



## Mainstream Veganism. An Obstacle to Animal and Social Rights Movements



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## Abstract

This article argues that the form of veganism, referred as mainstream veganism in this article, that is advertised today and that is popular among vegans, has very little implications in nonhuman animal rights activism. Moreover, not only does it not concern itself with nonhuman animal welfare, it also produces a negative effect on the efforts of nonhuman animal activists. The vegan food industry, as part of the capitalist market, lacks nonhuman animal rights expertise and is corrupted by sales-obsessed enterprises. In their attempt to maximize profits, they turn to sexist and fatphobic marketing strategies which with the help of media influence translate and shape the views of the vegan communities. The main target group of mainstream veganism is high-class Westerners, which limits the size of the vegan communities while financially restricting the lower classes to participate in nonhuman animal rights activism.



### Keywords

*Mainstream veganism, animal rights, sexism, fatphobia, classism, capitalism*

## 1. Veganism

According to the Oxford dictionary, veganism is described as “the practice of eating only food not derived from animals and typically of avoiding the use of other animal products.” Although the practice of meat abstinence can be traced back to Ancient Indian and Mediterranean societies, the term “veganism” was officially introduced in 1944 by Elsie Shrigley and Donald Watson in the UK. They coined the term as a stricter form of vegetarianism, a diet that prohibited nonhuman meat while still including other nonhuman animal products like dairy and eggs. Shrigley and Watson popularized the term by promoting veganism as a solution to the rise in tuberculosis that has been commonly found in Britain’s cows. It is also important to mention that despite vegetarianism which was at the time present mainly as a dietary choice strongly motivated with concerns to human health, Shrigley and Watson also considered the concern for nonhuman animal welfare in their introduction of veganism in the British society. Together with five other people, they formed the Vegan Society that by 2005 had 250,000 subscribers in the UK, and two million in the U.S. (Suddath 2008). Today, these numbers are even larger and the number of people who have begun identifying themselves as vegans has been increasing sharply on the global level.

Although this might sound like positive information for any nonhuman animal rights activist, it is questionable whether this rise in veganism actually helps in the fight against nonhuman animal suffering and exploitation, and whether this philosophy is just a passing trend popularized by efficient marketing strategies of the vegan product industry. In this essay, I will try to defend my argument that the currently rising vegan community does not bring much benefit to the nonhuman animal rights movement, but on the contrary that it has been mainstreamed and capitalized, and as a profit-motivated industry it hurts the social justice advocacy with evident sexism, fatphobia and classism.

## 2. Mainstream veganism

Until recently veganism has held a negative image in the public. There was a large amount of discrimination and resistance directed towards vegans. On the systematic and individual level, vegans, which represented a small number of consumers, were ridiculed and represented as hostile extremists. On top of that, the vegan diet was constantly under attack by critics who argued that a solely plant-based diet was not only unhealthy but also unnatural for humans, and that it should be practiced only with extra caution. Such views were significantly pushed by animal product industry lobby groups which carry large power since a lot of politicians are farmers themselves who protect their own self-interest (Deckers 2016, 107).

Today, however, the view on veganism has taken a swift shift. Veganism has become a mainstream dietary movement in the Western culture. In the UK specifically, meat consumption has declined by 20% in the last decade (Webster 2021). Supermarket shelves are now lined with vegan products, replacing even cheese and milk with their vegan counterparts, while new trendy vegan

restaurants are replacing old hamburger joints on every corner. However, this is not a result of a long-term battle made by nonhuman animal rights activists against the oppressing food systems, but a successful marketing campaign by new emerging “sustainable businesses” that took an opportunity to profit from the nonhuman animal liberation movement by making veganism the new synonym for health. Instead of transforming people’s lifestyle and attitudes to become more animal-friendly, veganism has only emerged as a new capitalist machine centered around making sales.

The new trend did not only fail to change the food industry that lives off of non-human animal struggle, but it has managed to make the same meat companies even more successful. For instance, many companies like the giants JBS or Nestle that primarily produce and sell animal-based products have added new vegan products in their range (Gandhi 2019). Even Mc’Donalds has introduced vegan burgers, so when their vegan customer makes a purchase, although they did not break their vegan diet, they still supported the company indirectly by contributing to the McDonald’s profits. Thus, no animal-intensive industry has lost any customers, but has actually gained new ones through the opportunities made by the vegan trend. Additionally, many companies that built their business on veganism were later bought by bigger corporations, such as the vegan cheese company Daia that was bought by a pharmaceutical industry that was accused of practicing animal testing (Gandhi 2019). This shows that these popular vegan companies do not care about nonhuman animal rights and ending their suffering but only care about profits and getting consumers to spend more.

