

Why we should bring back Veganism

...to feel compassion living in earshot of the sweatshops, the stadiums, the slaughterhouses, with the scent of blood cheap in the air...

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If we can consider reclaiming straight edge as a “revolutionary lifestyle option,” there’s no reason to stop there — why not bid on veganism, too?

From Vegan to Freegan

In the mid-nineties, it seemed all my friends were vegan and self-righteous about it. I was hanging out in a mixture of straight edge and political punk circles, at the high point of Earth Crisis’s fame, so this wasn’t unusual — although, to be fair, I wasn’t vegan myself, so it was probably more the case that I was defensive than it was that they were self-righteous. Whatever was going on, I remember one of the things that alienated me most about their dietary habits was the amount of money they spent on fancy vegan treats: I was already a couple years into my no-work experiment, and could barely afford rice, much less bourgeois-bohemian soy cheeseburgers — and besides, funding the non-meat “alternative” foods industry, a mere subdivision of the whole evil corporate food monster, didn’t seem much more right on to me than buying from the more obvious bad guys in the same market. It seemed to me that my friends’ money would end up, at best, funding some “free range” chicken farm, where the captives got an extra foot of space to pace until they were killed. I’ve since been proved essentially correct in my suspicions about the whole “voting with your dollars” approach to animal rights: the vegetarian/vegan trend has helped cement the iron grip of friendly-faced, evil-hearted corporations like union-busting Whole Foods over their own new niche, the bourgeois feel-good “organic” market, thus driving community co-ops and mom’n’pop shops into even worse straits, and closing down far fewer animal-exploiting corporations than more direct-action-oriented approaches have.

Anyway, I decided my own food activism would be to stop buying from the bastards altogether. In my case, this wasn’t much of a change, as I couldn’t afford to in the first place; but as I started to get a sense of how much food went into the dumpsters every week, and how much money my friends were wasting on their fancy diets, it became clear to me that — fuck consuming “cruelty-free” products — those of us who could should just drop out of the economy, period. I imagine a lot of people were going through something similar to what I was, because a couple years later, the term “freegan” was in use, and people were starting to talk as much about where what they ate came from as what was in it. At first, this was still a minority position in reaction to a veganism that had claimed to address animal rights without addressing capitalism: eating dumpstered cheese pizza was a big fuck you to middle class vegans who thought their hands were clean just because they stayed out of the dairy aisle.

From Freegan to...?

Nowadays, it’s almost hard to believe that freeganism appeared as a reaction to (and a reinterpretation of) veganism — in punk circles, it seems to be much more prevalent. This, of course, may simply be my limited perspective — but whatever strikes me as being most prevalent is the thing to react to and reinterpret, in my book! Now that freeganism has replaced veganism as default setting for punks, it’s time to look at the vegan diet and figure out what might be good about it, minus the consumerism that alienated some of us from it in the first place.

First, back to my own story: for years after becoming freegan, I figured I’d just starve to death if I began limiting my choices in the already limited world of free food. I ate cheese, even meat, whatever. Eventually, I started having doubts about it, though — I noticed that I would eat meat or dairy others had paid for when I had the chance, and that was really compromising my position. I decided to find out if it really was impossible for me to be vegan as well as freegan (that is to say, to eat only food that was both vegan and free); it wasn’t, and soon I was eating a strict vegan diet. In fact, it turned out that I went one direction when everyone else went the other: pretty soon all my formerly-vegan friends were freegan, while I became the last of the uptight, ingredient-reading vegans.

I hate to say this, but the next step for many of my friends has been a relapse into omnivore apathy. For a while, they only ate meat if they dumpstered it or found it dead on the road; now they're the ones buying "free range" chicken, buffalo patties, whatever. You have to travel in pretty sheltered activist circles to think you're being rebellious by doing something everyone in mainstream society does! Sure, sure, what you eat is a matter of personal choice, and one kid's diet isn't going to make or break an industry; but aside from the question of economic complicity, aside from the excuse to be self-righteous, even aside from the health issue, there is a little-discussed reason for strict veganism that has turned out to be really important to me.

Desire as Medium

For me, the most important thing about veganism is that it provides a concrete example of how we can transform our own habits and desires, how we can revolutionize ourselves. I figure we need to practice personally what we want to do on a global scale, if we are to have the knowledge and momentum to do it one day.

As the old sage once said, *in a world turned upside down, the true is a moment of the false*. Another way one could put this today: *in a life of suffering, pleasure is a component in a system of pain*. Here's an example, lest the philosophizing get too murky: a man comes home from the job he hates, exhausted, and turns on the television to unwind. Watching television is actually a fundamental part of his dispossession, but he experiences it as a pleasure, a reprieve. Here's another example of the same thing: *mmm, hamburger*.

In a world in which our own desires are turned against us as agents of our own oppression and the oppression of those around us, real indulgence, true hedonism, must therefore be a *contesting* of our desires, as well as a fulfilling of them. To experience joy and pleasure, not as a momentary reprieve from a miserable life, but as a total, gratifying *way of life*, we must subvert our own habits and tastes, we must challenge and reconstruct ourselves outside the template of our programming.

One of the best examples of this in action is veganism. I'm not talking about those vegans who go around complaining about how much they miss yogurt — that shit drives me crazy: if your politics are about self-denial, you need to reconsider your whole approach. No, I'm talking about the transformation that takes place in a person who has not eaten meat for a year or so, who slowly stops looking at meat as being food at all. Remember, the omnipresence of flesh isn't just about sales and profit; it's also about desensitizing us to slaughter, getting us to look at our fellow living things as commodities. The fact that I can pass a McDonald's now and see the corpses of tortured animals rather than a selection of tasty lunchtime delights is, for me, a little victory. It means I've brought my desires a little further back into connection with reality (as I perceive and construct it), and it suggests that, given enough time outside — to choose another example — patriarchy, I might also be able to unlearn the objectifying that was programmed into my sexuality, or the striving for domination programmed into my social behavior.

One friend of mine once chided me for making even dinner into a symbol, but that's backwards: those hamburgers are, in fact, the dead bodies of cows raised in factory farms — it's capitalism that presents them as "symbols," as products with exchange values rather than individual lives. I think that if we are to pursue happiness with some chance of success, we all have to be in touch with ourselves, not blocking any of our emotional responses. Doing what it takes to feel the tragedy of the factory farm holocaust whenever you pass a butcher shop is simply part of seeking to be a complete person, to be sensitive enough that you can experience joy fully, too, when you have the chance.

Perhaps one day, when animal-exploiting, environmentally destructive techno-industrial society has collapsed, I'll hunt deer in the woods, respectfully killing and eating my fellow creatures as my ancestors once did. In the meantime, I'm on strike. They can't sell me their products — I can get my hands on what I need for free — and neither can those products brainwash me into accepting genocide and exploitation as a part of everyday life. Every time I turn down some corporate animal product, however

it reaches my low place in the food chain, it feels better to say FUCK YOU to our enemies and their war on us all than it ever could to eat steak or drink milkshakes.

So, erstwhile freegan, if any of this stuff about liberating your palate as well as your grocery budget makes sense to you, perhaps you'll reconsider your diet. You and I can hang out cutting up vegetables while everyone else eats dumpstered doughnuts and roadkill. Maybe veganism will get so trendy again that we'll have to rebel against it once more! See you behind the supermarket, Editor B.

The Library of Unconventional Lives

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