

# Boycott veganism

Animal rights only begins with your diet

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*Deeds, not words.*

- Emmeline Pankhurst<sup>1</sup>, Women's Social & Political Union founding, 1903

"Go vegan."

We've all heard these words more times than we can count.

The logic behind them is simple. Non-human animals, like human animals, have feelings of pain and pleasure, sophisticated social and emotional lives, and a deep yearning for freedom and well-being. In virtually all morally-relevant characteristics, they are our equals.<sup>2</sup> Yet billions of these individuals are tortured and killed every year for food, clothing, and research. The obvious way to stop the slaughter, we are told, is by "going vegan" -- avoiding meat and dairy, finding leather substitutes, etc. When we convince everyone to "go vegan," according to the conventional view, institutional animal exploitation will end.

But this seemingly simple logic is flawed. In fact, the concept of veganism is *harmful* to the animal rights movement. And if you are serious about working for animal liberation, the first thing you should boycott is neither meat nor dairy nor eggs. The first thing you should boycott... is veganism.

This is a provocative statement, so let me make clear what I am *not* saying. First, I am *not* saying that eating animals is ethical. It is *not* ethical, for the same reason that human cannibalism is not ethical. Second, I am *not* making a claim about excessive vegan purity.<sup>3</sup> While it is true that many "level 5" vegans are probably motivated by personal purity rather than ethical principles, those who maintain a stricter lifestyle than the rest of us (e.g. avoiding bikes and cars because of the stearic acid in rubber) as *part of* a liberationist ethic should be commended. Third, I am *not* merely saying that veganism is a flawed word. Granted, "veganism" would not be problematic if it were a mere dietary description, removed of its significance as a movement objective. But I doubt such a narrow use of the term would be possible, given its prominence in the animal rights movement.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/time100/heroes/profile/pankhurst01.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.animal-rights-library.com/texts-m/singer03.htm>

<sup>3</sup>For example, see here: [http://www.goveg.com/effectiveAdvocacy\\_personal.asp](http://www.goveg.com/effectiveAdvocacy_personal.asp)

What, then, *am* I saying? In short, that *animal rights only begins with your diet*. Species oppression, like racial oppression in the pre-Civil Rights era, or gender oppression in the pre-feminist era, quietly saturates every industry, institution, and cultural norm in our society. Remediating the problem is thus a challenging and comprehensive project -- requiring more creativity, more commitment, and more militancy than the prevailing vegan establishment suggests. If the movement for animal liberation is to be successful, it must be a movement of social and political action, not just of words and diets. And it is pushing movement actors to this sort of principled action -- not to veganism -- that should be our main objective.

Let's break this idea down into a number of smaller bites.

### **Bite 1: Veganism neither saves lives, nor reduces suffering.**

*We had to destroy the village to save it.*

- Unidentified officer, My Lai Massacre, 1968.

We are often told that every vegan can expect to save hundreds or even thousands of animals in her lifetime. Taken literally, this is clearly wrong. Each of our independent consumer choices has virtually no impact on animal agriculture. Indeed, unless you are buying your animal products from a small and local producer, no one will even notice when you "go vegan." Animals today are produced by massive corporations in industrial facilities. It takes thousands of consumers for an economic blip to even appear on their radar.

You might ask: "Aren't we 'saving lives' in the aggregate? If 1% of the population is vegan, doesn't that mean that 1% of animals are rescued from torture and death?" The answer, again, is "no." In the short run, a reduction in demand simply drives down the commodity price of animals. If there is oversupply, "excess inventory" animals are not liberated and given happy lives. Rather, these animals are still tortured and killed, and possibly in even more brutal fashion, e.g. if they are exported to a foreign market or sold for pet food. The unfortunate truth is that a slave-owner has no incentive to care for a worthless slave. Consider what happens to chickens, for example, after their economic value is undermined: buried or burned alive.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, in the long run, it is possible that fewer animals will be produced due to veganism, since slave-owners will have reduced incentives for production.<sup>5</sup> But reduced breeding does nothing to save lives or alleviate suffering. Rather, it simply prevents animals from coming into existence. If we think veganism "saves lives," on existence grounds, we should also say that the Chinese government saved lives by forcibly sterilizing its citizens. The babies prevented from being born would have eventually died, after all, and often in miserable conditions.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.animalaid.org.uk/h/n/NEWS/pr\\_factory/ALL/217](http://www.animalaid.org.uk/h/n/NEWS/pr_factory/ALL/217)

<sup>5</sup> How much production is reduced depends on what economists call the "elasticity of supply." If supply is extremely inelastic, e.g. because of high sunk costs, then production may not fall much, if at all.

