Chapter 7
Veganism and Capitalism

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A specter is haunting veganism—the specter of anti-capitalist critique. By and large, mainstream animal advocates and vegans have either ignored the problem of capitalism or have seized upon capitalist innovation as the "solution" to the problem of exploitation and animal suffering (Pacelle, 2016). While PETA and other animal rights groups have long singled out specific corporations for their cruelty to animals, they seem unaware that such practices stem, in most cases, not from deliberate cruelty but from the objective features of our economic system. The destruction of billions of nonhuman animals and the despoiling of the living earth are not accidental features of capitalism, they constitute its fundamental basis. Understanding the nature of the capitalist system—and its relation to speciesism—is thus a sine qua non for any informed discussion of vegan politics. No prior system of producing human material life proved as destructive to animal lives and interests.

Speciesism forms the ontological ground of human identity; it is a system of material and symbolic human life organized around the domination, exploitation, and mass killing of other sentient beings (Sanbonmatsu, 2014). As a mode of life, speciesism precedes capitalist development by millennia (Sanbonmatsu, 2017). From its beginning, the human species has exploited and slaughtered animals for a variety of communal purposes, including for food, clothing, and propitiation of the gods. As an ideology and practice, therefore, human domination was already well developed before the advent of capitalist relations in early modern Europe. In *Capital*, Marx observes that the precondition for capitalist relations was the prior existence of a class of propertyless workers who had nothing to sell but their labor

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power (Marx, 1867/1978); we might observe that the new system of commodity production similarly presumed, and was dependent upon, a range of existing social practices that treated the bodies, minds, and habitats of animals as forces of production. However, while capitalism grew out of longstanding relations and patterns of human species dominance, it also transformed them. Prior to capitalist relations, the scope of human exploitation had been curbed by the material limitations of human economic and technical development, on one side, and by religious and folk injunctions—weak as they were—against indiscriminate or "unnecessary" cruelty toward animals, on the other. With the emergence of capitalist relations, however, the last practical and cultural fetters hindering human dominion fell away, opening the path for a more total form of domination. The Scientific Revolution ushered in a Cartesian, hyper-masculinist worldview that stripped away more reverential and organicist conceptions of Nature and reduced nonhuman animals to the status of mere machines (Merchant, 1980). This cultural transformation was in turn partly an artifact of the new system of commodity production, which subordinated all values in society to the quest for profit and treated Nature as the raw material for the accumulation of capital. European colonialism then spread the commodity system to the four corners of the earth. In the Americas, the violent exploitation of African slaves and poor and indigenous laborers, paralleled the exploitation and killing of animals. The latter were slaughtered in the billions to satisfy growing European markets for fish, meat, fur, and whale oil (Nibert, 2013). The rise and consolidation of the cattle industry in the nineteenth century, finally, created vast new centers of concentrated wealth and forged a new consumption pattern based on ever-growing per capita meat consumption.

This historical background aside, the key to understanding the contemporary predicament of animals lies in the nature of commodity production itself (Wadiwel, 2023; White, 2017). As in our own time, animals in previous epochs had the status of private property. As domesticated animals are believed to have been among the earliest forms of private property (Bowles and Choi, 2019), they likely played a key role in the emergence of class hierarchy. (The English word "capital" in fact derives from the Latin caput, or "head," signifying a head of cattle.) However, capitalist commodity production changed the nature of human species dominance. Because capitalist commodities are produced not to satisfy human needs (Mulvany, 2015), but solely to produce surplus value (profit), capitalists have an incentive to produce as many animals as possible, and to do so as cheaply as possible. By the early twentieth century, thus, the flesh, ova, and milk of nonhuman beings had assumed the form of standardized, inexpensive, mass-produced commodities.

Corporate monopolization—a structural feature of capitalist organization—leads to increased concentration of wealth and to continual expansion of the spheres of production and consumption. And because the "circuit" of production cannot be completed without consumption, corporations must implant new desires and needs in the populace, treating people as mindless "consumers" of an ever-growing heap of commodities, most of them unnecessary, wasteful, ecologically destructive, and harmful to sentient life. Today, there are thousands if not millions of distinct products containing animal ingredients; yet, animal goods continue to be produced in

ever-growing numbers and varieties to satisfy and expand this already massive global market.

The concentration of economic and technological power has led not only to the geographical and quantitative expansion of animal industries but to *intensification* of animal exploitation. Because the only value that truly matters under capitalist relations is exchange value—again, production for sale, not for use—animal exploiters must seek ways to reduce their costs and render production more efficient, without regard for the suffering and cruelty inflicted on animals in the process. Raised in close confinement, animals are treated as indifferently as any other mass-produced commodity, their lives and bodies ruthlessly molded to suit the needs of the industrialized system. As Michael Watts observes, "'what is striking about the chicken is the extent to which the 'biological body' has been actually constructed physically to meet the needs of the industrial labor process'" (Davis, 2012, p. 37). Hence this description of chickens by the authors of *Commercial Chicken Meat and Egg Production*, a reference guide for animal science students and commercial poultry and egg producers:

> The chicken industry has applied advanced technology in the form of genetics, nutrition, disease control and agricultural engineering to the growing and processing of chickens.... The technology built into buildings and equipment as well as embodied genetically into the chicken itself has steadily lowered the cost of poultry meat for consumers. (Bell and Weaver, 2002, pp. 87 and 805)

To maximize their productivity, chickens are genetically engineered, their bodies made to grow to grotesque proportions and at abnormally fast rates. Like chickens, other species of commercially farmed animals too—cows, pigs, talapia, etc.—are raised in intensive confinement and subjected to totalitarian controls, their diet, rates of growth, sleeping, and behavior closely monitored by the farmer or rancher to ensure a standardized and marketable final product. The Cartesian view of animals as machines is no longer a metaphor but an operationalized fact.

