

## **Ethical veganism and the challenge of interlocking oppressions: how do we create Vegatopia? (SLIDE 1)**

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### **Abstract**

Vegetarianism and veganism have crucial roles to play in creating a vision of a future free of violence and exploitation. When we assert the viability of a plant-based alternative to the dominance of animal-based diets, we refuse to accept that human society must always depend on the shameful exploitation of other sentient beings. In contrast, when we deceive ourselves and others about the abuses of nonhumans that are inherent in animal farming, we are complicit in fostering a culture that resigns itself to suffering, pain and death. However, the vegetarian and vegan movements are always at risk of being dismissed as being a ‘single issue’, or worse, of being elitist and insensitive to the complex forms of oppression and exploitation that exist between human beings. We as vegetarians and vegans therefore need to take responsibility for activism, advocacy and policy that simultaneously tackles problems of human poverty, sexism, and racism. If we can develop theory and practice that challenge the systemic forms of oppression capturing humans and nonhumans alike, then we as veg\*ans<sup>1</sup> can play a vital role in constructing a compassionate and just future for all.

### **Introduction**

As we are hearing this week from so many inspirational and informative speakers, there are many compelling reasons for veg\*anism: to end the appalling suffering of billions of animals killed for human food; to reverse the devastation of the earth as a result of animal farming; to avoid the personal and societal costs to human health of depending on such a violent and cruel diet. None of us here need much, if any, more convincing about any of these issues. Why is it then, that 64 years after the founding of The Vegan Society, 100 years after the founding of the IVU, and after hundreds of years of sensitive, thinking people compassionately and eloquently questioning the morality of killing and eating other animals, we still seem so far away from inhabiting a vegan world? [SLIDE 2] Our collective hopes for a veg\*an future, for peace and an end to exploitation and human-inflicted suffering, are radical challenges to the prevailing order of things – in short they are utopian. We are drawing here on Karl Mannheim’s sense of utopia as being concerned with bursting the bonds of the prevailing social order<sup>2</sup>. How, then, can we realise the transformative potential of veg\*anism, how can we create Vegatopia?

### **SLIDE 3**

In this paper we want to provide some sociological answers to this question; what are the cultural meanings of veg\*anism and meat and dairy-eating? Understanding these meanings helps us grasp what we are up against as a veg\*an movement, what it is that we as veg\*ans are opposing. It is obvious that it is not just a matter of argument and persuasion – all of the arguments are on our side. As a friend of mine says when asked why she is vegan: “there’s just no reason not to be”. For many of us here, living as a

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<sup>1</sup> We use the terms ‘veg\*an’ and ‘veg\*anism’ to collectively represent both vegans and vegetarians, and veganism and vegetarianism respectively.

<sup>2</sup> Mannheim, Karl (1936) *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, San Diego, USA: Harcourt, Inc.

vegan is taken for granted, obvious, easy and pleasurable. On a day to day basis, there really is nothing special about it. As Donald Watson, founder of The Vegan Society, said in 1944, “We can hardly wish to be classed as moral giants because we choose to live a life on a diet so obviously favouring self preservation”<sup>3</sup>.

#### **SLIDE 4**

For most people though, living as a vegan apparently seems unimaginable, impossible, a way of condemning oneself to a life of isolated misery. We are all familiar with the stereotypes of vegans as weak, pasty-faced, humourless and self-righteous. George Monbiot<sup>4</sup>, writing in *The Guardian* recently, said ‘I know a few healthy-looking vegans and I admire them immensely. But .... I cannot help noticing that in most cases their skin has turned a fascinating pearl grey’.<sup>5</sup> For most of us, images that statements like this conjure up are irritating and frustrating, but there is something much more serious going on here than a bad joke.

What is really behind these kinds of stereotype? The opponents of veg\*anism accuse us of adopting a pose of moral purity. On the one hand, we are allegedly engaged in a ‘war against pleasure’, through promulgating a myth of veg\*anism as a kind of asceticism. This is the view that to live as a vegan is to deny oneself one of the greatest, and simplest pleasures of life, to eat ‘good food’, for the reward of a self-righteous moral stance. At the same time, we are ridiculed for diverting attention from supposedly more serious issues when we raise awareness of the suffering of animals. We are probably all familiar with people arguing that they have no time to care about animals when there are enough people already suffering in the world. We are therefore accused of misanthropy, of not caring about the sufferings of human beings amidst our preoccupation with nonhumans.

In our view, both of these myths are wrong, or at least, we ought to work hard to ensure that they *are* wrong, by not replicating damaging stereotypes in our veg\*an activism. We will now look in detail at these two myths:

#### **SLIDE 5**

##### **Vegan Asceticism (the supposed war against pleasure)**

For us, veganism means:

...the dietary practice of choosing a diet composed of plant foods (supplemented with other non-animal foods such as fungi and minerals). Ethical veganism refers to the practice of minimizing, as far as possible, the harm caused to all animals (nonhuman and human). This involves choosing to eat a vegan diet; choosing products that do not depend on violence against, or the exploitation of, animals; campaigning against unnecessary human activities that harm nonhuman and human animals.<sup>6</sup>

In this definition, we were concerned to assert veganism as a positive choice, to emphasise what we *do* eat, not what we ‘give up’, what vegans *do* rather than what vegans *avoid*. This was a conscious strategy to try to move away from more defensive representations of veganism that play to mainstream stereotypes.

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<sup>3</sup> Watson, Donald *The Vegan News*, Nov 1944, No.1, p.3

<sup>4</sup> George Monbiot is a prominent, meat-eating, environmental campaigner in the UK.

