

Being vegangelical and the radical sustenance of culture

Lelia Green
Edith Cowan University

Abstract

Consumers in liberal democracies have been invited to adopt a range of new or modified behaviours—from waste recycling through water restrictions; green energy; cycling and hybrid cars. Yet there has been extraordinarily little emphasis upon our primary consumption patterns: the practicalities of what we eat.

This paper addresses the claimed environmental benefits of the vegan diet: a plant-based regime that excludes animal products—meat, fish, fowl, dairy and eggs. It asks why this regime has been so little discussed as a possible response to a range of ethical, health and environmental issues.

Proponents of veganism claim that contemporary practices of growing plants to feed animals—which are reared to feed humans—is one of the most wasteful ways imaginable to treat the planet's resources. Further, vegans suggest that this everyday approach to furnishing the western table has ethical implications (in terms of the Animal Liberation agenda) and general health implications (*The China Study*). Veganism is also promoted as an effective way to respond positively to the dietary restrictions (Halal, Kosher) inherent in a range of world religions, thus promoting cross-cultural and inter-religious harmony.

Latterly there have been (less authoritative) suggestions that the two major diseases of the affluent world—heart disease (Esselstyn) and cancer (Plant)—are preventable, or even treatable—with a vegan diet.



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Assuming that even a proportion of these arguments have merit, why is it that veganism remains such a minority pursuit in the face of a widespread social commitment to promote cultural sustainability?

Key words

culture, sustainable environment, sources of sustenance

In 2007 Al Gore and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change shared the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for

their efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change, and to lay the foundations for the measures that are needed to counteract such change. (Nobel Prize 2007)

Gore's film, *An inconvenient truth* (Guggenheim 2006), won the 2006 Academy Award (Oscar) for Best Documentary Feature. In light of these awards, it is not surprising to find a range of messages circulating in popular culture about minimising our individual impact on the environment. From invitations to purchase green energy via renewable sources of power generation, to offsetting the carbon burden of air travel, corporations' customer service models increasingly offer ways to consume with a less guilty conscience. In these circumstances, as Western citizens institute individual carbon-trading schemes at the level of the household, and argue about the relative cost of importing tomatoes compared with growing them in artificially heated glass houses, it is to be expected that there is a burgeoning of books with titles such as *The rough guide to ethical living: Low-carbon living and responsible shopping* (Clarke 2006) and *How to live a low-carbon life: the individual's*



guide to stopping carbon change (Goodall 2007), and magazines like *Ethical Consumer* (n.d.) and *New Consumer* (n.d.)

Concurrently with the focus on ethical consumption; the minimisation of carbon emissions; and the halting or reversal of climate change, consumers are facing an unparalleled chorus of messages about the health status of citizens in Western democracies. Facing ‘epidemics’ of obesity (childhood and adult) and diabetes (Zimmet & James 2006; Cameron et al. 2003), asthma and allergies (Prescott & Tang 2005), heart disease (declining incidence, but still the biggest killer) (Vos & Begg 2007) and osteoporosis (Sambrook et al. 2002); and with increasing rates of a variety of cancers (AIHW 2007); public health messages about people consuming more fruit, vegetables, whole grains and fibre are becoming increasingly strident. At the same time the warnings against being a *Fast food nation* (Schlosser 2002), or *Bad food Britain* (Blythman 2006) or *Fat Land* (Critser, 2003) jostle with Oscar-nominated blockbusters such as *Super size me* (2004) for space in the popular culture segments of the public sphere.

The rise in lifestyle-related ill-health has been so dramatically situated in the last third of the twentieth century—and is accelerating in such a stark manner—that the cause behind these effects seems likely to be a systemic change (or changes) in the way people are living. The popular culprits have been identified as ‘Too much fat’ (or ‘Too much sugar/high-fructose corn syrup’) and ‘Too little exercise’, but these are messages that have been circulating even as the health challenges have been growing. Meanwhile, the percentage of fat in the Western diet has been declining (Taubes 2007) without delivering any of the anticipated benefits. What else can be going on? Gary Taubes argues that:

the low-fat recommendations, besides being unjustified, may well have harmed Americans by encouraging them to switch to carbohydrates, which he believes cause obesity and disease. (Tierney 2007)



His favoured hypothesis for delivering better health is a low-carbohydrate diet but ‘the low-carb hypothesis hasn’t been seriously studied because it couldn’t be reconciled with the low-fat dogma’ (Tierney 2007). Instead, Taubes identifies the dynamics of culpability as being an ‘informational cascade’ (where people sign up to an apparent consensus since they feel unable to countermand the information circulating) coupled with a ‘reputational cascade’ (where people fear a reputational slur as a result of not signing up to the consensus: for example, concerns over the sources of funding for the studies on which their dissident views are based) (Tierney 2007).