The truth of the matter is that a life that does not exist cannot be saved. And it is a perverse social justice movement that rallies behind the cause of wiping the oppressed off the face of the planet. Consider: would civil rights activists have suggested depopulation of minorities, as a solution to the injustice of institutional racism? Would antislavery activists of the 19th century suggested reduced breeding for slaves, as a solution to the problem of human slavery? That sort of position seems more tenable for the opponents of social justice than its supporters.<sup>6</sup>

A final consideration: animals are commoditized, abused, and killed *everywhere* in our society. For example, plant-based agriculture involves the use and slaughter of countless animals in fertilization, plowing and tilling, energy consumption, and habitat displacement. Climate change rivals animal agriculture in its likely impact on non-human life, both quantitatively and qualitatively.<sup>7</sup> Veganism as non-violence, then, is at best, a myth; and at worst, a malicious corporate deception. Veganism, even when effective, merely replaces one set of abused and killed victims for another. We must do better than that if we hope to see a world where animal liberation is a reality.

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<sup>6</sup> Let me use a personal story to help illustrate the problem. One of our dear family friends, when I was growing up, was a girl with a severe neurological disorder called multiple sclerosis. She has been in a wheelchair since childhood, and can barely move her arms. She is trapped in the cage of her own body, and suffering has become a part of her life. She is periodically hospitalized -- any sort of everyday infection can induce respiratory or cardiac failure, because her health is so fragile. I remember visiting my friend as a child, when she was attached to a respirator. She could not do anything more than open her eyes and nod her head. I was overwhelmed with sadness, fear, and pity afterwards, and asked my parents why God would do such terrible things to such a beautiful and innocent girl. (I was raised an Evangelical Christian.)

Yet despite her profound suffering, my friend has lived a meaningful life -- and one far longer than doctors anticipated. (She is now in her 30s.) And at no point did anyone suggest that she would be better off dead, or that the world would be a better place if she did not exist. Far from it, despite her disabilities and suffering, her life has value. She can converse with people, when she is not ill; she has desires and awareness; and she hopes and dreams for a cure before her disease takes her life. Her life is worth living, despite her profound disability.

The point I am trying to make is that a life of suffering is not valueless. There are good things that come with life, as well as bad, for all of us. And for us to say that some other person's life is meaningless, (much less bad for the world!) because it involves too much pain or discomfort, is an affront to that person's individual dignity and autonomy.

We should say the same for non-human animal persons. Yes, they may suffer and die, if they are born in factory farms. But we cannot say that the world would be better without them, for the same reason that I cannot say the world would be better without my friend with MS. Every human with MS, and every poor piglet in a factory farm, is an invaluable individual, who has as much right to existence, and to the bounty of this world, as the rest of us.

This is not to say that we shouldn't fight to end terror, exploitation, and injustice -- whether it comes from sources natural or political. We absolutely should do everything we can to make sure that every suffering girl with MS, and every individual piglet in a factory farm, can one day run happy and free. But it is a fundamental affront to their rights and dignity as individuals, for us to say that we are saving them, by ensuring that they do not exist.

<sup>7</sup> See "Climate Change and Animals," Hsiung and Sunstein.

## **Bite 2: Veganism frames the animal rights debate in favor of our opponents.**

*One man's justice is another's injustice; one man's beauty another's ugliness; one man's wisdom another's folly.*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays*, 1841

In the recent debate over the Chicago foie gras ban, the opponents of the ban, such as Mayor Richard Daley, focused on how the ban encroached on the "choices" of consumers. So framed, Daley's position made perfect sense: why would any of us, in a liberal society, care what others put in their mouths? In contrast, supporters of the ban focused on the inherent "brutality" of force-feeding. And when faced with images of cramped conditions and bloody force-feeding, 80% of the population endorsed the ban.<sup>8</sup> To a significant degree, then, the battle over foie gras was a battle over framing<sup>9</sup> -- should we focus on the silliness of interfering with "dietary choices"<sup>10</sup>, or on the "brutality" of factory farming and force feeding?<sup>11</sup>

The same point, however, can be made about the fight for animal rights more generally. Is this a movement about choice and diets, or about cruelty and violence? When we examine how the "go vegan" message frames the animal rights debate, we see how we are playing into our opponents' hands. The concept of veganism necessarily focuses on the *human* who *chooses* a particular lifestyle. That lifestyle may be informed by ethical principles, no doubt. But the framing has been set -- the debate is about human choices and interests, rather than animal rights and brutality. The common and dismissive response we get when doing outreach -- "But I like eating meat" -- is a direct product of this framing. "I like eating meat" is a plausible response if our message is "Change your diet"; it is significantly less effective when our message is "Stop killing animals."