<sup>5</sup> Monbiot, George (2008) ‘The Pleasures of the Flesh’. *The Guardian* 15<sup>th</sup> April 2008

<sup>6</sup> This definition is taken from our website: <http://www.vegatopia.org/about.html#definitions>

## SLIDE 6

To investigate the extent of those negative images of veganism, we carried out a study of UK national newspaper reporting about vegans and veganism<sup>7</sup>. We found that only 6% of stories were positive – the vast majority attacked vegans and the idea of veganism. Here are just a few examples:

‘strict vegan’; ‘staunch vegan’; ‘perplexingly serious and vegan’; ‘a punishing vegan diet’; ‘strict vegan regime’; ‘self discipline[d] ... vegan’; ‘firmly vegan’; ‘committed vegan’; ‘militant vegan’; ‘ardent vegan’; ‘fervent vegan’; ‘vegan terrorists’; ‘outspoken vegan’; ‘...those with unhealthy or restricted diets, such as vegans’; ‘I had no alternative but to go vegan. It was the biggest sacrifice of all’; ‘If you thought eating out was bad, wait till you get a vegetarian round to meet the family’.

The type of adjectives chosen in these stories work together to perpetuate a myth of vegans as outsiders, as ‘others’. There is something strange and maybe even dangerous, about vegans from this viewpoint. This image helps to reassure the dominant culture that eating animals is normal, reasonable, pleasurable, and not something to be questioned – those who do question it are, to put it bluntly, treated as freaks. Even the minority of stories that gave a positive view, never went to the extent of explaining the reasons for veganism, instead the motivation for veganism is typically dismissed as a mild psychological disorder, a dedication to a dietary fashion, or a fear of the pleasures of the flesh.

## SLIDE 7

Consider this image of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall’s<sup>8</sup> book cover: *Hugh Fearlessly Eats it All* and quote from a review of the book: “Hugh [Fearnley-Whittingstall] is an omnivore and his sweet reasonableness in urging a diet of meat, fruit and two veg may convince some wavering vegans that all flesh is not sinful”<sup>9</sup>

This example nicely illustrates the denial of a compassionate motivation for veganism. According to Amato & Partridge’s 1989 study, compassion for the suffering of nonhuman animals is the primary motivation for 67% of veg\*ans<sup>10</sup>. Instead of confronting this, the book review portrays vegans as being in some way ‘afraid’ of meat as a polluting substance to our delicate dispositions. The idea of the ‘wavering’ vegan also suggests that vegans are vulnerable to the temptations of animal flesh, again reinforcing a discourse of asceticism, and by implication the normality of eating animals. The idea that vegans regard flesh as ‘sinful’ is ludicrous: it obscures the vegan argument that the killing of animals for human food is an immoral act of violence – flesh itself is simply part of the corpse of an animal, and is therefore an object (that is,

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7 Cole, Matthew & Morgan, Karen (2008) ‘The language of diet and the suffering of nonhuman animals: Promoting veganism through countering a discourse of asceticism.’ Presented at the BSA (British Sociological Association) conference “Social Worlds, Natural Worlds” at the University of Warwick, UK, 29th March 2008. Abstract available at:

[http://www.vegatopia.org/resources.html#Conference\\_and\\_Seminar\\_papers](http://www.vegatopia.org/resources.html#Conference_and_Seminar_papers)

<sup>8</sup> Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall is a celebrity chef, television presenter, and more recently campaigner on improving farmed animal welfare in the UK.

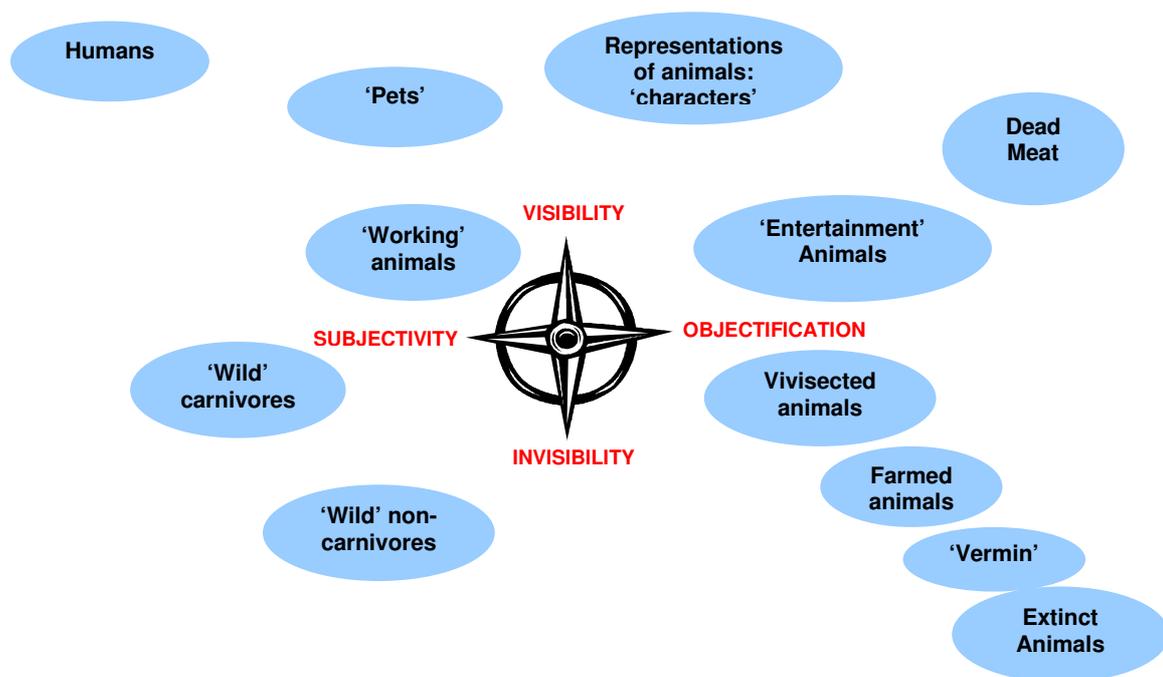
<sup>9</sup>Jaime, Tom (2007) ‘Common or garden: Tom Jaime, Ian Pindar and John Dugdale on Strange Blooms | Hugh Fearlessly Eats It All | King, Kaiser, Tsar | The Last Days of the Renaissance and the March to Modernity | The Man Who Knew Too Much’, *The Guardian* 30<sup>th</sup> June 2007.