So closely bound up with one another are speciesism and capitalism that it is no longer possible to speak of them as distinct structures. Speciesism is the material substrate of capital; capitalism in turn has amplified and intensified the nature of human species dominance, freeing it of all prior moral, geographical, biological, and even ontological limits. The result is a system whose scale and savagery of violence is without historical precedent. Globally, humans slaughter about 73 billion land animals (Orzechowski, 2022) and at least 1 trillion individual wild fish (Mood and Brooke, 2010) annually. Measured in biomass, 70% of all birds and 96% of all mammals (excluding human beings) are today living in human captivity awaiting slaughter (Bar-On et al., 2018).

The harms to animals under capitalism are by no means confined to animals directly exploited for commercial purposes but extend as well to the broader destruction of animals' lives and living spaces in nature. Currently, over half of all habitable land is used for agriculture (Ellis et al., 2010) with more than 80 percent of that land used for animal agriculture (Poore and Nemecek, 2018), making animal agriculture the most extensive human artifact on our planet and arguably our species'

most noteworthy cultural expression. Together, animal agriculture and the fisheries industry constitute the most ecologically destructive force on earth. The animal economy is a major contributor, for example, to greenhouse gas emissions: one study at Stanford University has estimated that "phasing out animal agriculture over the next 15 years would have the same effect as a 68 percent reduction of carbon dioxide emissions through the year 2100" (Eisen and Brown, 2022). The combined impacts of animal agriculture and the fisheries are meanwhile the leading forces driving the mass extinction crisis—the worst calamity to befall terrestrial life in 65 million years. At least half the drivers of extinction and biodiversity loss are related to animal exploitation (World Wildlife Fund and London Zoological Society, 2016, 2018). In just the last 40 years, an estimated 60% or more of the free animals of the earth have been wiped out of existence (Grooten and Almond, 2018).

In *Capital,* Marx (1867/1978) argues that capitalism has created a "metabolic rift" between *Homo sapiens* and the means of life—that is, the "material estrangement of human beings...from the natural conditions that formed the basis for their existence" (Foster, 2002). We might add, however, that capitalism has also estranged birds, mammals, insects, crustaceans, reptiles, amphibians, and so on, from their own means of existence, as well. Simply put, the world capitalist system, premised as it is on limitless economic growth and unchecked human consumptive "needs," has undermined the conditions for life on earth as such.

Unfortunately, the political structures of capitalism have stymied meaningful government action to remedy these and other catastrophic ecological impacts of the system on human and nonhuman animal life. Though the state is frequently depicted by bourgeois economists as a value-neutral institution, the reality is otherwise, with the capitalist state largely serving the interests of the ruling economic elite (Stache and Bernhold, 2021). Around the world, federal governments under lobbying pressure from animal industries subsidize ranchers and dairy farmers, fund and promote agricultural, medical, and other forms of research on animals, "cull" millions of "pest" animals at the behest of cattle ranchers, and so on. In the United States, the vast powers of the state are marshaled by private interests to promote animal exploitation, with state agencies at every level facilitating the production and killing of animals. Federal laws covering the treatment of "farmed" animals in the United States, thus, do virtually nothing to prevent the suffering of animals in agriculture or fisheries.

Though the US Humane Methods of Slaughter Act, for example, mandates that so-called "livestock animals" (e.g., pigs and cattle) be "rendered insensible to pain" prior to slaughter (HMSA, §1902), many species, including chickens, rabbits, and aquatic animals, are not covered by the HSMA's protections at all. Like the HSMA, the Federal US Animal Welfare Act of 1966 excludes "livestock" from its protections. Though some US states have enacted laws banning confinement systems such as veal crates and the battery caging of hens, no US federal policy exists to protect "livestock" from the kinds of *routine* harms inflicted on animals caught in the industrialized agriculture system. Meanwhile, the federal government subjects critics of the speciesist system to surveillance and intimidation, even branding them as "terrorists."

Legal protections for animals at the US state level are no better. While all 50 U.S. states now have anti-cruelty laws, the majority of them exempt most existing forms of industry practice. Clauses in state anti-cruelty laws, known as "customary farming exemptions," make it legally permissible to do almost anything to a "farmed animal." As Wolfson and Sullivan (2004) note:

> State legislatures have endowed the farmed-animal industry with complete authority to define what is, and what is not, cruelty to the animals in their care. There is no legal limit to institutionalized cruel practices to farmed animals who live in states with customary farming exemptions, which constitute a growing majority of states; if a certain percentage of the farming community wants to institute a new method of raising a farmed animal, that is the end of the matter.…The customary farming exemptions are not only an example of a powerful industry evading a criminal law that applies to everyone else, they are a unique legal development in that they delegate criminal enforcement power to the industry itself. (p. 215)

The anti-cruelty law in Connecticut, to take one example, states that "any person who maliciously and intentionally maims, mutilates, tortures, wounds or kills an animal shall, (1) for a first offense, be guilty of a class D felony, and (2) for any subsequent offense, be guilty of a class C felony." However, the same statute goes on to state that "[t]he provisions of this subsection shall not apply...while following generally accepted agricultural practices" (Connecticut General Assembly, Chapter 945, §53–247b).

