards animals, capitalism tops them all in the intensity, frequency, and invisibility of apathetic exploitation mixed with repeated moments of sadistic cruelty. And while many civilizations have also destroyed their local environments, capitalism, as a global system with an unprecedented level of technological power, is the first to carry ecocide to a global scale. Sheerly in underspoken quantitative terms, the biodiversity and biomass of Planet Earth today is the lowest it has ever been in human history. There is obviously a connection between capitalism's abuse of animals, its destruction of the environment, and its oppression and abuse of humans.

Because a large portion of the abuse of animals is caused by the meat industry, many concerned people automatically respond with a prohibition on the consumption of meat. A lack of history, of knowledge of the diversity of human societies, of understanding of capitalism — even of what consumption is — and lingering Christian morality, have fiercely conflated a concern for animals with veganism. But a vegan diet is not the only logical response to ecocide and animal abuse, while veganism as a political position is often blinding and counterproductive.

The crux of the matter is, veganism is a consumer activity. It is ultimately an attempt to change capitalism and human civilization through the exercise of one's privileges as a consumer. This is an impossible approach. To understand why, let's first define the problem.

Meat production as it exists in industrial capitalist society is inherently cruel. It cannot be made otherwise. Any time an animal must be transformed into a product and processed according to market logic, the most heartless and unfeeling kinds of exploitation will be utilized as a matter of course, as a business necessity, while simultaneously the workers in this industry will lash out in frequent moments of sadism — this is the inevitable psychological response of humans who must act as machines.

Thus, a vegan diet may be seen as a sensible response by people who want to minimize their involvement with the meat industry in an industrial capitalist society. But this is not a universal context, whereas veganism markets itself as a universal solution. PETA has declared that you can't be a meat-eating environmentalist, and most vegans believe this line or toe it explicitly. What vegans have failed to think out is that industrial capitalism has not existed forever, nor have human societies always been ecocidal or abusive towards animals. In fact, to avoid eurocentric conclusions vegans must admit that the first and the very best environmentalists eat meat. I refer to a number of indigenous societies, past and present, that have the best track record of living in harmony with the environment and seeing other species as their extended families. Especially since vegans put so much emphasis on the impacts of an individual's lifestyle, they (being nearly all residents of wealthy countries) are deluding themselves and the broader communities to which they advertise their image as the preeminent environmentalists, considering that these omnivorous non-capitalist societies had a much lower ecological footprint and a much deeper affinity for animals than anyone socialized in an industrial society can ever gain in their lifetimes.

A few vegans have pointed out in their literature that in fact some indigenous societies living in harmony with nature have practiced a vegan diet, therefore... This is the sort of ignorant statement that makes one want to bang his head against a wall. (For one, I've never seen evidence to back the claim up, and it could easily be another of the spurious factoids that some vegans disseminate). What the proponents of this view fail to understand is that a lifestyle is not (until recently, in some parts of the world) a consumer choice. In eco-harmonious societies, lifestyles

or economies (including diet) derive from different ways of relating to the natural environment that prove to be sustainable over time. In other words, outside of consumerism, possible lifestyles vary according to local environmental conditions. 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. This is to say, in most parts of the world it is more ecologically sustainable for humans to kill animals. Beyond hunter-gatherer economies, horticultural and agricultural systems are also often healthier with the integration of animals.

Another vegan argument that makes sense in an industrial capitalist society but not in an ecologically sustainable society is that meat consumption contributes to world hunger and destruction of the environment because domesticated animals require a huge amount of resources to feed them. A vegetarian requires x number of acres to meet her dietary needs whereas a meat eater requires x times ten. This is absolutely true in the idiotically organized system of industrial agriculture, but not necessarily true in other circumstances. On a permaculture farm in many climates, for example, integrating chickens into the farm enhances rather than diminishes the food supply. While a factory farm would require hundreds of acres of, say, soybean crops to feed the thousands of chickens they keep locked up, a few dozen chickens on a small permaculture farm are a part of the ecosystem. A tiny portion of the produce must be devoted just for chicken food, but the vast majority of their nutrition comes from the food waste of the human inhabitants of the farm (the compost) and especially from the farm itself. After the harvest of a particular vegetable bed, the chickens are turned loose in it. They eat all the scraps, the parts of the plants the humans don't eat, and they eat the bugs, meanwhile scratching up (aerating) the soil and pooping in it (fertilizing), increasing fertility and thus increasing the total amount of food, which is further supplemented with their eggs and, potentially but not necessarily, their meat. A farm is healthier when it is tended and allowed to develop as a miniature ecosystem (and these methods of farming will constitute the agriculture of the future if humans are to have a future) and ecosystems are not complete without animal involvement.