<sup>10</sup>Amato, Paul R. & Partridge, Sonia, A. (1989) *The New Vegetarians: Promoting Health and Protecting Life*, New York, USA: Plenum Press, p.34

the animal-subject is made into an object through an act of violence and dismemberment). It is nonsense to equate objects with the capacity to be sinful.

This is a good example of how we tend to organize our thinking about human and nonhuman animals, which we have theorized in fig.1 [SLIDE 8]

**Fig.1<sup>11</sup>: Representation of a speciesist<sup>12</sup> material and discursive positioning of animals**



This builds on previous work of Carol Adams<sup>13</sup> and many others (notably feminists), who have pointed to the dominance of hierarchical binary thinking in Western culture – that is, the tendency to define dominant groups against their ‘other’, and to attribute desirable characteristics to the dominant and undesirable characteristics to the dominated. This manifests itself in the context of gender, ‘race’, ethnicity, sexuality and so on. Juxtaposing a discourse of sin with ‘the flesh’ is a titillating reminder of the dominant form of heterosexual relations in Western, Christian culture as well, in which women have historically been associated with ‘original sin’, with the temptations of the flesh. Karen will talk about some of these connections with human oppression in more detail later, but for now, we will focus on the species boundary between humans and all other animals, and how the characteristics of social visibility and subjectivity affect the way we treat other animals.

Fig.1 indicates how we are more likely, in most circumstances, to grant other humans the position of subjects, who are treated as more or less of equal moral worth to

<sup>11</sup> This illustration, together with fig.2, also appear in Stewart, Kate & Cole, Matthew (2008) ‘The conceptual separation of food and animals in childhood’, currently under peer review.

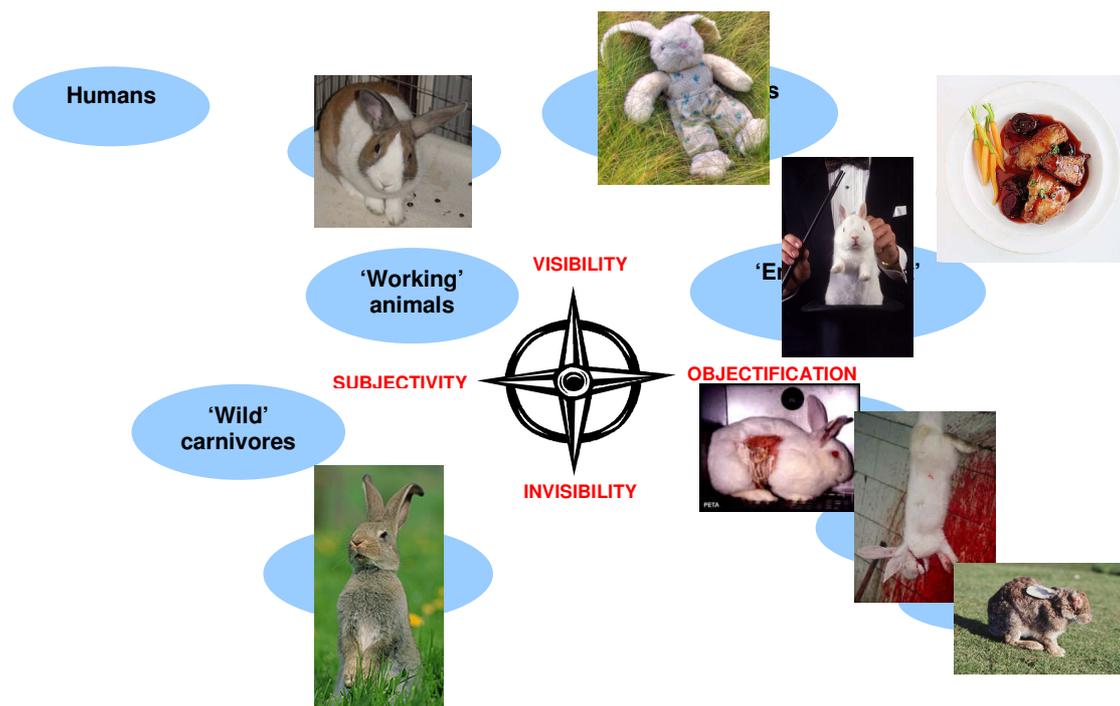
<sup>12</sup>Speciesism is defined By Joan Dunayer as ‘A failure, in attitude or practice, to accord any nonhuman being equal consideration and respect’ (2004: 5). The term was coined by Richard Ryder before being popularized by Peter Singer in *Animal Liberation* (1975).

<sup>13</sup> See contributions from Adams and others in: Donovan, Josephine and Adams, Carol J. (eds.) (2007) *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*. New York, USA: Columbia University Press.

ourselves. Human subjects are highly visible in our culture, that is, we generally recognize the significance of the feelings, thoughts, intentions and rights of other humans. We attend to each other's expressions of pain and pleasure, of dissatisfaction and contentment. Contrastingly, nonhuman animals are denied subjectivity to varying degrees, depending on the types of use we have for them. Nonhumans tend to be less visible in our culture the more they are treated like objects. To treat an animal as an object, such as for 'food' or as a piece of experimental apparatus in a vivisectors' laboratory, is to treat her or him as a means to a human end, and to disregard their own subjectivity. One advantage of looking at animals in the context of fig.1 is that it shows how the way we think about animals is 'socially constructed' – that is, it is a product of the types of relationships we have with them, not a product of the 'nature' of the animals themselves. Think about rabbits, for instance.