Media has a big part in transforming veganism from its infamous ridiculed reputation to a mainstream hippie trend. Today we can see celebrities all around the world using their media platforms to speak up about their vegan lifestyles and all the benefits that come with it. Still, none of these public influencers commonly mention nonhuman animal abuse, but talk about veganism as a strategy that can make your body lean or make your skin glow. To add to that, many vegan magazines or online blogs put their attention on food recipes, clothing or cosmetics without any mention of the real issues facing nonhuman animals such as their exploitation in the industry of consumer goods, political corruption and lobbying, speciesism in practice and in speech, etc. (Gandhi 2019). Consequently, veganism seems to be present in the form of a currently popular trend of the hippy elite, just like the fringes were in the 80s, whose demand is destined to decline when replaced by something newer and more captivating.

Additionally, this mainstream veganism populated by the media has transformed veganism into an exclusive movement that does not provide a safe space for all, and that has been accused of being hostile to some social groups, especially women and fat people. Fat shaming has become a common practice in the vegan community in its attempt to protect the image of veganism as a healthy and good lifestyle while also promoting it as a tool to lose fat and promise a handsome body to attract the attention of the non-vegan community. Veganism suffers from a history of bad reputation, where it was constantly

stigmatized as an unhealthy practice that deprives humans of necessary nutrients present in animal products. To break away from this stigma, the vegan movement has put heavy focus on re-branding the vegan lifestyle as healthy and the diet as “light” while shading the animal-based diet as heavy and fattening (Wrenn 2016, 2). Since the main marketing focus of veganism shifted to its representation as a healthy diet to achieve and maintain the perfect body, the campaigns are commonly criticized for fat-shaming and fatphobia that often excludes fat vegans out of the movement- a discriminatory trend called vegan sizeism (Wrenn 2016, 2). This process of presenting veganism as a healthy diet option has been exploited by the capitalist market for weight-loss products. In such an environment, veganism stops being a movement aiming at reducing nonhuman animal suffering and transforms into a money-making industry that feeds off of people’s insecurities about physical appearance.

Many organizations in the newly formed vegan market also use the oldest marketing trick in the book to reach and influence a large number of people—the “sex sells” strategy. Female bodies have historically been sexualized in advertising campaigns as nude female bodies attract social attention and create emotions of lust and desire in the patriarchal society, which are the exact emotions that a marketer wants to spark in a consumer (Boddewyn and Loubradou 2011). The veganism movement is no stranger to the use of female bodies in their ads, which mainly follow the typical Western ideal of a healthy and attractive female- young, slim, and white. These ads not only support the unrealistic beauty standards that are inherently fatphobic and racist, but also create a climate in which women are seen as objects and indirectly promote violence and devaluation of women. A perfect example of such a vegan marketing campaign is the PETA’s “I’d rather go naked than wear fur” which encouraged many women, most of whom are celebrities with large influential powers like Oprah Winfrey or the Kardashian sisters, to share pictures of their naked bodies under the PETA’s slogan. Even though this campaign was recently canceled, PETA, as one of the most famous animal rights advocates, continues to use highly sexualized messages to push the vegan agenda. This raises a question of whether the vegan cause ceases to be ethical when employing unethical means to reach their goals that hurt other marginalized social groups, and if many of the “non-profit” vegan organizations like PETA actually care about social change or if their focus stays on capital and fundraising.

Except for the apparent fatphobia and sexism found in the communications of the mainstream vegan movement, there is also a problem of the transfer of blame away from the powerful animal product industries that are directly responsible for the nonhuman animal suffering towards the powerless consumer groups. Laying all the blame on the consumers and portraying all the non-vegans as villains is insensitive to the different socio-economic situations that dictate the individual’s ability to start a vegan diet. There is a negative connection between the current mainstream veganism and classism, where the vegan community completely excludes and even shames the less advantaged classes. It is important to highlight that not only dietary veganism itself seems like a privilege, but the general ability to choose your own food. Thus, veganism today