## **Bite 3: Veganism confuses a potentially powerful message.**

*We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.*

- Martin Luther King responding to "moderates", *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, 1963

One response to the framing problem is to say that veganism need not be framed as a human dietary choice, if we push for it as a public moral principle rather than a personal lifestyle choice. But this simply brings another of veganism's problems to the forefront: the concept is inherently confused. "Veganism" has a bewildering number of definitions and motivations.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.nofiegras.org/zogby.html>

<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Framing\\_\(social\\_sciences\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Framing_(social_sciences))

<sup>10</sup> [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qn4155/is\\_20060915/ai\\_n16739073](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4155/is_20060915/ai_n16739073)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/southsouthwest/chi-0510260246oct26,1,463405.story>

While veganism's original rationale involved compassion for animals (but, conspicuously, *not* equality or justice), it was nonetheless conceived of as a diet rather than a political principle.<sup>12</sup> Veganism today retains that dietary focus, but it has added as many rationales as there are vegans. Within the vegan umbrella, there are environmental vegans<sup>13</sup>, health vegans<sup>14</sup>, freegan vegans<sup>15</sup>, pro-speciesism vegans<sup>16</sup>, "when convenient" vegans<sup>17</sup>, and compassion vegans<sup>18</sup>. This smorgasbord of principles and motivations makes the "vegan message" utterly incoherent.

The worst form of confusion, however, occurs when veganism becomes its own rationale. Too many nominal animal rights advocates live their everyday lives with a list of "forbidden" ingredients, but fail to adequately internalize the reasons those ingredients should be forbidden in the first place. When asked why they pass on the cheese, for example, they simply say "Because I'm vegan."

In doing so, they have failed animals and the movement in two ways. First, they have dodged an opportunity to offer a clear and compelling message on behalf of the animals. If the concept of veganism were eliminated, animal rights advocates would lose their rhetorical shortcut ("Because I'm vegan"), and be forced to offer a powerful, but more challenging, message of injustice and inequality -- e.g. "Because killing innocents is wrong"; "Because exploiting someone just because they are different from us is not fair"; etc. Without veganism, the focus of the conversation would move to animals and their lives, rather than humans and their french fries.

Second, when "Because I'm vegan" becomes a habitual and unthinking response, advocates remove themselves -- socially, intellectually, and emotionally -- from their motivation for boycotting animal products. They allow themselves to ignore the fact that every piece of meat is murder, that every egg is oppression, and that their "vegan lifestyle" is not a personal choice, but a moral and political imperative. The message sent by their personal boycott becomes, not just confused, but content-less. Eventually, they may lose sight of why they "went vegan" in the first place and abandon the movement entirely. (For examples of this process, see here<sup>19</sup>, here<sup>20</sup>, and here<sup>21</sup>, and consider the examples of Gwyneth Paltrow<sup>22</sup>, Julia Stiles<sup>23</sup>, or Nina Planck.<sup>24</sup>)

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<sup>12</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald\\_Watson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Watson)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.veganforum.com/forums/showthread.php?t=13282>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.vegfamil.com/forums/showthread.php?t=666>

<sup>15</sup> <http://freegan.info/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://vegan.meetup.com/11/messages/boards/view/viewthread?thread=3295339#10082095>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.satyamag.com/oct06/singer.html>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.satyamag.com/mar04/bauston.html>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.foodandwine.com/articles/why-vegetarians-are-eating-meat>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A50147-2005Mar19.html>

<sup>21</sup> <http://vegan.meetup.com/11/messages/boards/view/viewthread?thread=3390611>

<sup>22</sup> <http://europe.real.com/guide/bang/2/9268.html>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.veggieboards.com/boards/showthread.php?t=13473>

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.ninaplanck.com/index.php?article=vegan\\_babies](http://www.ninaplanck.com/index.php?article=vegan_babies)

How different things would be, if animal advocates explained and defended their beliefs directly and honestly, rather than using the "Because I'm vegan" escape hatch.

