



## 'Vegan': Recent word, ancient ideas

**Matthew Ruby and Tani Khara on the power and status of plant-based diets in different cultural contexts.**

Despite lots of historically negative media coverage, interest in veganism appears to be growing at a rapid pace. The number of people in the UK who identify as vegan quadrupled between 2014 and 2018, and across the pond in the USA, the number of self-identified vegans increased 600 per cent between 2013 and 2017. On a global level, Google Trends data show a steady rise in relative frequency of 'vegan' search queries since 2012. From Pret a Manger to Wagamama and even Burger King and McDonalds, major chains have rapidly expanded their vegan options, and high profile films like *The Game Changers* are credited with motivating many people to give plant-based diets a go.

But what is veganism, exactly? In 1944, a group of people in the UK proposed the word 'vegan' to describe a diet that excluded meat, fish, dairy and eggs. In 1988, the UK Vegan Society further defined veganism as 'a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose'.

### Traditional plant-based diets

Although the word veganism might be relatively new, the ideas behind it are not. Many Eastern philosophies have traditionally favoured plant-based diets. Hinduism has several teachings that advocate 'ahimsa' or non-violence towards all living beings, as it is believed that all beings share the same life force and should therefore be shown regard. Taoism and some Buddhist traditions advocate not harming sentient life forms, promoting a vegetarian diet as beneficial for one's physical and spiritual well-being. Similarly, the concept of 'Ren', which is core to Confucianism, emphasises benevolence and highlights that it should be extended to humans and non-humans alike.

Similarly, many traditional cuisines are largely plant-based. For example, numerous traditional Mesoamerican cuisines heavily feature plants like corn, beans, squash, amaranth, and quinoa. In Japan, shōjin ryōri (traditional vegetarian Buddhist cuisine) makes liberal use of rice, vegetables, seeds, and beans, and the traditional diets of many Mediterranean cultures are built around plant-based foods (albeit usually including moderate amounts of dairy, poultry and fish).

According to the traditional teachings of many Eastern faiths, having certain types of foods and abstaining from others represents the broader practices of spirituality and detachment from materiality. For example, the Hare Krishna and Buddhist faiths – which traditionally advocate plant-based eating – highlight the triadic relationship between health, spirituality, and food. Other faiths, such as Sikhism, similarly associate physical health with having a 'clean soul' (i.e., one that is free from sickness or disease). Dis-ease – or the feeling of unease – is believed to originate within the mind. To this point, the principles of Ayurveda, a 5000 year old system of Indian medicine, highlight that the 'process of life is in constant state of flux and not in static condition and... a continual adjustment with the environment is necessary for health and well-being'. Therefore, to maintain balance between the body and environment, the Ayurvedic diet calls for a clean, wholefoods plant-based diet. Similarly, many adherents of Rastafarianism, a religion that originated in Jamaica in the 1930s, follow a primarily wholefoods vegan diet known as 'ital', in order to promote both physical health and spiritual connection to the earth.

The simple, traditional plant-based foods eaten in these diets stand in stark contrast to the new plant-based analogues of popular animal-derived foods, like the Rebel Whopper, JUST Egg, and the ever-increasing array of vegan cheeses. 'Dirty Veganism' features indulgent foods such as no-meat nuggets, fishless fingers, and other 'crumbed and coated' products. The food industry has been quick to capitalise on veganism, with the global market for vegan cheese alone estimated to be worth just under \$4 billion by 2024.

### The power dynamics of (not) eating animals

In many societies around the world, eating meat has long been linked to status, power, and masculinity. Throughout much of European history, meat has been regularly consumed by the well-to-do (especially men), but an occasional treat for the working class. Such views remain relatively common, as meat is still viewed as a marker of status among individuals of low socio-economic status. Meat sits at the top of the food hierarchy, representing social status, affluence, and wealth.

In India, however, the power dynamics of meat consumption have a very different history. The caste system, which has been a key part of the Hindu tradition in India, used traditional religious teachings to make social distinctions on the basis of people's diets. Vegetarian foods were deemed 'purer' than non-vegetarian foods and were associated with high social status, compared to meat-eating, which was linked with low social status and a certain baseness. Although meat in Western cultures tends to have been linked to strength, in India physical power and strength were associated with manual, low-status occupations, and the culture has historically valued the 'cerebral over things material' and physical.

On the other hand, urban Indian culture today is witnessing a gradual change where boundaries among the different castes have become less rigid, with food being an obvious example. Non-vegetarian food today now tends to be associated with high class status, in contrast to the idea that vegetarianism signals a high caste status. Meat is increasingly viewed as a status symbol, as high-end restaurants offer imported meats to cater to India's higher income groups. In comparison, traditional vegetarian fare is considered by some as 'utilitarian' at best.