The lack of any meaningful federal and state protections for commercially exploited animals is not an accident but rather a functional necessity of the capitalist system, as the latter (as we have seen) depends upon the free appropriation of animals and their living spaces for the material reproduction of human society and for the accumulation of capital. Critics have noted that a hidden "sexual contract" and "racial contract" underpin the modern polity, with men and whites exerting social dominance over other groups, notwithstanding the appearance of formal equality in society (Pateman, 1988; Mills, 1997). But the *species contract*, as we might call it, is even more foundational to human civilization. In the terms of this contract, all humans have the right to wield power and violence against members of every other species, a right that does not flow in the other direction. The capitalist state meanwhile upholds and enforces the terms of this contract—hence the hundreds of laws, civil and criminal, serving to protect commercial and nonprofit animal exploitation, whether in agriculture, hunting, or laboratory experimentation, from interference by animal advocates. Hence too the role of the capitalist state in funding and regulating animal exploitation and legitimating and normalizing the system, whether through official reports and press releases of agencies like the USDA and Department of Fish and Wildlife, or through the educational system (the "Food Pyramid," funding for 4H programs, grants for animal research, etc.).

Finally, the capitalist nature of the liberal state complicates citizen efforts to challenge or abolish the speciesist system. Private monopoly control over mass media and other means of communication makes it difficult for animal advocates to be heard. And since the beliefs, values, and norms of society reflect those of the ruling class—those with the greatest stake in perpetuating the existing system—attempts by animal advocates to shut down (or even merely to disrupt) the

exterminationist system are met with hostility by a public whose ways of seeing and understanding the world have been shaped by capital, and who therefore regard themselves not as moral subjects, citizens, or historical agents, but as self-interested consumers. As a consequence, the "right" of the consumer to their meat is seen as trumping all ethical concerns, rights, or interests.

The Many Senses of "Vegan"

With this background before us, we can now turn to an examination of veganism itself. What, if anything, is new about the vegan movement? And what is its specific relationship to capitalism?

Ethical objections to the killing of animals for food first emerged nearly 3000 years ago, in Jainism and Buddhism in India, and in the vegetarian cults that developed around the philosophy of Pythagoras in ancient Greece. The notion that the human species, as such, might be said to constitute an oppressor class—a seemingly modern concept—can be found in germinal form in earlier epochs, for example, the tenth-century Islamic epistle, *The Case of the Animals vs. Man Before the King of the Jinn* (Goodman and McGregor, 2009). However, the specific notion that nonhuman animals can or should have "rights" as such only emerges in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, in early modern Europe. The idea of "abolitionism"—that is, that human domination of other species as such is the problem—is of even more recent vintage, dating to the late twentieth century.

Today's vegan and animal advocacy movements and organizations, which date to this latter period, must be placed against the backdrop of the growing pathologies of the food system under late capitalism. By the 1970s, those pathologies—including ecological disaster, threats to human health, and the extreme suffering of animals on industrialized farms—had grown to such proportions that the news media and the public could no longer completely ignore them. The breakdown of the animal agriculture system, in particular, created a structural opening for new oppositional movements to emerge. In this context, veganism is best understood as a collective ethical and political response to the systemic contradictions inherent in capitalist food production.

At first blush, the concept of veganism seems straightforward. "Vegan" describes a person who does not consume or utilize animal products, and "veganism" describes the practice of being a vegan. However, as a matter of empirical fact, the term "veganism" has come to refer to much more than merely an abstention from animal products. Discussion and debate surrounding what "veganism" *does* mean, as well as what it *should* mean, have become more pronounced in the past decade, with both the popular and academic literature identifying the term with a variety of behaviors and beliefs. Academic essays—for example, Cochrane and Cojocaru (2023) and Dutkiewicz and Dickstein (2021)—have identified multiple behavioral, operational, and normative definitions of the term. Two such definitions of veganism, in particular, deserve critical scrutiny: (1) that veganism should be construed exclusively as

"conduct-descriptive," that is, that "veganism" "should refer solely to an abstention from consuming and using animal-derived products" and not, for example, in terms of beliefs or ideology (Dutkiewicz and Dickstein, 2021, p. 3); (2) that veganism should be seen as a kind of tactic—specifically, a type of boycott focused on individual and collective consumer behaviors (Dickstein et al., 2022). Both definitions, however, have drawbacks.

First, the notion that veganism should be exclusively conduct-descriptive reduces the phenomenon to its purely behavioral manifestations, thus neglecting the crucial normative dimensions of vegan practice and, above all, the ethical intentions of vegans themselves. Taken literally, the conduct-descriptive view would thus depict hippopotamuses as vegans. Evidently, then, it is insufficient to describe veganism as a form of conduct alone, particularly since the vast majority of vegans see their veganism as in some sense "political," that is, as intended to effect change in society at large (Kalte, 2021). A workable definition of veganism must thus take into account its political and liberatory aspects.