*For more on the importance of clarity in social justice movements, see here:*

<http://files.meetup.com/482977/Slippery%20slope%2C%20or%20sticky%20staircase.pdf>

#### **Bite 4: Veganism undermines community-building.**

*They generalize, they shoot into the air, they do not disturb the repose nor wound the complacency of the sinner. 'they have put no difference between the holy and profane, neither have they shewed difference between the unclean and the clean.' Thus has free inquiry been suppressed, and a universal fear created, and the tongue of the boldest silenced, and the sleep of death fastened upon the nation.*

- William Lloyd Garrison on the prevailing anti-slavery establishment, *Thoughts on African Colonization*, 1832

But what about community-building? Even if veganism frames the debate poorly, and confuses the animal rights message, perhaps it has some long run value in building animal rights communities. After such dietary communities develop, it might be argued, *then* activists will have the conviction to stand up for animals on a more principled basis.

The first problem with this argument is that veganism does not build an animal rights community; it weakens it by destroying any coherent collective identity. Sociological research has demonstrated that ambiguous and conflicting ideological commitments are a recipe for erosion in a movement.<sup>25</sup> And while an "animal rights vegan" has about as much in common with a "health vegan" as she does with a devotee of the Atkins diet, both are included in the "vegan community." This short circuits the process of social reinforcement and identity formation that is necessary to inspire minorities to vigorously stand up against powerful majorities. Indeed, sociological research suggests that *every* non-animal rights advocate we have strong personal ties to, is hurting the movement's momentum.<sup>26</sup> Building a community of people who like vegan cupcakes, in short, will merely inspire us to make more vegan cupcakes.

Even among those who have some faint notion of animal ethics, veganism obscures fundamental differences. A vegan who abstains from animals on "compassion" grounds, for example, has embraced a different set of political beliefs than an animal rights

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<sup>25</sup> In a study of the Dutch peace movement, Klanderman found that "varying collective identities, proxied by diverse organizational memberships, predicted defection of participants from the movement." (as reported in Nelson Pichardo, *New Social Movements*, Annual Review of Sociology.

<sup>26</sup> Stanford professor Douglas McAdam was one of the first to empirically demonstrate the effect of social ties, both positive and negative, on activism. See here:

<http://files.meetup.com/160880/Social%20ties%20and%20activism.pdf>. Many other scholars have followed his lead in examining the role of social networks in explaining differential perception in social movements among nominal supporters. See, for example, here:

<http://files.meetup.com/160880/Social%20networks%20and%20individual%20perceptions%20--%20Swiss%20case.pdf>.

activist. "Compassion" is a personal sentiment that cannot, for cognitive reasons, be maintained beyond a handful of individuals immediately around us. (Social scientists have determined that humans have a maximum of 150 genuine social relationships.<sup>27</sup>). Civil rights activists did not beg racists for compassion precisely *because* they saw segregation as a fundamental affront to justice, not a mere lack of kindness. Yet the vast majority of vegans endorse, at best, compassion for non-human slaves<sup>28</sup> -- not equality or justice. With this as its basis, how can a vegan community be transformed into a movement for social justice?

But let's suppose, contrary to fact, that it can. This still leaves us with a second problem: veganism as community-building is a failed experiment. Vegetarian advocacy has existed for thousands of years, and in formal organizations in the United States since the mid 19th century. Yet the best evidence shows that the percentage of vegetarians in the United States has remained static for decades,<sup>29</sup> and has recently been declining in some areas of Europe.<sup>30</sup> While focusing on vegetarian or vegan community, as opposed to animal rights community, may maximize our numbers at any fixed point in time, dietary clubs have never triggered the dramatic *growth* required for a social justice movement to take hold.

In contrast, communities organized around a just belief system, and against a common social and political adversary, can experience explosive growth. William Lloyd Garrison published the first issue of *The Liberator* with the support of a handful of black subscribers in 1831.<sup>31</sup> And while his condemnation of those who supported slavery was ignored or ridiculed by those in the mainstream (Award-winning historian Henry Mayer writes that others in the mainstream antislavery community initially found Garrison's

<sup>27</sup> <http://dangerousintersection.org/?p=276>

<sup>28</sup> For an example, see here: <http://www.veganoutreach.org/enewsletter/20050420.html>

<sup>29</sup> See *Vegetarianism: Movement or Moment?*, pp. 14-18.

[http://www.temple.edu/tempress/titles/1542\\_reg.html](http://www.temple.edu/tempress/titles/1542_reg.html).

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=%2Fnews%2F2003%2F07%2F09%2Fnveg09.xml>

<sup>31</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Lloyd\\_Garrison](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Lloyd_Garrison).

Garrison wrote in his inaugural editorial:

I am aware that many object to the severity of my language; but is there not cause for severity? I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or to speak, or to write, with moderation. No! no! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen; -- but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest -- I will not equivocate -- I will not excuse -- I will not retreat a single inch -- AND I WILL BE HEARD. The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal, and to hasten the resurrection of the dead.