As fig.2 shows, what happens to rabbits, or rather, what humans do to them, entirely depends on where we position them materially and discursively, on what level of subjectivity they are granted or denied. The different categorical definitions applied to rabbits by humans show the profound difference in outcome that can result for individual animals according to how they are viewed by us, or in other words, what *meaning* we ascribe to them.

**Fig.2: The Material and Discursive Positioning of Rabbits**



By objectifying animals in these kinds of ways, we do them violence – both in the physical abuses of farming and other forms of exploitation, and symbolically by removing the discomfiting aspects of exploitation from our own sight and thought and therefore beyond the range of empathy. The more animals are objectified, the more they are portrayed out of their lived (especially 'natural') contexts, the further away from the centre of our moral concern they are made to seem. In this way, 'pets' are made to seem more deserving of our care and attention than farmed animals, even though there are no morally significant differences between the species or individual

animals that we share our homes with on the one hand, or eat, on the other. Furthermore, caring for those situated furthest away from ourselves is more easily dismissed as ridiculous, or as a distraction from the more important sufferings of human subjects - the more visible, and closer, members of our society.

### **SLIDE 9**

Returning to the Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall example, we can see how Hugh's subjectivity is enhanced – he is the agent in this image, displaying valued (masculine) attributes of bravery, of the dominance of nonhumans (the power of the fork to pin down the nonhuman and the depiction of the pig as many times smaller than life size), and of the capacity to fragment nonhuman animals – to literally and metaphorically cut them up, or vivisect, before devouring them. The pig however, is reduced to the status of an object. The real nature of pigs is obscured by her diminution of size, by her being segmented into consumable parts for human pleasure, by her being presented as something, not someone (she is implicitly referred to as part of the 'it' that Hugh 'fearlessly' eats).

### **SLIDE 10**

So how does this relate to our experience as vegans?

There are three things that we think are wrong with this 'othering' of vegans. In ascending level of significance, they are:

**1. It marginalizes vegans and marginalizes the ethical value of compassion.**

The construction of vegans as outsiders in newspaper discourse implies an imagined, or ideal reader – always omnivorous, always in need of reassurance about the rightness of omnivorism. There is never a sense that the newspapers are addressing vegans directly as an audience, even though we of course read the news like anyone else. This is because we, as vegans, tend not to share this hierarchical view of nonhumans – we at the very least do not treat, or think of, nonhuman animals as consumable objects.

**2. It helps non-vegans to avoid confronting the ethics of exploiting, imprisoning and killing nonhuman animals.**

Making veganism sound outlandish, and misrepresenting the motivations of veganism, also enables non-vegans to treat veganism as a curiosity, at best, or a dangerous obsession at worst (as in this recent news headline: "Vegan parents on trial for baby's death, allegedly from malnutrition"<sup>14</sup>). That means that the ethical heart of veganism, the opposition to exploitation and violence, is hidden. The non-vegan newspaper reader therefore is gently directed away from troubling realities. The concern of the vegan to close the distance of visibility and subjecthood with exploited nonhumans is made to seem ridiculous in itself. The effort is too much, because the distance is made to seem too great.

**3. It contributes to the perpetuation of the suffering of nonhuman animals.**

This is of course the most serious issue of all, because the exclusion of vegans from the mainstream, and of the real reasons for veg\*anism from public debate,

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<sup>14</sup> Grinberg, Emanuella (2005) Court TV News, November 21<sup>st</sup> 2005

[http://www.courttv.com/trials/andressohn/101805\\_background\\_ctv.html](http://www.courttv.com/trials/andressohn/101805_background_ctv.html), last accessed 20<sup>th</sup> July 2008

ultimately helps perpetuate the industrialised slaughter of billions of nonhuman animals. Acting against animal suffering through choosing veganism is a rational and compassionate response to a moral outrage. The systematic distortion of vegans and veganism in the media helps to suppress potential dissent. In other words, it reinforces this hierarchical way of thinking that makes the suffering of nonhumans invisible, and the concerns of caring humans seem trivial.

#### **SLIDE 11**

The second part of our definition of veganism (as a reminder: “Ethical veganism refers to the practice of minimizing, as far as possible, the harm caused to all animals (nonhuman and human). This involves choosing to eat a vegan diet; choosing products that do not depend on violence against, or the exploitation of, animals; campaigning against unnecessary human activities that harm nonhuman and human animals”) makes clear that veganism ought to be about a lot more than a type of diet. It is also about a particular way of being in the world, a way of being that is engaged with struggles against all forms of oppression. Human beings are, after all, animals (a simple biological fact that is usually elided by a speciesist culture), and if veganism is opposed to the suffering of animals, it must logically be opposed to the suffering of humans too. Why does it feel necessary to make clear the biological connection between humans and other animals? We think the obsessive search for a distinction between ourselves and the other creatures of the earth is an indication of a much deeper problem. Our exploitation of animals connects with far-reaching processes of fragmentation, division, compartmentalisation in our thought and action. To explain what we mean by this, we will consider the second aspect of the vegan stereotype:

#### **SLIDE 12**

##### **The Veg\*an Misanthropist: Commodified Morality**

‘I don’t have time to ethically audit my entire life.’: this was one person’s response to hearing the arguments for veganism. This kind of statement implies that morality is effortful and something we only have time for once we have taken care of the more important, more pressing demands of life: working, consuming, taking care of familial and domestic responsibilities, and so on. This is a view of morality that sits comfortably with the appeasement of one’s conscience through donating a little money, signing a few petitions, or other kinds of ‘slacktivism’. In other words, moral action is that which we can indulge in if and only if we have the luxury of some time away from the ‘demands’ of working, consuming and so on. Behaving morally is reduced to a purchasable commodity like any other, and therefore moral action can easily be dismissed as a form of elitism. Conversely, moral action on the part of people not obviously privileged can be dismissed as the behaviour of people who are insufficiently disciplined by work and consumption. This is the strategy that animates the stereotype of the ‘hippie’ activist, or the ‘animal terrorist’. We are unfortunately aware, especially in the light of events in Austria at the moment, that people who conspicuously devote too much time and energy to animal activism are liable to state persecution, which can only persist as long as concern for animal suffering remains marginalized. Again, bad jokes about vegans turn out to have much more sinister connotations.