The second popular academic definition of veganism, as a type of boycott focused on changing individual and collective consumer behaviors, though better than the first, is also incomplete. Unlike the classical boycotts of earlier movements—the Montgomery bus boycott, say, or the grape boycott of the United Farm Workers—veganism lacks a proper public dimension. In general, veganism is not publicly *perceived* as a boycott, that is, as a form of collective action or movement organized to effect a tangible political aim. Indeed, veganism is not widely seen to be a "movement" at all, but as an individual "lifestyle" choice. Veganism thus lacks a phenomenal form within what Hannah Arendt (1958) termed "the space of appearances"—that is, the public realm of a political community, where citizens meet to debate the shared terms and conditions of society and human life. Vegans are not viewed as participants in a social justice movement; the terms "vegan" and "veganism" are construed by the public, rather, in their least expansive senses—viz., as matters pertaining to a personal dietary choice, rather than as markers of a collective praxis whose goal is to free animals from all forms of human domination. This perception partly explains why vegans are so widely mocked by the public as censorious moral scolds and sentimentalists. (Vegans are consistently rated more negatively than atheists and immigrants and are seen as only slightly more respectable when their veganism is said to be motivated by health concerns rather than ethical or animal rights concerns (Cole and Morgan, 2011; Higgins, 2018; MacInnis and Hodson, 2017; Manjoo, 2019; Reynolds, 2019).)

Compared, then, to "animal rights," "animal liberation," or "abolitionism," or other oppositional terms that implicate the whole spectrum of speciesist practices—that is, not just diet or clothing, but vivisection, zoos, aquaria, hunting, rodeos, destruction of habitat, etc.—"veganism" is much more narrowly construed by the public, its scope limited by its association with eating habits. While it is clear, though, that people identify as vegan for a range of personal reasons (including health or environmental concerns), veganism is nonetheless best seen as an ethical and political movement, one that seeks to address speciesist social structures and systems—that is, as a form of collective activism carried out in solidarity *on behalf*

of animals (Cochrane and Cojocaru, 2023; Scholz, 2013). Whether "veganism" is itself the most appropriate label for encompassing anti-speciesist praxis, however, is not a topic we can address in the scope of this paper.

Veganism and the "Free Market"

While the number of people adopting a vegan diet for ethical reasons is on the rise globally (Kim, 2022), the status of veganism as a consumer movement has given it an ambiguous and even contradictory status within capitalist relations of production. Manufacturers of plant-based foods are interested in selling products, not in educating the public about the ethical and political problems with the speciesist system. Vegan products thus are marketed, first, as aesthetically desirable, second, as healthier than animal products, third, as more ecologically sustainable, and fourth (and more distantly) as being virtuous for the consumer to buy ("cruelty-free"). The consequence of this approach is inevitably to reinforce a free-market ideology that interpellates human beings as "consumers" rather than as citizens or moral agents. By conveying the message that consumers should "go vegan" because it is in their interests to do so, manufacturers reinforce the self-interested egoism at the heart of capitalist relations. Such an approach inevitably makes veganism vulnerable to changing consumer tastes and the caprices of the marketplace. A vegan burger marketed on the basis of its supposed nutritional or health advantages over animal products, for example, will have to compete with animal-based foods being marketed in similar terms—"lean pork," or "organic chicken," etc. If nutritional studies later reveal the health "savings" of eating processed vegan products to be negligible in comparison to animal foods, however, then consumers may find a reason to continue eating their organic chicken. A similar vulnerability can be seen in the marketing of vegetarian or vegan products based on their supposed environmental benefits. Indeed, there has been a raft of news stories in recent years profiling vegetarians who have gone back to eating meat now that they can buy "sustainable," "organic," and "healthy" chicken, beef, and pork (Applestone and Zissu, 2011; Kirby, 2019; Lennon, 2017).

Despite these problems, many liberal vegans and animal welfarists have continued to champion the free market as a panacea to speciesism. Wayne Pacelle, for example, the former CEO of the Humane Society of the United States, argues that capitalism is inexorably improving the lives of animals (Pacelle, 2016). Several leading animal advocacy nonprofits have meanwhile backed efforts to make the meat, egg, and dairy industries more "humane," suggesting that capitalist animal agriculture can be "reformed" in ways that would resolve many or most sources of animal suffering. The same organizations, and prominent movement leaders, have also touted high-technology cellular meats as the "solution" to the exploitation of animals for food (Shapiro, 2018). A coalition of venture capitalists, Silicon Valley technologists, and animal welfarists has begun developing such cellular meats—actual animal flesh, grown in vats—with proponents like Bruce Friedrich of the

Good Food Institute arguing that the power of capitalist agribusiness can be harnessed in pro-animal ways to shape consumers' perceptions and desires anew—as a way to wean the public off of (or at least away from) meat from living animals (Freston and Friedrich, 2018). Animal agriculture interests like Cargill, Tyson, and other large meat companies have in fact begun investing in companies developing synthesized flesh products.