It is pretended, that I am retarding the cause of emancipation by the coarseness of my invective and the precipitancy of my measures. The charge is not true. On this question of my influence, -- humble as it is,-- is felt at this moment to a considerable extent, and shall be felt in coming years -- not perniciously, but beneficially -- not as a curse, but as a blessing; and posterity will bear testimony that I was right. I desire to thank God, that he enables me to disregard "the fear of man which bringeth a snare," and to speak his truth in its simplicity and power.

activism to be "shrill, weird, and counter-productive"<sup>32</sup>), the power and integrity of his message attracted a small but principled community of activists -- a community resistant to social erosion. Within a decade over a thousand abolitionist societies formed across the country;<sup>33</sup> by 1865 slavery was gone.

The animal rights message is no less compelling than Garrison's call to end human slavery. And it too can experience explosive growth, but only if activists have enough conviction to stand up for non-human slaves as vigorously and consistently as Garrison stood up for human slaves.<sup>34</sup>

**Bite 5: Veganism ignores our social and political contributions to species oppression.**

*We must be the change we wish to see in the world.*

- Mahatma Gandhi

The animal rights movement, like other social justice movements, aspires ultimately for social and political transformation. Yet veganism, as a movement strategy, is focused on private economic decision-making. As noted above, a reduction in demand has no direct impact on animal slaughter or suffering. So if veganism has any value for the movement, it must be because of the social or political statement it sends, not because of its negligible economic consequences.

But if we concede that veganism is only important for its social and political effects, then why not focus the movement's attention on *all* of our social and political choices, rather than just those that implicate our diets? Dietary and consumer choices, after all, comprise a tiny portion of our social behaviors. And consumerism is an unwieldy method for conveying a political message; a meat-free diet does not necessarily imply standing up for the rights of animals, any more than a gluten-free diet implies standing up for the rights of wheat.

A defender of veganism might say that I have ignored an important political dimension of veganism; it is a boycott, and not just a consumer lifestyle. Veganism, under this view, is a statement of our refusal to support oppressive industries.

There are two problems with this view. First, recall the issues raised in parts 3 and 4: the confused nature of the vegan message, and the incoherence of the vegan community. A boycott comprised of individuals who have no idea what they're boycotting, and who cannot or will not transform their boycott into a coherent and collective public demand, is not much of a boycott.

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<sup>32</sup> All on Fire, Mayer, p. xiv.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality. The relevant excerpt is here: [http://files.meetup.com/482977/Social\\_Sources\\_of\\_a\\_Mass\\_Movement.pdf](http://files.meetup.com/482977/Social_Sources_of_a_Mass_Movement.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> To see how the justice of a cause influences its growth and effectiveness, see renowned political philosopher Joshua Cohen's article, The Arc of the Moral Universe. [http://web.mit.edu/polisci/research/cohen/the\\_arc\\_of\\_the\\_moral\\_universe.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/polisci/research/cohen/the_arc_of_the_moral_universe.pdf)

Second and more importantly, refusing to condone animal exploitation in *ONLY* our diets, leaves plenty of room for acquiescence in our other social behaviors. For example, the statement we make by happily eating where animals lie mutilated and dead all around us is far more problematic, from an animal rights perspective, than consuming dairy or eggs in the privacy of our homes. Few will be convinced that each of the poor individuals lying on a dinner plate is a murder victim, when nominal animal rights advocates blithely laugh and dine while the victims' tortured bodies are being ripped to pieces. Consuming dairy privately at home, in contrast, has virtually no social effect; indeed, even if others are present, most people do not even connect dairy with the death of an animal. Yet veganism perversely condemns the latter act, and says nothing about the former.

In other activist contexts, we clearly recognize that rejecting exploitative products is not enough; we also reject exploitative practices, principles, and people. A women's rights activist would not be taken seriously, if she chatted pleasantly with her close friends while they raped and beat their wives. A gay rights activist could never maintain credibility, if she denied homophobia in the abstract, but refused to say a word for gay rights when those around her derided homosexuality as deviance or criminality. A civil rights activist would invariably fail to trigger a serious debate over racism, if she herself refused to confront those who tortured and killed blacks with anything more than friendly entreaties.