However, we agree with Brian Luke's view<sup>15</sup> that the incredible amount of energy expended on maintaining animal exploitation in meat-eating cultures is evidence for an underlying compassionate or empathetic sensibility that takes a lot of suppressing. Karen will talk in some more detail about how we as a culture deny the atrocity of animal suffering. But I want to briefly discuss one important strategy of suppression now: the argument that we have a finite amount of compassion to spare, and that spending it anywhere other than on other humans is therefore frivolous and wasteful.

### SLIDE 13

Bob Torres' recent book *Making a Killing*<sup>16</sup>, presents a crucial, and long needed, critique of the role of capitalism in exploiting nonhuman animals. One of Torres' key points is that animals' bodies themselves become commodified. By being transformed from living, breathing, feeling subjects into lifeless objects (meat), animals' body parts take on the appearance of being just one consumer 'good' among countless others. Whether or not we eat meat therefore appears to be just one more consumer or lifestyle choice. Because meat appears to be just another object, seemingly no different to a cucumber, the ethical component of choosing meat is obscured. If we are wealthy enough, we might choose to purchase meat that is labelled 'welfare friendly'. This usually means that we have enough money to afford to pay off our consciences, in other words, to purchase a little moral kudos along with our 'happy meat'. This reduction of moral behaviour to a purchasable commodity is the same ideology that supports those who dismiss animal rights activists as privileged 'sentimental do-gooders', implying that the expression of emotion – indignation, anger, sadness, grief, empathy and so on, are just the petty indulgences of people who are lucky enough to have the necessary 'free time' to spare.

### SLIDE 14

Returning to the newspaper reports on veganism that we discussed earlier, I said that only 6% of newspaper stories were 'positive'. When we look more closely we find that nearly all of these examples occur in the 'lifestyle' sections of newspapers. In other words, veganism is (rarely) granted some mainstream acceptance if it is presented as another consumer choice, as another way of purchasing morality. It might sometimes be tempting for us, used to the regular hassles of not being able to find vegan food, of not having our choices respected and catered for, to welcome this kind of limited recognition. However, we think we are on a dangerous road if we pursue the celebration of lifestyle veganism too assiduously. The logic of lifestyle veganism fits perfectly with the commodification of morality that dominates our lives in capitalist cultures. Even the few positive stories start to look less promising in this light.

One of the most powerful impacts veg\*ans can make is in the complete integration of our moral sensibilities, of our compassionate principles, into every aspect of our daily lives. We have much to celebrate in veg\*an experience, not least the fact that pleasure and morality, or perhaps, aesthetics and ethics, coincide in our choices. We know that we are not (with perhaps some exceptions) ascetics. Asceticism in itself is not the problem – but the assertion that it is a necessary component of veg\*anism is. We also know that our moral sense is not something we tack on to our lives if we are privileged enough to have the time. It is something we re-enact every time we eat and drink,

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<sup>15</sup> Luke, B. (2007) 'Justice, Caring and Animal Liberation' in Donovan, J. and Adams, C.J. (eds.) *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*. New York, USA: Columbia University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Torres, B. (2007) *Making A Killing: The Political Economy of Animal Rights*. Edinburgh: AK Press.

every time to we take the decision to refuse complicity in animal exploitation, every time we explain our decisions to others, every time we come together at events like this to give ourselves renewed strength for the struggles ahead.

Consumer veg\*anism reduces us to a single issue, to the idiosyncratic periphery of modern life. This plays into the fragmenting, divide and rule tactics of capitalism. To move forward we need alliances and connections and a holistic awareness of the part veganism can play in broader struggles for liberation. If we get distracted into appeasing the hedonistic narcissism of capitalist consumer culture, we diffuse our power, we lose our focus, we become one among countless other 'lifestyle' movements pandering to the latest trend.

Now Karen is going to talk some more about some of the other contemporary experiences of fragmentation, of divide and rule, in particular about sexism and racism and what we can learn from this in the veg\*an movement.

## **SLIDE 15**

### **Denial and wilful ignorance**

Much human behaviour is characterized by denial in one form or another – and this is particularly apparent in our attitudes to the exploitation and abuse of others; whether nonhuman or human. The sociologist Stanley Cohen, in his book *States of Denial*, talks about various atrocities committed by humans against other humans – for example individual acts of violence such as domestic abuse or state atrocities such as the holocaust or state-sponsored torture. He discusses how these atrocities happen, and suggests that there are certain techniques used by humans, either as individuals, organisations or states, in order to neutralize or otherwise deny wrongdoing.

- denying responsibility
- denying that there has been real harm or injury caused
- denying that there is a victim at all and
- condemning the condemners.<sup>17</sup>

This is a useful way to think through the ways in which both humans and nonhumans are treated as objects, made less visible, and therefore made to seem beyond the reach of compassion.

## **SLIDE 16**

### *Denying responsibility*

The first of these techniques is typified by the separation of the animal from the packaged, processed piece of meat found on a supermarket shelf. This separation enables consumers to ignore the fact that in purchasing and eating that meat, they are complicit in the miserable life and slaughter of the animal they are eating. As our model shows [SLIDE 17], the high visibility of meat as an object (that is, a disguise for the process of animal farming, killing and butchering) helps to stop us recognizing the animal who was killed to get it. The very process of turning the live animal into packaged, processed meat rests upon the assumption that the animal is not a being. US Department of Agriculture reports, for example, refer to pigs as 'crops'<sup>18</sup> During

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<sup>17</sup> Cohen, S. (2001) *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, Cambridge: Polity Press, pp.60-61

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.thepigsite.com/swinenews/17457/usda-reports-could-be-important-for-crop-prices>

slaughter and processing, nonhuman animals are sent down what Adams refers to as a “disassembly line”, losing body parts at every stop<sup>19</sup> This helps us to complete the process of objectification as part of a cow’s leg becomes a rump steak, bits of a pig get turned into bacon and with each step our sense of personal responsibility in the process becomes diffused.