Many vegans and animal welfarists have thus retained their faith in the free market, believing that by "voting" with their wallets, conscientious consumers can reduce demand for animal products over time. Confronted with the horrors of "animal capital" (Stache, 2020), vegan consumers reason that consuming animal products increases demand, which in turn increases the production of animal products. Therefore, by refusing to contribute to the consumption of animal products—that is, by personally *boycotting* the purchase and consumption of animal products—they believe they are decreasing demand, and therefore decreasing harm to animals. At the center of this kind of reasoning is a *causal* relation. The idea is that my consuming animal products generates demand, which in turn increases the production of animal products, which ultimately increases animal suffering and death. Many if not most vegans seem to subscribe to thinking along these lines, believing that in adopting a vegan diet they are decreasing animal harm by removing themselves from the causal chain of the animal system.

As critics have observed, however, this kind of linear causal story connecting individual consumer choice to changes in market supply gets the facts wrong, as modern industrial capitalist markets (like the chicken market) are too massive to be sensitive to the purchasing signals generated by an individual consumer. Individual consumer choices in themselves cannot be said to make a discernible difference in decreasing the number of animals harmed. This is known as the causal inefficacy objection to ethical veganism, and it underscores the impotence of individual "consumers" in the face of the immensity of the system of animal capital. In fact, conceiving of veganism chiefly in terms of individual choice—that is, as a species of what some anti-capitalist critics have dubbed "lifestylism" (Bookchin, 1995)—is problematic in itself, on several levels.

"Tactical" or boycott veganism—that is, conceiving of veganism solely or primarily as the abstention from nonhuman animal products—promotes the liberal myth of voluntarist consumer power. In reality, despite a significant rise in the number of people identifying as vegan (Grand View Research, 2019; Sentient Media, 2021), the number of animals slaughtered annually has continued to rise (Faunalytics, 2022). Put simply, the increased number of vegans appears to have done little to nothing to decrease meat consumption in recent years. So-called online "vegan calculators" (e.g., The Vegan Calculator, n.d.) claiming to inform users on the number of animals individual vegan consumer choices save seem to be more about confirming vegan consumer virtue than supplying inconvenient truths about the real world. As Jenkins and Stanescu (2014) note:

> Boycott veganism conflates conspicuous consumption with ethical action and political change. Simply replacing animal with plant-based products only transfers capital to global corporations through different mechanisms; boycott veganism serves to reinforce capitalist

> institutions and neoliberal social structures that promote the commodification of life and disguise market forces as neutral, amoral means of distributing social goods. Furthermore, limiting activism to an economic boycott undercuts the moral force of veganism by reducing it to an individual lifestyle choice...promoting moral progress by "voting" with dollars leaves ethical responses to the exploitation of human and nonhuman animals to the will of the market. (p. 78)

To put the matter in its simplest terms, one cannot buy one's way out of the commodity fetish nor commodity narcissism (Cluley and Dunne, 2012), no matter how much one pays for organic or pasture-raised meat. In short, we cannot consume our way to animal liberation.

At this point one might object: Aren't there ameliorative movements that are meaningful in a capitalistic system such as the "ethical consumption" movement involving practices like the "ethical" sourcing of coffee beans, or boycotting goods of child labor like clothing products of the "fast fashion" industry? Don't these practices signal decreased demand, pressuring producers in competitive markets to transform the ways they do business, thus thwarting producers? The short answer is, no.

First, fair trade only touches the surface of the problem, leaving the overall structural dynamics and class relations built into capitalism as a system fundamentally intact. Fair-trade movements have failed to slow the rate of resource depletion, to alter inequitable terms of trade between the global North and global South, or to improve the social position of exploited workers. A movement to ameliorate the suffering of animals is bound to fail for the same reasons.

Second, so-called ethically sourced products like fair trade coffee often obscure hidden labor exploitation. For example, the Fairtrade Foundation does not mandate that small-holding coffee growers (those consisting of 20 or fewer employees) pay their workers a living wage. Further, many of these smallholders themselves hire low-wage migrant workers during harvest (Luetchford, 2007).

Supply-and-demand thinking, that is, the belief that reducing the demand for animals reduces the number of animals slaughtered, is demonstrably false—or, at least, is not as linear as vegan calculators would lead us to believe. Powerful animal agribusiness "producers" adapt to decreased demand in manifold ways to maintain profits, including: cutting production costs through employee layoffs (Doering, 2023), ignoring labor laws and regulations, and ignoring necessary steps in production (Bakst, 2016; Goldstein and Facundo, 2023); manufacturing demand in developing nations (a tactic perfected by the tobacco industry) by lobbying for looser regulations (Kathrin, 2019a); developing "efficient" import–export strategies (Kathrin, 2019a); increasing labor demands on slaughterhouse workers through worker exploitation (e.g., high workloads and dangerous and extreme line speeds) (Heanue, 2022), the use of refugee (Hernandez and Jordan, 2023) and prison labor (Williams, 2023); government-subsidized price supports, for example, federal governments buying up surplus production and subsidizing prices (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, n.d.).