Vegans, and all of us, should be more aware that it is very easy to farm a piece of land to death with only corn, or wheat, or any other monocrop. On land that has been farmed to death, as well as much arid land in the world, the only thing that can grow is grass. Farming is practically impossible. But one farming practice that can restore the health of the land is cattle farming. Herd animals are native to arid grasslands, and with the guidance of permaculture practices, cows or other herd animals can be raised without damaging the environment, and if we are talking about over-farmed land in a temperate, moist climate, sustainable cattle farming can heal the land to the point where vegetable farming can again take place. For another writing project, I interviewed an ecological cattle farmer in western Virginia whose family had gotten some land that had been farmed to death, and after a few decades of sustainable cattle farming using herding practices that mimic grazing patterns in a state of nature (as well as a philosophy that he was a "grass farmer," i.e. growing healthy grass that would sustain the cows rather than producing cow meat as conventional farmers view it), earthworm growth and levels of organic matter in the soil reached superlative levels, while several ravines that had been caused by erosion naturally filled in. In the end, ecological animal herding can reverse desertification, increase the total amount of arable land available, and increase the total food supply.

There is no coherent morality or ethics rooted in nature that can view the killing and eating of animals as wrong. In nature, killing and eating something is a respectful, intimate activity, and a necessary part of natural cycles. Viewing this as wrong is nothing but a shockingly alienated, civ-

alized view that domesticates animals at a metaphysical level by reducing them to quasi-citizens in need of rights. Fuck that shit. Humans and all other animals are much more free and full outside of legal frameworks, without rights, only needs and desires.

Humans have evolved as omnivores. In many parts of the world, humans are a natural predator in the native ecosystem. This is a natural role we have relinquished, often to disastrous effect. In my home, the mid-Atlantic region of North America, the overpopulation of deer is destroying what remains of the forests. Native species of trees, which they generally find the tastiest, cannot regenerate, because all the saplings get eaten up in the winter. I myself have tried to reforest part of a watershed in suburban Virginia which I personally protected from lawnmowers, only to have the deer destroy the trees and preserve the reign of monoculture grass yards. The lack of forested areas along river valleys is a major factor in killing the Chesapeake Bay, which is one of the most important breeding grounds for marine life in the North Atlantic. My grandparents live on the Chesapeake, and they and many of their friends used to harvest small amounts of crabs, oysters, and fish, mostly for their own diet. Many of these aquatic populations have collapsed in recent years. Human consumption was a stress on the ecosystem, but the major cause of the death of the Chesapeake is pollution and runoff coming from the suburbs (where many people rich enough to consume enlightened diets douse their not-so-enlightened lawns with fertilizer and pesticides). It should be no surprise that the fishermen were some of the more vocal defenders of the Chesapeake Bay. It must also be remembered that the Chesapeake used to be literally thick with fish and shellfish, which made up an important point of the ecologically sustainable and animal friendly diet of the indigenous inhabitants.

Returning to the deer, in many parts of eastern North America their only natural predators are wolves, cougars, and humans. A few places can still support wolf and cougar populations, and these should be defended fiercely wherever they remain or are attempting to reintroduce themselves. But given human population levels on the east coast, it is impossible in most areas for wolves or cougars to take up residence. That only leaves humans. We currently have no practical solution for the high human population, though the struggle to abolish the car culture is a vital step in reducing the impact of that population. In the meantime, the ecosystem can't wait. If we did have any influence over the diets of a significant portion of our society, the best thing to do on the east coast would be to cut out consumption of tropical fruits, soy, hell, all non-local produce, and sharply reduce meat to a little bit of chicken and beef from local organic farms, and, importantly, deer, that we preferably hunt ourselves. This would be the most ecologically sustainable diet in the short term for the bioregion I live in. The vegans almost get it right on one point — the amount of meat eaten there on average is way too high — but they completely ignore another point, conveniently leaving out how much damage they are doing by the quantity of tofu and bananas most of them eat.

