



Veganism in a Post Modern Society

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Veganism is a lifestyle that entails abstaining from the consumption of animal products. Some vegans limit this to their diet. Many, however, expand their practice of veganism to include the abstinence of all non-vegan products. This includes but is not limited to clothing made out of fur, wool and leather as well as toiletries and beauty products that

contain animal substances and are tested on animals. In this critical reflection I explore the prevalence of veganism in today's society, some of the reasons why people may choose this

lifestyle and whether or not it is effective in all the ways that people think it is.

It is already apparent that a vegan lifestyle is based on consuming certain products and not consuming others. In modern society, people's lives revolved around their profession. This type of society engaged its members in their role as producers. In the post-modern, post-industrial society that we now purportedly live in, the focus, according to Bauman (2005), shifts from production to consumption, the latter of which has come to play a significant role in the shaping of our identities. In

fact, Bauman (2005: 26) states that "the roads to self-identity, to a place in society, to life lived in a form recognizable as that of meaningful living, all require daily visits to the market place". As such, veganism as a consumption practice is an option chosen within a society which portrays itself as offering a freedom of choice, but which after all

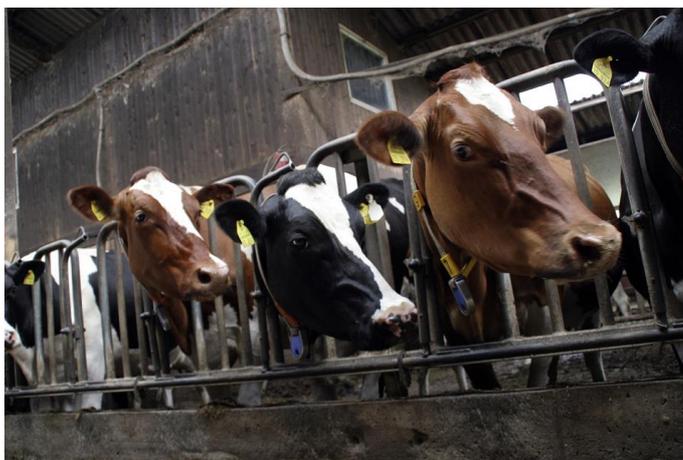
forces all citizens to consume in one way or another. Considering the positive effects of veganism, a plant-based lifestyle may therefore be seen as an effective way to navigate the shift from



producer to consumer society.

Why be vegan though? There are various reasons attached to the desire of following a plant-based lifestyle and information on this is now widely available in books, magazines and especially online. Talking about the information society, Webster (2006) argues that quantitative changes in information as well as the significance of information itself, lead to qualitative changes in social structures. One may argue that there is an ever-growing sea of information all around us. This information, or knowledge, is projected onto us

through all types of media. Although perhaps increasingly difficult to navigate because of the large amount, it can be used by consumers to inform their choices (Ibid, 2006). Applying this to veganism, there is now a growing amount of information available, e.g. on how animals are being treated in order to be consumed by humans. This knowledge is there, ready to be accessed by people who do not want to be complicit in animal cruelty and for that reason decide to go vegan. Thus, one may argue that the rise of the information society, due to its nature of making more and more knowledge available, makes it more likely for people to choose to practice a vegan lifestyle. However, information simply being available is not enough to change entire populations' practices. This is demonstrated by the overwhelming number of people worldwide who are not vegan (yet) and it shows that, as opposed to what Webster (2006) argues, changes in quantity and significance of information do not necessarily lead to changes in societal structures. However, knowledge may change the way we communicate. Since the advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and especially the development of social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, it has become progressively easier to connect with people all over the world. This is a key feature of the network society that we now live in, as maintained by Castells (2010). He claims that a network society is a step further from a knowledge society because it entails the rise of global communication which is facilitated by technological development. The results of this globalising process are plenty fold, but one of them is what Harvey (1989) calls time/space compression. It allows vegans to share their experiences with and reasonings for following a plant-based lifestyle, e.g. their outrage over



animal cruelty, on one side of the world and it being received instantly by people in vastly different countries. What that leads to is a growing global interconnectedness and, in our case, consequently the growth of a global vegan movement.