### **SLIDE 18**

#### *Denying real harm*

The second of Cohen’s techniques can be related to the stereotypical images of farms as places where happy cows and pigs co-exist with farmers. Such images enable consumers to deny the reality of intensive farming where animals are crammed into sheds and cages, rarely see daylight and are deprived of the opportunity to exhibit their natural behaviours. In much of Europe, the growing emphasis on organic, ‘free-range’ farms enables consumers to pretend that they are doing animals a favour – that by buying organic ‘free-range’ meat, they are facilitating a happy existence. This ignores the fact that such animals are still being bred, raised, corralled and controlled and ultimately, terrifyingly, slaughtered long before their potential life-span in order to serve the desires of human palates.

### **SLIDE 19**

#### *Denying that there is a victim*

Many of us can remember when we first realised that the meat on our plates once was part of a living animal. Some of us reacted with horror, with tears, or with confusion - but often we are soothed and reassured through the success of the meat and dairy industries in completely dissociating animals from food. When we are old enough to no longer be able to deny the brute fact that animals died to ‘provide’ animal food, we can turn to other convenient fictions. For instance, on organic dairy farms, the removal of young calves from their mothers, the grief this causes to both, and the slaughter of male calves at just a few days old is obscured and ignored. The same is true of the slaughter of male chicks in the free range egg industry. The pretence that such farms are animal paradises enables those who produce and eat organic ‘free-range’ meat, dairy and egg products to deny that any animals are being harmed. It also gives people the opportunity to purchase moral superiority. When we buy ‘happy meat’, we also pay to not have to look at the reality of animal’s suffering. We keep suffering invisible by conceding a marginal acknowledgement of the subjecthood of animals. ‘Happy’ farmed animals therefore are more prominently featured in marketing, in other words, according to our theoretical model (see Fig.1) they are shifted towards the top left, as a ‘caring’ relationship between farmer and animal is stressed. Therefore while the animal may become more visible, this is outweighed by the fact that the farmers become considerably more visible too in inverse proportion to the amount of shame that is felt necessary to conceal.

### **SLIDE 20**

#### *Condemning the condemners*

The final technique relates to the way denial works by condemning those who oppose the abuse and exploitation of animals and who refuse, as far as possible, to participate in such behaviours. One of the most shocking current examples is that of Dr Martin Balluch and other animal rights protestors in Austria who in May 2008, were arrested.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p.58

Some of the charges against Dr Balluch and the others relate to tactics such as fly posting, blockades and undercover investigations inside factory farms – usually the only tactics available to those wishing to expose and highlight animal abuse. The hostility experienced by those, like Dr Balluch, who seek to expose and oppose the abuse of nonhuman animal is a tactic used in their turn by those who do not wish to confront the responsibility they bear as individuals in the continued abuse of nonhuman animals. While this denial is going on, the victims – the nonhuman animals themselves – are made invisible. The scale of slaughter and processing is unimaginable to most consumers, many of whom will insist that they ‘hardly ever eat meat now’ or that they ‘only eat chicken or fish’ (a kind of hierarchical arrangement of species which is another way of denying real harm, denying that there is a victim, and thereby denying responsibility). Yet statistics reveal that consumption of animal products goes on rising in both affluent and ‘developing’ nations. In April 2008, for example, in the UK alone, official slaughterhouse statistics reveal that 253 thousand cattle and calves were slaughtered, 1314 thousand sheep and lambs, and 917 thousand pigs. Just to make it clear – these are the figures for one month alone in the UK.<sup>20</sup> These figures and details are freely available from DEFRA (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) - but they remain largely unreported other than in the specialist media. Mainstream publication would make denial more difficult (though not impossible) because it would force at least some of those who eat meat to confront their own responsibility in the slaughter.

## **SLIDE 21**

### **Moral choices/compassion**

However, encouraging people to become vegetarian or vegan is not simply a matter of forcing them to confront the issues or count the number of tortured and slaughtered bodies. In his work, Stanley Cohen eloquently and disturbingly addresses the actions of humans in relation to other humans. And yet while discussing the issues of atrocity and suffering, he explicitly confines himself to *humans* and denies the parallels with human relationships to nonhuman animals – or rather he denies that compassion can be effectively extended from one’s own immediate human concerns to wider issues including environmental and animal rights. He suggests that there may be a form of compassion fatigue in that we are unable to cope with increasing moral demands and that essentially, a choice has to be made between one moral concern and another. The statement to which Matthew referred earlier: ‘I don’t have time to ethically audit my entire life’, was made by someone I met recently. He is a self-defined ardent environmentalist, keen to criticise people who unthinkingly drive cars or who go in planes and yet who seemed threatened by my veganism. His own issues were, he maintained, more important and although he grudgingly admitted that there *might* be an environmental argument against the farming of animals, he was, he said, more concerned with *wider* issues (implying that I was concerned with trivial issues). His reference to ethically auditing indicated a belief that, as Matthew has already said, veganism is all about denial of pleasure. Furthermore it indicated his belief that what happens to nonhuman animals is beyond his range of moral concern. Similarly, Cohen, whilst acknowledging that ‘the treatment of animals in cruel experiments and factory farming is difficult to defend ... this is not [his] responsibility; there are worse problems; there are plenty of other people looking after this. What do you mean, I’m in

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.thepigsite.com/swinenews/18002/uk-slaughter-statistics-may-2008>

denial every time I eat a hamburger?’<sup>21</sup> Well yes, we would suggest that Cohen and others who work hard to highlight the atrocities committed by humans against other humans *are* in denial when they refuse to recognise the correlation between the abuse of humans and the abuse of nonhuman animals.’ Carol Adams suggests that there is a ‘war on compassion’ which has ‘resulted in a desire to move away from many feelings, especially uncomfortable ones.’<sup>22</sup> Many people seem to believe that it is futile to care and that their caring will not change anything. It appears easier to ignore the fact that awful things are happening than to try to confront them and to do something about it.

