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Contemporary Vegetarianism in the U.K.: Challenge and Incorporation?

A. D. BEARDSWORTH and E. T. KEIL
Department of Social Sciences, University of Loughborough

The relationship between vegetarianism and the "orthodox" food ideology and the overall food system in the U.K. is complex and ambiguous. Vegetarianism, and *a fortiori* veganism, appear to represent a direct challenge to orthodox foodways and current production methods. Yet there is some evidence for the incorporation of vegetarianism into the commercial food system, which raises the question of how and why incorporation has occurred.

Vegetarianism as Challenge

Vegetarianism consists of a spectrum of inter-related food selection and food avoidance patterns, ranging from strict veganism at one end to much looser forms at the other, which may allow fish or even poultry. The vast majority of western vegetarians are converts (often "self-converts") who have made a conscious choice to reject certain aspects of orthodox foodways, having subjected them to critical scrutiny. The research reported here deliberately excludes any analysis of ethnic groups and sub-cultures where vegetarianism is customary practice.

Vegetarianism challenges conventional nutritional culture in several ways:

Nutritional. Meat is argued to be an unsuitable food for humans, being seen as "heavy", and as causing digestive problems, as well as having negative implications for health. Vegetarian foods are characterized as "light" and "full of vitality" (as opposed to the "dead flesh" of meat). Vegetarian foods are seen as superior in both nutritional and gustatory terms. Indeed, Twigg (1979, 1983) has argued that vegetarians invert the conventional food preference hierarchy.

Moral. The rearing, transporting and slaughter of food animals is challenged on moral grounds in that it is regarded as entailing unacceptable suffering or violation of animals' rights.

Spiritual. The ingestion of meat, and especially of blood, is seen as compromising spirituality and inflaming "animal passions".

Ecological. Animal husbandry is seen as ecologically damaging and resource-extravagant compared with the production of plant foodstuffs with people as the primary consumers.

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Address correspondence to: Alan Beardsworth or Teresa Keil, Department of Social Sciences, University of Loughborough, Loughborough, Leics. LE11 3TU, U.K.

0195–6663/93/030229+06 $08.00/0

These challenges are very deeply rooted in western thinking, for example in classical thought (Dombrowski 1985). They also appear in medieval theology and in the work of eighteenth century English writers questioning the anthropocentric world view (Thomas, 1983). These ideas developed further in the nineteenth century and led to the establishment of the Vegetarian Society in Britain. They find their contemporary manifestation in the work of philosophers like Singer (1976), Regan (1984), Midgely (1983) and Clark (1984), and of vegetarian propagandists such as Wynne-Tyson (1975). Indeed, it can be argued that, with between one and two million practising vegetarians in the U.K. (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992), vegetarianism has become a "mass" option in the U.K. and is no longer a radical stance for a small "deviant" élite.

Evidence of this challenge to orthodox foodways emerged in our qualitative study of a snowball sample of 76 vegetarians. We have described elsewhere (Beardsworth & Keil, 1991a, 1991b, 1992a) the range of reasons—moral, health, ecological, political—given by respondents for their move towards vegetarianism. Whatever the explanation given, all the accounts have in common the reappraisal of established conventions about the use of animals as food. Whether by dramatic conversion or through a more gradual process of change, the taken-for-granted acceptability of meat is confronted and replaced by a more questioning stance.

For many, particularly those who are concerned about the morality of killing animals, there is a sharp awareness of what was described by one respondent as: "the link between animals in the field and what ends up on the dinner plate". Once the link is made, it can become the occasion for change. As another respondent recounted:

> "... I've always been fond of animals ... and when you reach an age where it's blatantly obvious that meat is animals, I didn't want any more to do with it".

Interestingly, some respondents recognized that a rejection of orthodox food values presented them with certain moral dilemmas. For example, one respondent who remained lacto-vegetarian acknowledged that:

> "If you are going to consume dairy products then you've got to accept that by doing that you are instrumental in animals being bred for slaughter".

Other respondents had been prompted to reject meat because they had been made aware, in some cases by media coverage, of "... additives, and the colourings, and hormones, and all this sort of thing". Yet others had a strong concern about their own health, rejecting meat as unhealthy and following a vegetarian regime to give them what they believed was a more nutritious diet.

One consequence of the challenge to orthodoxy was unexpected. Far from anxiety about being in a minority, many respondents emphasized that, as vegetarians, they could now be "at ease with their conscience". As one respondent expressed it:

> "Peace of mind's probably the best one [advantage] ... I can live with myself as a vegetarian, whereas—knowing what I do now, I could not live with myself ... as a meat-eater..."