Veganism is a consumer choice within present day capitalist society. Stripping it of its moral universality, we can better evaluate its appropriateness, if an honest evaluation is what we actually desire.

As a political strategy, is veganism effective? (Significantly, I rarely hear vegans pose this question to themselves). I know of no general, unlimited boycott, in the long history of the boycott tactic, that has been able to eliminate an entire industry at the magnitude we're talking about, nor do I know of any partial victories that suggest it may be possible with improved efforts. Targeted boycotts can be effective, especially when backed by sabotage actions, but when the boycott is not levied against a specific target — a product or company, but against an entire industry and

huge class of goods, it simply cannot work. A great example of a successful international boycott was the campaign against Shell Oil for South Africa divestment, and its most effective component were the many attacks on property. We should note that this campaign did not require participants to abstain from oil consumption, which is impossible in a capitalist society.

As an ideology, veganism fails to understand capitalism and ecology. It is incontestable that to save animals and the planet, capitalism must be abolished. Emphasizing the dubious power of consumer choices sabotages the fight against capitalism and ecocide. Existing as consumers, which is a role involuntarily imposed on all of us, is not compatible with nature, and in the long run the vegan diet is not the same as an ecological diet. The most important factors are not the presence or absence of meat, but if the food is local, and if it is sustainably produced. Today, only a limited number of people can achieve this lifestyle. The point is not to be one of those people, it is to abolish capitalism and develop ecological perspectives within anti-capitalist movements (and anti-capitalist perspectives within ecological movements, which are not one in the same only because of short-sightedness in each movement). Many vegans have done vital work spreading environmental consciousness (as have many omnivores). But as a whole veganism tends to spread a false consciousness. It misrepresents what means are capable of creating an ecological society and what lifestyles an ecological society could sustain. Vegans have spread the lie that you can't be a meat-eating environmentalist, and suppressed the truth that you can't be a capitalist environmentalist.

Instructive is the ease with which capitalism has accommodated vegan consumer choices in many countries — how easy it is now to shop vegan in the UK, Nederland, and most of the US. This encourages us to imagine, what if veganism succeeded? What if everyone or nearly everyone in wealthy countries adopted a vegan diet? The meat industry would collapse, but other industries and capitalism as a whole would continue, leaving us with the contradiction of a vegan society liberating animals in the limited sense understood by the critique of factory farming, but destroying the environment nonetheless, and all the animals with it.

Vegan or non-vegan consumers cannot destroy capitalism and save the planet, nor does veganism necessarily prefigure an ecological society. We will destroy capitalism and save the planet outside our involuntary role as consumers. Veganism as a boycott does not work. Within capitalism, a decrease in demand can lower prices, and increase total consumption. Those treacherous reformists who spread the lie of energy efficient lightbulbs and so forth have helped energy consumption skyrocket. Throughout the 80s and 90s, greater energy efficiency lowered energy prices and allowed the major consumers — the factories and shopping malls — to consume much more. Similarly, while the number of vegetarians and vegans in the US exploded from almost none to a sizeable minority in the last decades, total meat consumption did not decrease, in fact it increased. Let's be blunt. Y'all talk about saving animals but you haven't made a dent. It's much easier to be a vegan these days, capitalist production has created a niche for you, but no fewer imprisoned animals are being slaughtered in the factory process. Doesn't that highlight a need to reevaluate strategies? Or is veganism something other than an attempt to liberate animals? (More on this in the next section).

I have not seen vegans spread the awareness of the capitalist market that their strategy requires, nor engage in the amount of self-evaluation that is compatible with an honest desire to save the planet. The typical posture seems more like being on the side of the good guys as everything goes to hell.

...and a moral highground approaching religious proportions

For this reason, I think it is fair to point out the ways that veganism is more similar to a religion than to a liberation strategy. I think it's great for people to decide, as a personal choice, not to consume meat, especially if they could never bring themselves to kill or slaughter an animal. I personally was vegetarian for eight years, and came much closer to veganism in the last part before suddenly becoming an omnivore again in response to racist exclusions I witnessed from some white vegans. Currently, I do not consume the meat of domesticated mammals (noting that scavenging and stealing are not consumption in the capitalist sense). At a strictly personal level, I do not want to raise an animal with whom I can develop an emotional relationship, for the purpose of killing it. I could kill a bird or a fish to eat, and I have, because I do not think they are capable of recognizing me or any other individual, and therefore I cannot form an emotional relationship with them that is not narcissistic or one-sided. I also think that hunting a wild animal for food is respectful and emotionally healthy. That's just me.