It is precisely the one-sided view of compassion engendered by this way of thinking that we are seeking to contest. Compassion is, as far as we are concerned, a concept without boundaries. Our concern with oppression does not end where another species begins. As vegetarians and vegans we all frequently come across people who say to us ‘well I care about animals but I care more about humans’. Often the implication of this (intended or otherwise) is that in caring about nonhuman animals, we don’t care about humans. The New York Times recently epitomised this in an opinion article about the proposed extension of rights under Spanish law to primates [SLIDE 22]. ‘Too often’ claimed the NYT, ‘animal-rights supporters seem to care about animals to the exclusion of people.’<sup>23</sup> This is, as far as we are concerned, another form of denial; the links between various types of abuse and between the abuse of humans and other animals are clear and so should not be seen as an ‘either-or’ situation. In seeking to expose and fight the exploitation and abuse of nonhuman animals, we are also seeking to highlight and oppose the exploitation and abuse of other humans. The two are not mutually exclusive. We are not trying to claim that the motivations of those who abuse humans are the same as those who abuse other animals. What we *are* saying is that there are strong similarities in the end results and in the way, as bystanders, we explicitly or implicitly permit such abuse to occur.

### SLIDE 23

#### Meat and human oppression

In her books *The Sexual Politics of Meat* and *The Pornography of Meat*, Carol Adams discusses the connections between the oppression of women through sexual and domestic violence and animal abuse<sup>24</sup> and there exists a significant amount of research which links these forms of violence. One example of the way in which women become sexual objects, like the dismembered animal body, becoming pieces of meat was perhaps exemplified by Hustler Magazine. Following a campaign against pornography, Larry Flint ironically claimed that they would no longer portray women as meat while featuring a cover picture of a woman’s torso being fed through a mincer. Further examples linking women and meat, include research conducted by the human rights group Amnesty International, a Russian woman described the abuse she experienced at the hands of her husband [SLIDE 24]: ‘Once he raped me in a perverted fashion in front of the children. He beat me first and then he raped the "hunk of meat" that he

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p.289.

<sup>22</sup> Adams, C.J. (2007) ‘The War on Compassion’ in Donovan, J. and Adams, C.J. (eds.) *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*. New York: Columbia University Press. p.33.

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/14/opinion/14mon4.html?\\_r=1&emc=tnt&ntemail=y&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/14/opinion/14mon4.html?_r=1&emc=tnt&ntemail=y&oref=slogin)

<sup>24</sup> Adams, C. J. (2006) *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist Vegetarian Critical Theory*, Tenth Anniversary Edition. New York: Continuum and Adams C. J. (2004) *The Pornography of Meat*, New York: Continuum.

considered me to be.’<sup>25</sup> In Australia, the senior Islamic cleric, Sheik Taj Aldin al-Hilali, who was later forced to apologise for his remarks, compared unveiled women to ‘uncovered meat’ implying that they invite rape and sexual assault. ‘If you take out uncovered meat and place it outside ... without cover, and the cats come to eat it ... whose fault is it, the cats’ or the uncovered meat’s? The uncovered meat is the problem. If she was in her room, in her home, in her *hijab*, no problem would have occurred.’<sup>26</sup> According to this way of thinking women, like animals, are seen as disembodied, fragmented. They are an object, something to be consumed. Just as with the fragmentation of animals’ bodies to produce meat, it becomes impossible to feel compassion for an object. In many cultures the consumption of meat, particularly red meat, is linked to notions of masculinity and sexual potency.<sup>27</sup> A book called *Why Men Don’t Iron*, published in the late 1990s, claimed that men take a more sensual pleasure in their food than women and that the male palate can only be satisfied by red meat. Women preparing chicken, fish or vegetable dishes for their male partners are trying to turn them into something less than men.<sup>28</sup> This myth is one often promoted by the meat industry. So, for example, we have an advert used by Burger King in which the main actor declares he won’t eat ‘chick-food’ – i.e. quiche – because he is a man.

## SLIDE 25

The process of objectification is not only applicable to women – it takes place with almost any marginalised group. So, in racist discourse the conflation of nonhuman animals and non-white ethnicities has been well-documented. In her book *The Dreaded Comparison*, Marjorie Spiegel traces the historical links between the oppression of nonhuman animals and human slaves.<sup>29</sup> She draws on numerous horrific similarities between the transportation of nonhuman animals packed into trucks and slaves shipped from Africa, both tightly packed and dying of hunger, thirst and disease. Charles Patterson, also, in *Eternal Treblinka*, notes the similarities between the mass transportation of cattle and of Jews on their way to being killed.<sup>30</sup> Even the instruments used to control, punish and mark nonhuman animals and slaves bore striking similarities. Slaves and cattle were branded, collars were put on both, babies were, and in the case of nonhuman animals still are, often removed soon after birth or in the first few years. Spiegel and others discuss the live experiments performed on people of colour and on nonhuman animals [SLIDE 26]. Perhaps the most notorious experiments were carried out from the 1930s in the United States, where white scientists, believing that syphilis affected whites and blacks differently, observed the course of untreated syphilis in black men over the course of 40 years until the experiment was finally exposed by a journalist. The men were not told that they had syphilis and were left untreated. In the case of nonhuman animals, of course, much of this treatment continues to this day; nonhuman animals, including primates, are infected with a variety of diseases and observed as the disease takes its course. It is not simply a matter of making comparisons between one oppressed group and another, however. Amie Breeze Harper,<sup>31</sup> an American academic, contends that an approach which fails to

<sup>25</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7113099.stm>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.iheu.org/node/2776>

<sup>27</sup> cf. Twigg, J. (1983) ‘Vegetarianism and the meanings of meat’ in Murcott, A. (ed.) *The Sociology of Food and Eating*. Aldershot: Gower.