The vegan diet

The benefit of veganism is another hypothesis that has not been seriously studied. Indeed, for many of the key authors who will shortly be cited, the issue is not only one of low/no animal products, but of focussing on a natural, wholefoods, plant-based diet: what has been termed Low HI—low Human Interference.¹ ‘Veganism’, as a term, is often not used in order to foreground the plant-centred nature of a healthy diet. (Veganism has been used in this paper to indicate the absence of animal protein and because the word play implied in vegangelical deserves a wider audience than the thousand or so citations—up from about 100 in the past year—currently on Google.)

Unlike Taubes’ unstudied low-carbohydrate diet theory, veganism does fit into a low (saturated) fat regime, but is generally seen as too extreme, and too outside the realms of the ‘healthy eating pyramid’ (Nutrition Australia n.d.) for it to be taken seriously in the informationally-cascaded biomedical circles. Even so, a range of authors have been spruiking veganism as an appropriate response to the health, environmental, culturally inclusive, ethical and animal liberational agendas currently circulating in the minority world. Some of these authors have also challenged the low-fat hypothesis. Esselstyn (2007, p. 36), for example, argues that the reason why the benefits of a lower-fat diet are not



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demonstrable is that ‘moderation kills’. The appropriate answer to the challenge of heart disease, he suggests, is more no-fat than low-fat.

In response to the traditional healthy eating pyramid the US Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM n.d.) has issued alternative food recommendations based on a vegan lifestyle.

Table 1. Four food groups, from Saunders 2003, p. 28

Fruit	3 or more servings per day
Grains	5 or more servings per day
Vegetables	3 or more servings per day
Legumes	2 or more servings per day

Although the PCRM has about 10,000 members in the US (Saunders 2003, p. 25), the dominant messages about healthy eating in the media remain those that are aligned to the interests of the meat, fish, fowl, egg and dairy industries and conventional agriculture, and the money invested in prevention is paltry compared with the money available for treating established disease.

In *The China Study* (2004), Campbell and Campbell argue that animal protein has, in and of itself, been implicated in the increased development of cancerous tumours: ‘nutrients from animal-based foods increased tumor development while nutrients from plant-based foods decreased tumor development’ (Campbell & Campbell 2004, p. 66). These small scale laboratory studies were then used as the basis for investigating differential cancer rates recorded in the nutritionally diverse Peoples Republic of China in the early 1980s and overlaid against the Chinese *Cancer Atlas Survey* (Campbell & Campbell 2004, pp. 69 & 72). This exercise—the report upon which is the main substance of *The China Study*—indicates



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that the areas in China that at that time experienced the highest rates of Western cancers were also the areas that consumed the most animal products.

Jane Plant, herself a cancer survivor and a meticulously-trained earth sciences expert, also used the Chinese *Cancer Atlas Survey* (Plant 2007, p. 78) as a key to her eventual conquest of breast cancer. Her recommendation is to reduce animal protein to less than ten percent of daily dietary intake by calories, rather than to exclude it all together, as vegans would suggest. Nonetheless, Plant does advocate a plant-based diet and the total elimination of all dairy foods. The lack of an absolute on the matter of animal protein may explain why Plant's work is not widely cited by the coterie of plant-diet promoting American-based (usually) physicians who, in addition to Esselstyn (2007), comprise Ornish (1990), McDougall (1990), Fuhrman (2003) and Barnard (1996). Many of these draw upon the original work of Nathan Pritikin (Pritikin & McGrady 1979) and, like Pritikin did, some have instituted residential centres where their interventionary diet and exercise regimes have been extensively trialled with strongly positive results. Some of these books are targeted at heart disease, some at cancer; others at weight loss and anti-aging. This might be in order to attract the attention of selected populations of eager-for-information consumers. Throughout, the basic tenet of plant-based animal-free eating remains intact. As Campbell and Campbell (2004, p. 109-10) comment:

The evidence now amassed from researchers around the world shows that the same diet that is good for the prevention of cancer is also good for the prevention of heart disease, as well as obesity, diabetes, cataracts, macular degeneration, Alzheimer's, cognitive dysfunction, multiple sclerosis, osteoporosis and other diseases. Furthermore, this diet can only benefit everyone, regardless of his or her genes or personal dispositions. [...] [T]here is one diet to counteract all of these diseases: a whole foods, plant-based diet.