Veganism dismisses personal and emotional considerations by declaring what is acceptable for everyone. This is a religious characteristic. Secondly, veganism takes moral prohibitions that are not logical within nature but only within a specific historical context and universalizes and mystifies them. Thirdly, veganism is missionary. As a fairly deserved generalization, y'all try to convert. Having been a vegetarian, I know that people in the mainstream who have never developed enough of an ecological consciousness to do so little as change their diet try to convert, marginalize, or mock veggies a whole lot more, so we can see this as a defensive reaction. But then, perhaps Christian self-righteousness also originally came out of their persecution. In the end, it doesn't matter much.

Spreading information about animal cruelty, about the meat industry, about the destruction of the environment, is admirable and necessary. Spreading the idea that there is only one way to salvation, that people need to mimic your strategy and lifestyle, is Christian. It's especially embarrassing when, as we have seen, the moral and strategic grounds aren't so well thought out.

I think the quasi-religiousness of veganism explains why I've so often encountered vegans who defend their position in an illogical, dishonest way — as a matter of faith. There's the matter of false propaganda. For one, the PETA milieu anti-fastfood rumour that KFC stopped referring to themselves as Kentucky Fried Chicken because the crap they serve doesn't even qualify as chicken anymore and they would risk lawsuits if they alleged otherwise (since when has advertising in honesty been so strictly enforced?). Actually, it's because, with the health craze, "fried" food got a bad name, hence the retreat to the initials KFC. These sort of meme attacks, while they may be very effective in the short term, damage the credibility of a movement in the long-term.

I've also had the argument with vegan and vegetarian friends who say that thanks to their diet they are not responsible for killing animals. Even after I pointed out the fallacy, they continue to chant this article of faith, though they know full well that their consumption of industrially farmed vegetables, their use of plastics, their dependence on petroleum-fueled transportation, their dependence on coal- or wind- or nuclear- or hydro- or even solar- (think mining for panel and battery construction) powered electricity kill a shitload more animals than meat factories. You cannot live in a capitalist society without killing animals and destroying the environment. We are all in this together, and the division between vegans who don't kill animals and the rest of us who are responsible for enslaving animals and destroying the environment is stupid and self-righteous.

The way many vegans respond to the embarrassing heresy of freeganism (only eating animal products if they are stolen or dumpstered) also illuminates religious illogic. How eating dumpstered or stolen meat supports the meat industry, if not on a metaphysical level, escapes me. Supposedly, stealing meat contributes to killing animals, because when meat gets taken off a supermarket shelf, they order more to replace it. However, stealing is a low-level attack on the industry, that does not contribute money to its profit margins. Stealing, unequivocally, is not consuming. Furthermore, most supermarkets log data through the cash registers on exactly what products are purchased, thus they also can collect statistics on what products are most frequently shoplifted. These products might be attached with security tags, lowering profit margins, or they might be put in a less accessible spot, which lowers the frequency of purchase (shopping being a largely compulsive activity). It is not unheard of for a product that is robbed too frequently to be entirely removed from a supermarket's inventory.

The idea that stealing meat contributes to the industry is not only poorly thought out, but contradictory. If supermarkets use the money they receive to restock a pre-selected range of products (including meat), then that means that the money vegans spend buying lettuce also goes to buying more meat. Thus, the supermarket industry is integrated with the meat industry, and the only way to get food from supermarkets without sending your money to support this industry is to steal, which has the added benefits of undermining the imposed consumer role and putting you in conflict with capitalist society. Concomitantly, vegans who go shopping are not really vegans. How far do we take the analysis? Do the banks they put their money in invest in any supermarkets or any other industries integrated with the meat industry? Do any of the companies they work for or shop from? To great effect, the SHAC campaign has illustrated just how wide a company's economic involvements are.