Given the often appalling treatment of animals on factory farms, many vegans today view their lifestyles as a rejection of interconnected mainstream ideologies that promote abuse and suffering. These ideologies include objectification, whereby sentient beings are reduced to

mainstream ideologies that promote abuse and suffering. These ideologies include objectification, whereby certain beings are reduced to inanimate objects; speciesism, which involves treating members of one species as morally more important than members of other species; and carnism, where certain species (such as dogs and cats) are deemed morally relevant whereas the welfare of others (such as many farmed animal species) is disregarded.

Proponents of plant-based diets also tend to hold biospheric world views, which take into consideration the needs of the wider ecosystem in addition to one's own needs, reflecting ancient teachings which emphasise regard and respect for humans' symbiotic relationship with nature. In his book *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer highlights that with a plant-based diet, 'food takes on a different quality. We take from the earth food that is ready for us and does not fight against us as we take it.' This, to some extent, reflects concepts of the ancient Indian Vedic diet where 'sattvic' plant-based foods were linked to lightness and purity as opposed to meat-based 'tamasic' foods, which symbolised violence and decay.

#### Challenges with veganism today

Veganism is currently encountering its own challenges relating to perceptions of elitism, exclusion, power, and status. A common critique of vegan diets is that they are meant for the privileged, and are too expensive for the average person in comparison to their animal-derived counterparts. Another common criticism of veganism is that while mock meats and dairy substitutes can often be convenient and tasty alternatives for people who are transitioning to a plant-based diet, many of these are classified as junk food, given their degree of processing and the additives, preservatives, and salt they contain. For these reasons, some proponents advocate a wholefoods plant-based diet as the ideal version of veganism, and a number of chefs are promoting traditional and budget-friendly vegan cuisine. Furthermore, the most common meat 'alternatives' have been around for centuries, and are only moderately processed – e.g., seitan is basically wheat gluten and water, tofu is coagulated soy milk, and tempeh is ground and fermented soy beans.

Media depictions of veganism are frequently criticised for a disproportionate focus on white vegans, which both erases the work of vegans of colour and contributes to the perception that veganism is only for white people. In fact, previous literature has claimed that mainstream discourses of veganism tend to depict 'white gentrification', which in turn alienates people of colour and also those from different socio-economic backgrounds. African-American critical race feminist Amie 'Breeze' Harper similarly provides a critique of how many best-selling vegan books today, aimed at promoting health and wellness, automatically assume their readers are "white middle-class females living in locations where a whole-foods vegan diet is easily accessible". In this regard, such perspectives are limited as they tend to overlook the full vegan praxis.

In view of this, alternative representations of veganism are increasingly finding a voice in the mainstream discourse. For example, the online community 'Black Vegans Rock', founded by Aph Ko, highlights the unique stories and experiences of black vegans. The book 'Sistah Vegan' similarly highlights a more diverse vegan identity, covering narratives and reflections from black female vegans. By challenging stereotypes, vegans of colour have sought to decentre whiteness and demonstrate that anyone can be vegan. Recent research highlights that some strategies for decentering whiteness can include promoting culturally appropriate vegan foods as well as educating the public about accessibility and affordability in relation to a vegan diet.

#### What's next?

The reasons for adopting plant-based diets are vast and varied. Some of the most common motivations are health-related concerns, objections to animal cruelty, disgust with eating flesh, rejecting meat's association with patriarchal ideology, and concern about the environmental impact of meat production. At its core, however, veganism is a lifestyle of compassion that seeks 'to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals'. A rejection of cruelty to animals also means moving past hierarchical worldviews that create division among both humans and non-human beings. In summary, to quote Albert Einstein, 'Our task must be to free ourselves... by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty'.

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#### BOX: A bit of history around milk in China and cows in India...

According to traditional Chinese dietary practices, milk was considered the food of barbarian invaders, and was often shunned and considered 'disgusting'. Today, however, given China's recent rapid rise in the global economy, milk represents a means through which China competes with historically powerful nations who have long dairying histories. In 2006, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao was quoted as saying, 'I have a dream to provide every Chinese, especially children, sufficient milk each day'. In addition, patriotic slogans such as 'One cup of milk can strengthen a nation' indicate that milk is symbolic of China's desire to be noticed on the global stage. An example of this includes China's National Basketball Association (NBA) player Yao Ming who, in 2003, was featured as the 'Got Milk? Rookie of the Month'. Following on from this, China's Mengnui Dairy announced a promotional partnership with the NBA, acquiring rights to promote their dairy products in association with the NBA's activities in China as well as in other countries. Milk, therefore, is viewed as a 'special' food in China that symbolises both national and individual power.

In India, religious texts dating as far back as 1000 BC highlighted an antipathy towards the killing and consumption of cows. Economic factors were the main reason behind this as cows provided labour, fuel and food. Given the cow's practical utility within human society, ancient Vedic literature emphasised respect and reverence towards cows. Today, cows continue to be symbolic of 'the earth' and the 'mother figure' as their milk is associated with life-giving properties and nurturance. Milk is also often used in Hindu prayer rituals as it symbolises purity.

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