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The wholefoods advocates put forward a range of reasons as to why the broader medical establishment has not been prepared to embrace their findings. The most cogent of these include a claim that most patients are unwilling or unable to follow through on the dietary modifications required; the lobbying power of the meat, eggs, fish and dairy industries; and the discomfort of being a scientific outlier. Even so, citing Ornish, Esselstyn comments: 'I don't understand why asking people to eat a well-balanced vegetarian diet is considered drastic, while it is medically conservative to cut people open' (2007, p. 93). Also implicated alongside the power and economic might of agribusiness is the power of the medical establishment and the technology and skills-based infrastructures that support this. Doctors become most rich when the health chips are down and a dramatic intervention (such as a by-pass or a transplant) is required to save the day—and the patient. Prevention gets short shrift in this model. As Upton Sinclair, an American novelist who died in 1968, said: 'It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it' (cited on the site of *An Inconvenient Truth* [Guggenheim 2006]).

Environmental, ethical and inclusive reasons for a radical vegetarianism

Although it might be expected that most people would be motivated by self-interest to experiment with a vegan diet, there are at least three other reasons to do this. The environment is one of these. *Diet for a small planet* (Lappe 1991) was originally written in the late 1960s in response to a realisation that it was hugely wasteful to feed animals with food that could sustain far more humans than the meat they produced. Latterly, this message has been underlined by the findings of the Livestock Environment and Development, and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation's joint report on *Livestock's long shadow* (Steinfeld et al. 2006). This report details exhaustive research into the impact of livestock animals on the biosphere and the environment commenting, for example, that while accounting for only twenty percent of the globe's biomass, livestock monopolises seventy percent of available arable land—land that would once have been biologically



diverse. Additionally, the extensive rearing of livestock, and the creation of huge feedlots, has been associated with significant water consumption and a range of pollution and environmental degradation issues. Thus livestock and the farming of animals for food extract a disproportionate price from the environment.

The environment and consumer health, however, are not the only areas to suffer from modern farming practices. Animals also suffer. A number of organisations and books have detailed the cruelty of most farming practices, and this is one of the many reasons given as to why some consumers adopt a vegetarian diet eschewing most animal protein and only consuming eggs and dairy. In *The ethics of what we eat* (2006), Peter Singer and Jim Mason debunk these arguments, too. They underline the cruelty implicated in the removal of calves from their milking mothers, and the killing of male chicks and the shortening of the life expectancy (to about twenty-five percent of the natural span) of the flocks of egg-laying hens—including free range hens. Whilst they argue that free range, organic, sustainable food is better for the animal (and the consumer and producer), these authors suggest that the production of all animal protein is exploitative of suffering and indicative of species-ism. Jane Plant (2007) is also unequivocal about the negative impacts of the management of milk production in cows, and especially the implications of widespread usage of antibiotics and hormones on the health of the animals and consumers.

Cultural sensitivities might additionally dictate the eventual move away from animal flesh. In an age when Halal, Kosher and Hindu dietary restrictions divide populations, appropriately prepared and cooked vegetable foods can reunite them.

So why is there not more debate?

The public sphere is becoming more accessible to more voices as access to the Internet spreads. This diversity of voice goes hand in hand with a fragmentation of audiences and



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readerships (McKee 2005) and a retreat to the authority of 'the expert' and 'the respectable source'. A call to a wholefoods, plant-based diet misses out on each of these criteria. The informational cascade (Tierney 2007) favours the status quo in terms of expertise, while the funding of research into food favours the continuing influence of agribusiness and horticulture. Together, the expert and the funding streams mean that funding continues to go to projects which tweak the dimensions of recommendations regarding animal products: low-fat or skim? White meat or red? Fresh-water fish or deep sea? Very few of these dynamics predispose the researchers, or the consumers, to ask radical questions.

Similarly, the funding of medical research and of consequent careers favours the lionisation of interventions over prevention and of technologically-assisted interventions over nutritional ones. The medical establishments that are talked about and supported by foundations are more likely to be innovating new procedures than advocating more ingestion of fruit and vegetables. Indeed, the fruit and vegetable production sectors are peculiarly un-powerful. Natural products are not protected by trademarks or patents; they are not enhanced by value-adds; apart from matters such as the organic or biodynamic cultivation of foodstuffs, and local or imported produce, there is little market differentiation possible that would compensate for the mark-ups on manufactured, processed and slaughtered food. An absence of mark-ups and margins also translates into less advertising and a reduced media spend. Magazines and papers consequently get far more advertising and sponsorship mileage from lauding the use of animal products over a wholefoods plant-based diet. This dynamic reduces the coverage of vegan arguments in the press and makes such information appear as marginalised and 'fringe' as is currently the case. In fact, without the book publishers, the websites, and the multiply-repeated impacts of the experiential courses run by such authorities as Joel Furhman, John McDougall and Robert Pritikin (son of Nathan) it might be possible to dismiss vegans as just a bunch of deluded diet evangelicals.



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Note

1. L Boniface 2006, personal communication.



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