When we compare the animal rights movement to human rights activism, in short, we begin to see the innumerable ways that we are reinforcing the culture of species oppression in our everyday lives. Should we even be using language such as beef or pork, or should we be aghast at words that signify prejudice, torture, and murder? Should we have friends who support the slaughter of innocent individuals, or should we stand with the victims against those who are brutalizing them? Should we always be happy, patient, and understanding when we talk about the profound suffering of our animal brethren, or should we demand an immediate end to animal Holocaust and force a confrontation of beliefs?

The answers to these questions are not as obvious as many of us first take them to be. Regardless of what we conclude on the specifics, the general point is that it is not primarily our diets that have been warped by our speciesist culture, but our social and political beliefs. And instead of standing up for animals as consumers, we need to stand up for animals in the *totality* of our social and political lives.

In short, we need to stop treating animal rights like a personal preference, and more like a social and political movement. We need to recognize that every silent act of acquiescence, which we rationalize as a matter of "convenience", "decorum," or "bridge-building", is a betrayal of the individual animals whose brutally-tortured bodies are screaming out for us to stand up for them. And most importantly, we need to speak and act with the political urgency and rhetorical clarity that would be the natural result if *we* were the ones whose heads were on the chopping block.

Until we do so, *no one* -- not even other activists -- will take this cause seriously, and even self-proclaimed progressives will continue to respond to our message with laughter and ridicule.<sup>35</sup>

Gandhi challenged his fellow activists to give their lives and bodies to resist those who would harm innocents. We may not have Gandhi's courage, yet, to stand resolutely between an oppressor and his victim, to take the blade or bolt gun in place of our non-human friends. But courage comes in small steps -- and for the animals rights movement, the first step is to offer a few words on a poor lamb's behalf, when her tortured corpse is being torn to pieces right before us.

*For more on our social and political contributions to the infrastructure of animal abuse, see here:*

<http://files.meetup.com/482977/Social%20and%20Political%20Veganism%20Part%201.pdf>

<http://files.meetup.com/482977/Social%20and%20Political%20Veganism%20Part%201.pdf>

#### **Bite 6: Veganism as social justice has no evidence, and no theory.**

*I am aware that many object to the severity of my language; but is there not cause for severity? I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice.*

- William Lloyd Garrison, inaugural editorial of *The Liberator* (1831)

All of my previous claims would be irrelevant, however, if we could identify some factual or theoretical basis for veganism's central role in the animal rights movement. Can we?

As a factual matter, has there ever been a social justice movement that was preceded by a mass consumer movement? Did anti-slavery activists ask people to boycott cotton and tobacco, and hope that a vigorous anti-slavery movement would spring forward from "cotton-free consumerism"? Did civil rights activists create a parallel economy of "segregation-free alternatives", and expect that people's purchasing decisions would push them into the militancy of racial equality? Did gay rights activists focus their attention on promoting gay-friendly products, and expect that this would somehow lead to an end to homophobic institutions and ideas?

Or, in all of these cases, was consumer action a tertiary concern -- perhaps useful as part of a specific campaign, but never the centerpiece of movement strategy?

The closest historical parallel to the veganism, in previous social justice movements, is the failed "African colonization" program from the antislavery movement of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Colonizationists suggested that the problem with slavery was simply that pro-slavery individuals had no "good alternatives" to slavery. They thus refused to blame

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dn-wTQLniYg>

anyone for the brutality of slavery; it was described as an institutional, cultural, and systemic problem rather than an *individual* crime. Colonization of blacks to Africa, combined with their replacement with free labor, was thought to be a solution to the problem. By reducing the black population of America, providing a substitute for their labor, and showing whites that a slave-free society would not lead to chaos, colonizationists claimed that the "peculiar institution" would gradually disappear.

In fact, colonization is now rightly seen as a corrupt, racist, and morally bankrupt movement that was, if anything, a fundamental *obstacle* to true slave liberation.<sup>36</sup> By focusing attention on "alternatives", colonization simply distracted attention from the inherent wrongfulness of slavery. By decrying slavery only as an institutional problem, it succeeded in undermining any attempt to hold individuals accountable. And by unendingly reminding activists that slave liberation would only come "gradually," colonization deflated any attempt to build a more vigorous and principled movement. Indeed, until "immediatist" activists such as William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass explicitly set out to destroy the colonization movement, and attacked the colonizationist depopulation program as racist and futile, antislavery was constantly stuck in neutral, or worse.<sup>37</sup>

The parallels between colonization and veganism are striking. Veganism purports to be in favor of animal liberation. Veganism pushes for depopulation of the victims, as a solution to their slaughter and suffering. Veganism offers cruelty-free alternatives to those who wish to avoid "gratuitous" violence. Veganism speaks endlessly about the institutions and systems that brutalize animals, while ignoring the individuals who perpetuate those institutions and systems. Veganism constantly admonishes us to be friendly, patient, and understanding toward those who enslave and torture our animal friends, because liberation will come "gradually" and only when tyrants see the "convenience" of ending their oppression. And unsurprisingly, like colonization, veganism has failed.