As there is supposedly much pressure from immediate surroundings (e.g. family) to consume non-vegan products, the social networks that are created during the globalising process described above, are claimed to be essential to maintaining a vegan diet (Cherry, 2006). Although, there is a downside to being vegan in the online world as the internet is not such a welcoming and accepting place after all. Similar to pressure from family and friends, since the internet is a social environment, resistance to veganism is also very much present online (possibly because being omnivorous is so normalised in most societies). This complicates Castells' theory of the network society in application to veganism. Global networks and communities may be created and may even lead to an increase in vegans worldwide but there is also always resistance to them which may put people off veganism altogether.

While on the subject of the globe, there is now a lot of information available to the consumer on the environmental impacts of buying and consuming non-vegan goods. Food production and consumption contribute hugely to climate change. In the 2016 documentary *Before the Flood*, examples of the devastating impacts of animal agriculture are given. For instance, it is stated that "of all the reasons for tropical deforestation, the foremost is beef and beef is one of the most inefficient uses of resources on the planet" (Before the Flood, 2016: 00:51:25). As humans are responsible for the mass production and consumption of beef as well as all other animal products, this indicates that climate change, partly as a result of mass animal farming, is a global risk

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created by humans. Furlong and Cartmel (2007) claim that we live in a risk society, meaning that people have to navigate an increasing amount of risks in their everyday lives. The authors, drawing on Beck (1992), link this with the individualisation of lifestyles which forces people to reflexively construct their own biographies - it puts the burden of dealing with risks on the individual. Veganism, as a practice to combat global warming, then is an attempt to navigate on an individual level the socially created risk of climate change. Going vegan can thus create ontological security. By figuring out what it is that gives a person's life meaning – in this case, contributing to saving the environment – they can create their own narrative or biography and live according to it (Giddens, 1991). The practice of veganism is one way of adhering to this narrative which gives people a sense of security in a society that is full of risks. This application of Giddens' theory to



veganism stands in opposition to Barnatt's (2013) view that most people feel a detachment from personal responsibility to do something about climate change because environmental changes are not necessarily observable to the individual. Drawing on *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al, 1972), his argument is that it is not enough to consume differently. A consumer society, as explained above, is built on the assumption that people consume as much as possible. Therefore, in order to subvert environmental changes, people – including vegans - need to consume less altogether. Evans (2011) goes even further in saying that making any individual changes at all is not enough, rather the whole system of consumption needs to be overhauled. Hence, one may argue that the ontological security created by following a vegan lifestyle is actually false because simply consuming vegan products is not enough to tackle climate change. What that means, assuming that people would still like to stick to their chosen

narrative of 'saving the planet', is that they cannot necessarily just do so by consuming plant-based products. This may put their ontological security and therefore their identity at threat because, as we have already established, the way in which we consume contributes largely to the establishment of our identities.

To conclude this, veganism may be a tool for some to navigate postmodern risks, but it is not available to all. Furthermore, the ontological security created by being vegan can be dangerous. It may create the sense that by following a plant-based lifestyle, people are already doing their bit to save the planet which could result in them not adhering

to sustainable practices in other areas of life, e.g. transport, travel and waste production, which can be almost equally as detrimental to the environment as an omnivorous diet.

To summarise, in this critical reflection I have explored the

practice of veganism within contemporary society. Although one may argue that the rise of information in general and ICT's specifically have facilitated the growth of veganism worldwide, we must be careful in considering what exactly the consequences of this are. Namely, veganism, even if more sustainable than omnivorism, is still a consumption practice and thus perpetuates the role of the citizen as a consumer and the implications that this has in creating one's identity. Perhaps the individual navigation of the risk of global warming does not have a sufficient impact on environmental changes, but structural changes of the consumerist society we live in would. However, this is not to say that the practice of veganism is useless. It does have an impact on the emission of greenhouse gasses, for example, and it also saves animals from being killed. What vegans - me included - do need to carefully consider is that we should not rest upon the fact that we do not consume animal products. Rather, the careful

application of sustainable practices in all areas of life must always be in the forefront of our minds and we should also urge corporations and institutions to adapt sustainable practices as they arguably have way more power than any individual to make a positive change when it comes to our environment.

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