encourages the sense of superiority of the privileged over the less affluent who buy food based on financial restrictions and not choice. This privilege seems reserved to the wealthier countries of the West, like the UK or Australia which are one of the countries with the largest vegan communities. In supermarkets vegan options and alternatives are priced higher than their animal counterparts. That is not to say that there is absolutely no affordable vegan food. For example, a simple meal containing rice, beans and potatoes is affordable. Additionally, although conventional grown fruit is expensive there are a lot of frozen fruits and other frozen food items that are vegan and cheap. Still, although these food items are cheap, they are not nearly as healthy, varied and interesting as the more expensive and exotic vegan food items and ingredients that are reserved for the wealthy. Thus, dietary veganism puts shame on people who consume animal products but at the same time unfairly restricts anyone who is not financially successful to a life of frozen bland food with relatively no nutrients. That being said, the vegan community and organizations should develop a higher understanding of the collective cost of the capitalist industrial system that parallelly exploits both humans and nonhuman animals, and start creating stronger pressure on the markets to make vegan food more affordable and accessible to all.

### **3. From mainstream veganism to social and animal rights**

The current growth in the veganism trend seems like a good sign for animal activism in the short-term, but it is relatively insignificant in the long-term. This is because people's intentions behind following a vegan diet are not in line with the principles of animal rights activists. As I have previously mentioned, people chose to follow a vegan diet because of their own self-interest and health benefits, and not because they are dedicated to ending non-human animal suffering. Thus, people's principles and moral ideology around nonhuman animals did not change with their change in diet. In other terms, this can be explained with the difference between dietary veganism and ethical veganism.

Ethical veganism is a philosophical view, considered as a religion under the U.S. law, that distinguishes itself from dietary veganism by avoiding contact with products derived from any form of animal exploitation (Johnson 2015, 31). It includes not wearing clothing made of wool or leather and not using products tested on animals. Thus, someone who identifies as an ethical vegan does not only follow a plant-based diet but extends their philosophy into other areas of their lives, opposes the use of animals for any purpose, and tries to avoid any cruelty and exploitation of all animals including humans. Considering this, a person who accepts ethical veganism changes not only their overall moral perception of nonhuman animal suffering and exploitation for human use, but I would argue that ethical vegans also change their perception of nonhuman animals themselves as autonomous individuals who deserve the same rights and treatments just like any other human. In the case of ethical veganism, it is very unlikely that a person would restrain from veganism after some time period when the trend dies out or alternative diets become more popular as it would be the case with dietary vegans.



In conclusion, even though the number of people who have identified as members of the vegan community has increased, the benefits this has on nonhuman animal welfare is doubtful. The vegan movement has been exploited by the capitalist markets that took advantage of the opportunity to earn profits from the insurgency of animal rights activist groups. Their objective does not follow those of nonhuman animal activists that fight for the termination of nonhuman animal exploitation, but centers around the consumerist goal of getting people to buy the products no matter what the reasoning behind it is or how that impacts nonhuman animals.

The vegan goods industry pushes the narrative of veganism as a healthy lifestyle for humans, using highly sexist and fatphobic communications, that takes away the spotlight from the real fighting ground of activists. Since the main reason people are starting to favor vegan products over non-vegan is their own health, the vegan movement has transformed from an advocacy for nonhuman animal liberation to an anthropocentric practice humans employ for their own self-interest. Presented and known mostly as a dietary choice, the current mainstream veganism fails to change the moral perceptions of humans about nonhuman animals and, the popularity of veganism is destined to fall again. Many people lack any knowledge about the importance and impacts of veganism beyond human health. For instance, a study conducted in 2004 in South Australia showed that out of 250 questionnaire participants, 70% of them are aware of the health benefits of vegan diet and agree that veganism can prevent future diseases, but only 35% agreed that veganism can help the overall natural environment (Deckers 2016, 108).

Even though educating people about the health benefits of veganism did succeed in getting a lot of people to become vegan, this strategy is still inefficient because, as a famous phrase “old habits die hard” states, many people are reluctant to make a behavioral change even when they are aware of the negative consequences (Deckers 2016, 109). One perfect example of this is the growing smoking population despite the well-known health risks. This brings me to my argument of the greater effort by the nonhuman animal rights activists to raise awareness about the overall importance of veganism, beyond the apparent health benefits and the moral responsibility of every human individual to transform the current food industry and other sectors that exploit animals for the production of goods and profitization. Nonhuman animals have the same ability as humans to feel emotions including fear, frustration, pain and suffering. Thus, it is necessary to break down the hierarchical dichotomy between humans and nonhuman animals, and only in this system of equality where nonhumans are seen as sentient and intelligent individuals is a chance of complete animal liberation.



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