Because of these missionary and universalizing tendencies, veganism creates a number of problems within a diverse anticapitalist movement. These problems are especially volatile when it comes to race, owing to a few coincidences: people of color are more likely to require meat for a healthy diet, to have a more ecologically friendly tradition of eating meat, as well as a food culture that is more rooted, less undermined by consumerism, and thus one with which they identify with more strongly. For all these reasons, vegans can come off as particularly insulting and racially exclusive when they insist that a vegan diet is healthier for everyone (not true, some people are healthier when they eat some meat) or when they propagate the peculiar mathematical view of food that a vegan meal, as a lowest common denominator, is the only dietary option that is inclusive to everyone. This is often justified with the argument that "people need to learn that a meal does not need to include meat" as though it were just some ignorant habit and not a fully developed food culture in its own right. A culturally inclusive compromise is not a vegan meal, but a meal with vegan as well as omnivorous options. Predictably, veganism misses out on the merits of pluralism in favor of a decidedly absolutist worldview.

Is animal liberation an oxymoron?

I don't think that animal liberationists believe they are going to end the vivisection and meat industries by rescuing imprisoned animals any more than anarchists believe we are going to abolish the state with the current level of activity we are capable of. So let me be unequivocal in stating the many strong points of animal liberation actions. These actions are brave, and more

than anything today people need to be inspired. These actions are passionate, another revolutionary necessity. Even though the liberations will save a tiny number of animals from the conveyor belts of a vast death machine, each individual animal is worth saving. Such non-quantitative logic is valuable in a struggle for an anarchist world free of domination. Thirdly, the animal liberation movement has developed important tactical innovations that have spread to adjacent milieus and movements. They are also important for spreading consciousness of the viciousness of our civilization towards other living things.

My criticism of animal liberation is a minor one, and mostly meant as food for thought. Unlike veganism, animal liberation is, in my view, an important part of a full anarchist movement. As a separate movement, it faces the danger of falling into repetitive, fetishized activity carried out only for its internal moral values rather than working in conjunction with more long-term strategic approaches, but I think there is enough interchange between animal liberationists and other types of radicals to wed animal liberation to the necessity to abolish capitalism.

More problematic is animal liberation's relationship with false visions of solidarity that already predominate in many activist circles, especially more privileged circles. Technically, though at first the point seems almost petty, animal liberation is an oxymoron. Liberation, unless we mean it the way George W. Bush does, can only be accomplished by its subject. In other words, people must liberate themselves. Animals, on the other hand, cannot. Unfortunately, from here to eternity animals will never organize a social force capable of ending capitalism or even vivisection. Animals will never write letters or raise bail money for imprisoned animal liberationists. In a democratic sense, humans and animals are not equal because they cannot be co-participants in civil society with equal rights and responsibilities. But then, fuck democracy. Autonomy is a more coherent concept, and all living things deserve autonomy and control over whatever choices they are capable of making. (This does raise a moral question regarding domestication, as many animals have participated in their own domestication as an evolutionary adaptation, and well treated, especially free grazing domesticated animals will not run away, even if they have seen their broodmates slaughtered. Instead they choose to stick around with their human companions. What then do we make of their equality or autonomy?)

Animals will not liberate themselves, they must be saved. The planet must also be saved, but this does not mean these are hopelessly missionary projects, as by "save" we basically mean we must stop torturing and destroying animals and nature. Through this necessity, animal liberation promotes a false idea of solidarity that creates a very patronizing, often racist model when activists who get their feet wet with animal liberation activities attempt to work together with other human groups in struggle, if through reasons of privilege they might also be able to imagine themselves as saviors. This is not an inevitable weakness of animal liberation, just a potential consequence within revolutionary circles where animal liberation activity is much more developed and emphasized than international or cross-racial solidarity. In other words, animal liberation is obviously not responsible for the missionary impulse that is culturally ingrained in whiteness. Rather, animal liberation may be so attractive to many white radicals because it does not challenge but may promote the missionary approach to solidarity, in which a more powerful being saves an innocent but helpless being from harm.

In conclusion...

On an individual level, many vegans have engaged in vital work raising environmental consciousness, and they have experienced their diet as a means of reaching ethical consistency and self-discipline. But their diet has not been an asset in the struggle. For many of us it is important to live in a way we consider ethically consistent, and to attempt to prefigure the world we are struggling to create. However, an absolutist veganism is not necessary to either of these tasks, and instead impedes an accurate understanding of ecology and capitalism, while discouraging a united, pluralistic movement against capitalism.

Anarchist library
Anti-Copyright



Peter Gelderloos
Veganism is a consumer activity
2008

Retrieved on June 18, 2009 from news.infoshop.org

en.anarchistlibraries.net