A further problem with rooting animal advocacy in a consumer-based strategy is "corporate capture," as the leading meat, dairy, and pharmaceutical interests gain

control over an increasing share of the vegan consumer market. Monopoly capitalism concentrates greater and greater wealth and social power in an ever-shrinking number of corporate hands: more than half of all chicken production is now controlled by JBS, Tyson, Sanderson, and Purdue, more than two-thirds of pork production is controlled by JBS, Tyson, Smithfield, Hormel, and Tyson, and almost three-quarters of beef production is controlled by JBS, Tyson, National Beef, and Cargill (Hendrickson et al., 2020). These powerful companies are now seeking to dominate the so-called alternative protein market, too. Vegan products are owned by multinational animal agriculture conglomerates, which effectively act to *commodity dissent* to the animal system (Frank and Weiland, 1997; Haug, 1986), neutralizing the more radical, disruptive aspects of veganism. For example, the White Wave Company, which produces Silk soy milk products and So Delicious vegan dessert products, was recently purchased by the French multinational dairy corporation Danone. Similarly, Litelife Foods and Field Roast, both producers of vegan meats, were recently acquired by Greenleaf Foods, SPC, a subsidiary of Maple Leaf Foods, Inc., a Canadian multinational packaged meats corporation. Meanwhile, the Otsuka pharmaceutical company, the second biggest pharma in Japan, has purchased the Daiya Vegan Cheese company. By continuing to purchase products from such companies, vegans are increasing the profits of companies that have a vested business interest in maintaining—and even expanding—animal exploitation. Otsuka, for example, conducts experiments on animals: should vegans therefore stop buying Daiya cheeses? Addressing that question, vegan writer Kate Pevreall asks:

> In a world where capitalism prevails how are we supposed to help spread veganism in a way that doesn't impact our morals?....If current vegans were to boycott Daiya due to the morals of their now parent company, it would likely destroy a well-known vegan brand that encourages people to try alternatives and replace animal products in their life. (Livekindly, 2019)

Recently, big meat companies like Tyson, Smithfield, Perdue, and Hormel have begun rolling out their own meat alternatives including plant-based burgers, meatballs, and chicken nuggets (Yaffe-Bellany and Arumugam, 2019). However, this has posed an ethical and political dilemma for vegans. If they refuse to support vegan products in their drive to expand their dominance over the meat market, it will lessen demand for plant-based alternatives to flesh. However, if consumers do purchase vegan products, they will be helping the meat industry continue to sell meat from live animals.

The trouble is that agribusiness companies are run not by animal rights advocates but by businesspeople; consequently, there is no reason to suppose that meat companies will abandon their huge capital investments in intensive animal agriculture in order to turn everyone into a vegan. On the contrary, companies like Cargill have made it clear that they are investing in both vegan and cellular meats as part of a diversified protein portfolio while continuing to modernize and even expand their intensive animal agriculture facilities. In a 2020 press release, Cargill CEO Brian Sikes explains:

> At Cargill, we recognize that meat is a core part of consumer diets and central to many cultures and traditions. We believe consumers will continue to choose meat as a protein

source, and that is why we are focused on bringing it to their table as sustainably and cost-effectively as we can. Our traditional proteins, as well as new innovations like cultured meats, are both necessary to meet that demand. (Food Navigator USA, 2020)

To underscore this strategy, Cargill continues to invest heavily in its factory farming infrastructure—including "nearly $600 million in recent investments in conventional protein in North America alone" (Food Navigator USA, 2020). By 2040, according to a report by the consulting firm A.T. Kearney, plant-based and cellular meats are likely to account for over half the market in protein products; however, as the size of the global protein market is also expected to double in the same period, the overall number of animals killed for human consumption worldwide would decrease only slightly, if at all (Gerhardt et al., 2020).

As this discussion suggests, there are clear contradictions involved in privileging vegan consumption as a strategy for promoting animal liberation within a capitalist order. Veganism tends to collapse into voluntarism, with the focus on individual consumer actions inevitably coming at the expense of (1) structural critique of capitalism and of the capitalist state and (2) effective collective action. Alas, there is little evidence that "conscientious consumerism" is an effective form of activism. Behind the illusion of consumer "free choice" lie powerful economic and political interests with the ability not only to shape what consumers want, but to shape who they are—their perceptions, desires, values, needs, and conceptions of the world. The belief that a global system of mass violence like speciesism—the most extensive and deeply rooted system of oppression in existence—can be overcome through changing citizens' consumption habits alone—by creating "one vegan at a time"—thus seems insupportable.

Even as the evidence for the relationship between industrial animal agriculture and environmental devastation continues to mount (Eisen and Brown, 2022), the view that we can solve climate change through voluntaristic veganism has nonetheless gained popularity. What this view misses is that it is *capitalism*—not "factory farms"—that transforms animals into commodities for profit. It is the profit motive, a structural imperative of capitalist development, that motivates the mass extraction of resources, animal and other. Even if everyone became vegan, we would still be left with capitalist destruction and capitalist exploitation of human and nonhuman life at a global scale. In emphasizing individualistic solutions, veganism also may mask more revolutionary strategies (Kathrin, 2019b).