Even if you find this particular historical analogy unconvincing, moreover, we have powerful factual evidence right before us with the case of India, where 70% of the world's vegetarians currently reside, and where you will find entire cities comprised of ethical vegetarians.<sup>38</sup> If animal rights can spring forward from a dietary movement and community, we would expect India to be at the forefront of animal rights. In fact, per capita meat consumption has been steadily increasing in India (~40% increase in the past 20 years), just as in the rest of the world.<sup>39</sup> And as Indians are exposed to different

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<sup>36</sup> See, for example, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality*, Goodman, UC Berkeley Press. [http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/frederick\\_douglass.html](http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/frederick_douglass.html)

<sup>37</sup> For a powerful indictment of colonization, see William Lloyd Garrison's *Thoughts on African Colonization*, available at: <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/abolitn/abeswlgbt.html>. On Frederick Douglass, see [http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/frederick\\_douglass.html](http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/frederick_douglass.html) and <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/abolitn/abar03at.html>.

<sup>38</sup>  
<sup>39</sup> [http://earthtrends.wri.org/searchable\\_db/index.php?theme=8&variable\\_ID=193&action=select\\_countries](http://earthtrends.wri.org/searchable_db/index.php?theme=8&variable_ID=193&action=select_countries)

cultures and dietary traditions, they are abandoning their vegetarian diets in favor of more "modern" lifestyles.<sup>40</sup>

Some may find these examples and anecdotes irrelevant. Empirical argument has less value, after all, when we are talking about a subject as complex as social change. And it might be the case that there are significant factual differences between the animal rights movement, and previous social justice movements, that justify the strategic significance of consumer action for animal liberation. Are there any theoretical reasons, then, for us to endorse veganism as a movement strategy?

One common distinction people draw is that the animal oppression is more pervasive than the oppression fought by previous activists, and that we thus need a vegan "stepping stone" for society to reach the animal rights platform. This is a curious claim, given that both slavery and segregation directly impacted a far greater portion of the economy than animal oppression, and had even greater significance to the social and political systems of their time.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, even if animal oppression *is* more pervasive, it is not as deeply rooted. That is, there are relatively few people whose livelihood and identity depend entirely on oppressing animals. And research in political science suggests that this should make the animal rights movement an *easier* movement than, for example, antislavery.<sup>42</sup> It is far more difficult to oppose a narrow and intense political interest than a diffused but weak one.

Another claim is that veganism is necessary because no one will join our movement, so long as their consumer behaviors are inconsistent with animal rights. The first thing to note about this claim is that humans are rarely, if ever, consistent and rational. Daniel Kahneman has won a Nobel Prize, for example, due to his work on exposing the pervasive contradictions and biases in human decision-making.<sup>43</sup> The second thing to say is that *veganism itself* is rife with contradictions. Recall, again, that animal exploitation saturates our entire economy. Farming plants, producing energy, and making vegan consumer products all involve massive violence against animals. Third and finally, even if the behaviors that we describe as veganism are necessary for effective activism, for consistency reasons, that in no way implies that we should strive for those behaviors as the central objective. Our ultimate goal should be to stand up for animals, not to reach the

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<sup>40</sup> Two of my classmates in graduate school, for example, were raised vegetarian in India, but quickly added flesh to their diets when coming to the West. When I tried to tell them about veganism and animal rights, neither seemed particularly interested. "It's a different culture here," one said. "I just found out that I like eating meat," said the other. Neither of these individuals was stupid. To the contrary, both were brilliant, progressive, and open-minded. They knew exactly how animals were produced in the United States. Their childhood diet was simply not a sufficient reason to embrace animal rights. And when it became inconvenient to maintain that diet, they abandoned it, not out of active malice for animals, but simply because they were more focused on their own lives than some radical social cause.

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of the economics of slavery by a Nobel Prize winning economist, see Time on the Cross, Robert Fogel. Fogel demonstrates that, far from being backwards, slavery was a very advanced and productive economic system that provided massive benefits to both the South and the North. It was also a growing system.

<sup>42</sup> On collective action, see here: [http://economics.about.com/cs/macroeconomics/a/logic\\_of\\_action.htm](http://economics.about.com/cs/macroeconomics/a/logic_of_action.htm).