<sup>28</sup> Moir, A. and Moir, B. (1999) *Why Men Don’t Iron*, London: HarperCollins pp-93-94

<sup>29</sup> Spiegel, M. (1988) *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery*, London: Heretic Books.

<sup>30</sup> Patterson, C. (2002) *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust*, New York: Lantern Books

<sup>31</sup> <http://breezharper.tripod.com/research/index.html>

acknowledge the impact of colonial history on issues such as vegetarianism and animal rights means that certain human inequalities are always ignored while the focus is placed on the rights of nonhuman animals. One example of this approach, which she refers to as 'colour-blind' as it fails to acknowledge the privileges enjoyed by whites and denied to others, relates to the way, as vegans, we practice 'cruelty-free' consumption of products by avoiding those which involve the exploitation and/or slaughter of nonhuman animals. Many products however, involve the exploitation of humans. Chocolate, in particular, has a strong association with child labour in West Africa. Here, slave labour still exists, in order to meet the demands of American or European consumers [SLIDE 27]. As ethical vegans, it ought to be automatic that we take care to make sure that our actions do not support the oppression of other humans, just as it is automatic to us to oppose nonhuman animal exploitation through our choices. Western exploitation of impoverished populations through the cash crop system destroys and inhibits the recovery of autonomous, self-sufficient food production. Intensive monoculture crop production also causes soils to suffer nutrient depletion and thus pushes economically vulnerable populations further away from sustainable agricultural systems.<sup>32</sup> Organisations such as the UK charity VEGFAM do their best to help counteract this by providing funds for self-supporting, sustainable food projects and the provision of safe drinking water, and by funding ethically sound plant-food projects, which do not exploit animals or the environment.<sup>33</sup> As vegetarians and vegans we are all used to thinking carefully about the goods we buy and what has gone into the production process. For many of us, therefore, extending our range of awareness and considering the wider implications of oppressive production practices is a comparatively small step.

## **Conclusion**

### **SLIDE 28**

Looking again at our theoretical model (fig.1), we can see that it helps us to understand both how humans dominate nonhumans, and how different kinds of humans dominate other humans. The exploitation of women, or of people of colour, also includes processes of making invisible and of objectification. These processes are helped by the creation of false representations (as in pornography) that obscure the truth of the experiences of exploited peoples. As veg\*ans, we are also subject to these processes, although the consequences for us are usually less serious – although there are exceptions, as in the case of State persecutions of animal activists. Unfortunately, we can also replicate these processes ourselves, when we fail to take account of the human consequences of some of our actions for animals. In attending to one form of oppression it can be all too easy to ignore another and it is this insensitivity to the intertwining of repressive and coercive behaviours that we are seeking to overcome. For instance, when vegan products are sold as 'cruelty-free', but depend on the exploitation of human labour, we make those labourers and their sufferings invisible, and we tacitly treat them as objects – as means to the end of our own pleasure in consuming the product of their labour. This is not a way of comparing or equating the sufferings of different humans and nonhumans, or of using the sufferings of some in order to motivate compassion for the suffering of others. Instead, what we are doing is showing how diverse systems of exploitation make use of the same processes and tactics to make exploitation normal and acceptable. When we recognize those

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<sup>32</sup> <http://www.vegansociety.com/environment/land/>

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.vegfamcharity.org.uk/home.html>

similarities, we equip ourselves with tools to oppose those processes and tactics wherever they occur.

There are positive lessons that we can draw from this model. It can help us avoid reproducing exploitative tactics in our own practice. It can also help to suggest effective strategies to oppose animal exploitation. A great deal of effort goes into making the abuse of nonhuman animals invisible, and into convincing ourselves that it is appropriate to treat others as objects. The reason for this great effort is because it works – it makes the exploitation of animals easier, and it places the whole sordid business outwith the mainstream of political questioning or personal and social reflection. Therefore, we can see the value of attending to the experiences of nonhuman animals as individuals, as unique personalities, not as representatives of an undifferentiated mass of beings. In so doing, we recognize other animals as subjects, and refuse to treat them as objects. It also demonstrates the value of exposing abuse, of making visible the reality of exploited nonhuman animal's experiences.

### **SLIDE 29**

Most significantly perhaps, it allows us to recognize how behaving with compassion can be much more straightforward than our opponents would have us believe. Consumer capitalism reduces ethical action and a compassionate sensibility to just one more purchasable commodity. The hate and fear-fuelled 'teachings' of sexism, racism and speciesism attempt to make the reality of the experience of others 'invisible' to 'us'. They make it seem difficult to care for those who are objectified. But when we recognize 'others' – humans and nonhumans – as subjects, and when we make the effort to confront and attempt to empathize with their experiences, we come to realize that the distances between us are not so great. Instead of being an insurmountable task, at great personal, emotional cost, a compassionate disposition can become habitual and a source of joy and renewal as we see barriers that separate us from others crumble away. Practicing empathy for others denies that there are unbridgeable distances that exist between 'us' and 'them'. We are not sentimentalists when we care for others – we are pragmatists, using the most effective tool at our disposal to oppose exploitation. When our actions help to break through the barriers that our cultures erect between recognizing others, both human and nonhuman, as subjects, then we are on our way to building a more peaceful future, we are on our way to Vegatopia.

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