It is clear that the destruction of terrestrial life is a problem that requires coordinated, *collective*, not merely individualistic, action. Boycotting meat products will not by itself achieve animal liberation. What we need is an explicitly political struggle, one organized around ending the global oppression of animals and waged in solidarity with working persons. The more we focus on lifestylism the more capitalism goes unchallenged. As ecosocialist activist Sebastian Livingston notes:

Within advanced capitalism, consumer culture serves as a counter revolutionary safeguard, a sedative. And as we come to identify with the products of our alienated labor rather than realize our alienation within the process of production we sink deeper into the veins of capital, becoming the reproductive organs of the beast. (Livingston, 2019)

Vegan lifestylism may even help ensure a kind of homeostasis within the capitalist system. We instead need to conceive of veganism not as an ethical practice of consumption within the capitalist system but as a heretical remedy to capitalism.

Is There a Strong Case for Veganism?

In the face of the seeming inefficacy of veganism under the system of animal capital, do we still find strong grounds to advocate for veganism? Vegan critics have responded to causal inefficacy objections in various ways. In general, their responses fall into two broad categories: those that deny causal inefficacy and those that accept it. Of those that deny causal inefficacy, Alastair Norcross (2004) and Shelly Kagan (2011) argue that despite appearances to the contrary, veganism is a rational response to systems of animal capital given the expected utility of various vegan consumer choices. Since collective action has causal impact, then at least *some* individual actions must have causal impact. The efficacy of collective action is not due to some mystical metaphysical occurrence but rather to a combination of imperceptible individual actions, each of which, combined with the tiny impacts of others, results in a significant causal effect overall. In this view, being vegan *makes a material difference* in the world.

As a matter of empirical fact, modern supply chains that connect individual farmers to consumers *are* surprisingly responsive. The checkout procedures of today's large grocery stores can actually track the sale of each product, automatically ordering replacements from parent companies. Current information technology allows firms to track sales in detail, down to the level of the individual transaction, including the rates of orders, in order to optimize shipping and refrigeration times and to minimize waste. (McMullen and Halteman, 2019) Thus, there must exist some threshold point in sales that will trigger a material reduction in production (Kagan, 2011). So, there is reason to believe that vegan choices actually can make a difference to the number of farmed animals produced or slaughtered. Further, no matter what the causal impact of your consumer choices, one's *not* being vegan certainly acts to delay such a threshold event (Norcross, 2004).

A second, related response involves the notion of role modeling, or *signaling*. Vegan activists in the age of social media have a greater probability than in the past of influencing others who, in turn, influence others, and so on, a *social contagion* wherein an action of a particular type increases the probability of another action of that type. On this view, vegan signaling can increase the chances that others become vegan, which increases the odds that the collective action of the aggregate triggers a reduction in production.

A third response involves what Wright (2019) calls the five "strategic logics" central to anticapitalist struggles: smashing, dismantling, taming, resisting, and escaping capitalism. Dickstein et al. (2022) argue that veganism assists particularly with the *erosion* of capitalism. On their view, veganism

> distinguishes itself by enacting an alternative sense of who registers in our ethical calculus…. To adopt veganism as praxis does not just attempt to directly reduce the amount of animal products consumed…but presents a commitment to live a life that relates to animals in a new way—and to be open to the new relationships and practices that subsequently emerge. (p. 11)

In this sense, veganism's unique power is found in its "reimagining multi-species relations to ones not rooted in a violent cycle of domination primarily mediated through consumption" (p. 11).

Suppose, however, that none of these reasons motivate an obligation to become a vegan. Suppose, further, that under the system of animal capital, causal inefficacy wins the day and being a vegan makes no direct or even indirect progress toward a reduction in the production of animal products. Why then be vegan?

Harman (2015) argues that actions may be morally wrong not only because they increase harm in the world, but because they involve what she calls *joint causation*. For Harman, a joint cause is an act that is neither necessary nor sufficient for a particular effect. To illustrate, given a 100-person legislative body where a majority vote is required to pass a bill, any one of the 100 voting members is a joint cause of passing a given bill where 51 votes are sufficient. On this deontic view, we don't need to make a causal difference to have good reasons for not participating in collective wrongs. For instance, even if joining a large group of bullies makes no difference to how badly the victim is hurt, it's still wrong to participate in large group bullying. With regard to vegan consumer behavior, even though individual purchases of vegan products have little if any effect on decreasing harm to animals, it could still be morally wrong to fail to participate as a joint cause in such a collective good. Harman identifies two moral reasons for individuals to adopt vegan praxis independent of whether doing so has causal effect on decreasing animal suffering. By consuming animal products, one is participating as a joint cause in practices that harm animals, and also failing to participate in a movement that can do a lot of moral good.

Martin (2015) argues that even if adopting vegan practice makes no causal difference to decreasing animal harm, not doing so makes the consumer *complicit* in harming animals. Central to Martin's view are the notions of role-taking and group function. Individual consumers of animal products are complicit in the suffering and killing of animals not because they contribute directly (or even indirectly) to such harm, but because they willingly choose a *role* and participate as a member of a consumer *group* that functions to signal demand. On this "collectivized liability" account of moral responsibility:

> [e]veryone who voluntarily joins [in the bullying] thereby participates in a cooperative project aimed at making the victim suffer, and it is surely right that each individual participant is thereby liable to be blamed for the victim's suffering….[T]his liability stands even if the individual does not actually contribute to the victim's suffering. (p. 210)

Similarly, the nonvegan chooses to participate in a group—a consumer group—that functions to signal demand to agribusiness, making one complicit in the harming of animals. In order not to be complicit, one must—at minimum—abstain from the

consumption of animal products, regardless of whether such abstention is causally inefficacious.