<sup>43</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel\\_Kahneman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Kahneman)

necessary behavioral conditions for standing up for animals. A movement that focuses purely on "preconditions" will never reach its end goal.

We could go on endlessly here, in examining rationalizations for the vegan movement. But the key point is that a proponent of veganism must have *some* understanding of how consumer action can lead us to animal liberation. When one canvases the literature on social movements -- from the materialist accounts of relative deprivation<sup>44</sup>, to the constructivist identity politics of new social movement theory<sup>45</sup> -- it is incredibly difficult to find any conceptual framework that would fit a strategy of vegan consumerism into its mechanics. To the contrary, despite their many differences, existing theories of social movement almost invariably include a number of common elements:

- A vision of the world clearly different from the one that currently exists
- Initial stages of community building and socialization behind that vision
- Increased feelings of grievance, and subsequent radicalization, within the movement's community
- Direct and polarizing confrontation with the mainstream opponents of collective vision
- Ideological cascade that leads to reversal of previous moral and legal norms

Veganism, far from fitting into any of these elements, actively *undermines* them. In contrast, when you read about gay rights<sup>46</sup>, women's suffrage<sup>47</sup>, antislavery<sup>48</sup>, or civil rights<sup>49</sup>, we see individuals standing firmly apart from the exploitative mainstream, and becoming increasingly vocal and uncompromising in their rejection of injustice and oppression. This, and not the "bridge-building", "compassion", or "understanding" of vegan advocacy, is the stuff on which social movements are made.

## Dessert and Coffee

*The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.*

- Martin Luther King, Jr., Tenth Anniversary SCLC Convention, 1967

It's about time to finish our meal. To sum up, veganism, far from helping animals, is a huge problem for the animal rights movement. If we want to stand up for animals, then we should stop calling ourselves vegan; stop asking others to go vegan; and even stop using the word vegan. When asked, we should state that our fight is for equality, justice, and freedom -- not for a plant-based diet.

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1982.tb02218.x?journalCode=tsq>

<sup>45</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_social\\_movements](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_social_movements)

<sup>46</sup> <http://files.meetup.com/160880/Gay%20rights%20movement%20--%20Politics%20of%20Gay%20Rights.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/time100/heroes/profile/pankhurst01.html>

<sup>48</sup> [http://files.meetup.com/160880/Antislavery\\_Appeal.pdf](http://files.meetup.com/160880/Antislavery_Appeal.pdf)

<sup>49</sup> <http://files.meetup.com/160880/Lessons%20from%20the%20civil%20rights%20movement.pdf> (read the sections on civil rights; skip the rest)

Much of what is written here is challenging. And much of it, you will probably reject, if you are the typical animal rights advocate. My hope, however, is that even if you find these ideas strident and abrasive, you will seek to learn more -- to test your intuitions against factual and conceptual scrutiny.

And if you do so, I would encourage you to forget everything you know about the animal rights movement, and learn instead from the example of more successful movements. The campaign for animal liberation is on life support. The number of animal activists is not growing; per capita meat consumption increases every year; new and grotesque ways of abusing animals are discovered with no concern for the animals; and the most prominent "animal rights" organizations (such as PETA) are unapologetic supporters of the slaughter of innocent animals.<sup>50</sup> These are not the signs of a flourishing movement. And if you take nothing from this article, at least use it as a trigger for further research into *successful* social justice movements. The life of even one innocent animal would justify far more than that.

When you do examine the history and logic of successful social movements more carefully, however... when you read about the immediatist shift in the antislavery movement in the 1830s, catalyzed by Garrison's bold condemnation of slavery in 1831; the radicalism of civil rights activists, triggered by the act of one brave lady in 1955; the militancy of gay rights activists of the early 1970s, inspired by the Stonewall Riots in 1969, a common vision will appear from the intellectual fog -- a vision of justice and confrontation, not one of compassion and consumerism.

We need to build a community and movement that can take on the mantle of these brave activists from history and pursue a vision of social justice. I'm confident you'll agree, if you look more carefully at the progress they achieved, and compare it to the relative futility of the modern animal rights movement. And when you do, I'm just as confident that you will, like me, boycott veganism.

*What should our movement look like, if it's not focused on veganism? See the article, "Why we protest" in the files section of the Coalition for Animal Rights page: [www.tinyurl.com/chicagocoalition](http://www.tinyurl.com/chicagocoalition).*

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<sup>50</sup> <http://www.nokillnow.com/PETAIngridNewkirkResign.htm>