Adams (1990) describes meat in terms of what she calls the *absent referent*, the literal, conscious being who is disappeared in the eating of the corpses of animal others. Adams argues that the absent referent permits us to forget about the animal as an independent entity while enabling us to resist efforts to make the animal present. The processes of commodification and objectification under capitalism turn sentient beings into absent referents; veganism encourages us not to forget the sensitive, material beings who suffer and die to produce "meat" and other animal products. This consciousness is necessary if we are to stand in solidarity *on behalf of* animals against the commodification of their lives and bodies.

According to Gruen (2011), ontologizing animals as food—that is, conceptualizing them as existing in the category of the edible—denies them their individual personalities and interests. Categorizing animals as "edible" renders sentient beings as fungible, disposable, and consumable. When we conceive of animals as commodities, we alter the relationships we have with them as well as how we imagine those relationships. Veganism "seeks to alter the terms that determine which beings are a who and which are a what." (Dickstein et al., 2022, p. 11) Similarly, Diamond (1978) argues that, as humans, we understand ourselves as not being in the category of the edible—an understanding that, in part, shapes how we construct our relations with each other and the ways of life we share. If we were instead to think of our and other people's bodies as food, the value of our bodies and ourselves would be diminished.

In a similar vein, animal virtue ethicists argue that those who are truly concerned for the well-being of animals should feel revulsion at the prospect of participating in such activities, and should therefore refuse to be party to them, even if their participation does not cause harm to animals. They argue that, vis-á-vis our relations with other species, *compassion* is the relevant virtue speaking to the quality of our moral character. On this view, ethical veganism is the kind of practice a virtuous and compassionate moral being would adopt (Abbate, 2014; Alvaro, 2019; Hursthouse, 2006). In this context, most critics, virtue ethicists or otherwise, acknowledge that there is no "moral purity," as such, to veganism. To walk in solidarity on behalf of animals against speciesist structural and systemic oppressions does remove one from the larger cycle of violence and killing, since virtually all aspects of consumption in late capitalism involve harming humans and animals. For this reason, veganism can only be, in an important sense, aspirational (Gruen and Jones, 2015).

Relatedly, Sanbonmatsu (2014) sees veganism as part of an existentialist project. For Sanbonmatsu, we humans *choose* speciesism. Bifurcating and collapsing the world of beings into the "human" and the "animal" results in a kind of self-alienation in which we estrange ourselves not only from other sentient beings, but from our own humanity, too. In so doing, he argues, we refuse responsibility for the freedom to refrain from violence toward the other beings. Correspondingly, by choosing not to consume animal products, we choose ourselves as better beings, refusing to endorse the unjust domination inherent in the system of animal capital.

Conclusion

In sum, veganism commits one morally to the idea that conscious, sensitive beings possess intrinsic—not merely instrumental—value, and politically to anti-capitalist critique. To conceive of veganism either as a consumer boycott or as a free-market solution to animal oppression is therefore problematic.

Veganism is best seen, rather, as a tactic within a wider revolutionary movement whose goal is animal liberation in the broadest sense, that is, the freeing of nonhuman animals from human domination, and the freeing of human beings themselves from the oppressive structures that limit their own species capacities. Conceived this way, it is plain that veganism—*as* anti-speciesism (the better term)—will need to achieve public recognition as a form of collective action and political solidarity, rather than a "lifestyle" choice, if it is to achieve its full potential. That is, veganism must come to be viewed as a full-fledged social justice movement, one organized around the abolition of speciesism as a system under capitalism (Jones, 2015).

It is clear, then, that we need revolutionary change—a transformation not only of the food system but of our mode of economic development, too. Structurally, politically, and economically, we need an alternative to capitalism. This does not mean that we should revert to totalitarian Communism—the USSR and its satellite states, and China under Mao (Shapiro, 2001), produced terrible ecological catastrophes and their treatment of animals was no better than in the capitalist West. The choice, however, is not between totalitarian Communism on one side and laissez-faire capitalism on the other. This is a false dilemma. Ecological Marxists (Benton, 2011), socialists committed to animal liberation (Alliance, 2018; Eisenman, 2016), and scholars elaborating on the critiques of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno of the early Frankfurt School (Maurizi, 2021), have all made a compelling case for a new, democratic conception of socialism, one unafraid to stand in defense of all sentient life and against every form of violence and exploitation. Abandoning human supremacy (Crist, 2017) in favor of a nonspeciesist political and cultural morality would entail a titanic human metamorphosis, a transformational shift in human identity in which we would come to see the earth as a holistic community of sui generis, morally valuable beings—a planet bursting with diverse forms of consciousness, sentience, and intelligence. What is at stake is not merely our own material survival, but our spiritual and moral flourishing. In surrendering our dominion, we would discover the joy and comfort to be found in interspecies friendship, connection, and love. We might at last also reconcile ourselves to ourselves—to our own animal natures. We and the other animals have nothing to lose but our chains, and a world to win.

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