These quotations draw our attention to respondents' feelings of separation from orthodox foodways. Yet there is also evidence for re-incorporation into the broader food system.

INCORPORATION OF VEGETARIANISM

Our respondents' acccounts leave no doubt that becoming vegetarian in the U.K. over the last 10 to 15 years has involved making a change during a period when alterations have also been taking place in public reaction to non-meat eating and to minority foodways in general. One respondent went so far as to say:

> "... It's gradually getting so much better. ... from when I first turned vegetarian to now, it's brilliant".

And while not all were able to enthuse to such a degree, there is considerable evidence of improved availability of vegetarian foods:

> "... more shops selling vegetarian food, particularly pre-packed things without meat in ... and restaurants are selling a lot more vegetarian things—have a special vegetarian menu".

The latter excerpt neatly summarizes the two major changes which make the vegetarian option easier: first, ready access to the foodstuffs which allow the relatively straightforward preparation of guaranteed vegetarian food at home, and second, opportunities to eat out with family and friends in situations which do not draw attention to differences, but take for granted that even a small group at the same restaurant table might demonstrate a plurality of preferences.

These changes were commented on very positively by our respondents. For example, one interviewee observed that:

> "... it's much less difficult now than it was—you know, six years ago. Partly because I'm more aware of what's available, and just because there are so many things available".

There are interesting comments on choice and cost at the specialist vegetarian shops relative to the popular retail outlets:

> "I think if you were to live on foods totally aimed at vegetarians it would be a lot more expensive, because they do tend to be quite a bit pricey—especially in the shops designed for vegetarians, you know, like health food shops and things—products I do find very expensive. But I think you can be a healthy vegetarian and not have to pay for those sort of products".

This is possible because major supermarkets now stock specific products aimed at vegetarians. For example, one respondent said:

> "Yes, it's much easier now, simply because most places like Boots and Tesco's will actually do vegan stuff. If you go back seven years, they didn't and you were into one or two specialist health food shops".

In addition, eating out has become easier:

> "... for instance, the Little Chefs [chain of fast food outlets] do vegetarian meals. It isn't very good, but it is vegetarian and it's not too expensive".

One respondent, who had in the past always relied on Indian restaurants for vegetarian food, now recognized that there was a wider choice:

> "What we would do if we go [to] a restaurant which we've never actually been to before, is to ring up in advance and say 'we're vegetarians, what can you do for us?' More often than not, they are extremely helpful. We've had some wonderful meals. For instance, a couple of weeks ago, we were down in Southampton in a hotel. We'd booked this hotel a couple of weeks in advance. Phoned up two days before to say 'we're coming, we're vegetarian.' They said 'Oh, no problem, we have a separate vegetarian menu'. This is happening more and more".

While it is important not to suggest that vegetarianism has become totally accepted, since meat eating remains a focus of strongly held opinions in current society, there is evidence of increasing tolerance, even promotion of vegetarianism. Interviewees were also aware of broader changes; for example, as one respondent mentioned, vegetarianism was becoming the "... trendy thing to do". Respondents were also aware of increasing public interest in eating less meat and of the public perception of vegetarianism as no longer "cranky" or based upon "health faddism". In addition, respondents suggested that, in general, more people appeared to be willing to try new kinds of food, resulting in a growing market for vegetarian products. All this appeared to be located in the context of increasing awareness of the consequences of the exploitation of animals and, indeed, of people and resources in general. Many respondents explicitly linked these ideas with environmental concerns and the ideology of the Green Movement. A particularly graphic example of the growing acceptability of vegetarianism came from a respondent who was a chef and had become vegetarian. When he left his job as a consequence of this conversion and went to register for unemployment benefit, he was asked to give the reasons for leaving his previous position:

> "... I remember actually putting down, that ... as a vegetarian, I could no longer put myself in the position of having to handle meat. And interestingly, that was accepted by the Social Security as a valid reason for having left work..."

Several respondents commented on the coverage of vegetarianism in the media, "... a sort of general media interest ... a general awareness in the population at large..." The expression of this raised awareness took several forms. One respondent noted that:

> "There's been such a flood of [vegetarian] cookery books onto the market in the last two years..."

Currently, many British newsagents carry examples of magazines aimed specifically at vegetarians (for example, *Today's Vegetarian*, *Vegetarian Living* and *BBC Vegetarian Good Food*). Both specialist and general interest magazines carry advertisements for vegetarian products. In addition, many magazines, particularly those aimed at women offer, among their recipes, a substantial proportion for meatless meals, often presented as being especially healthy and nutritious.

The Process of Incorporation—Why and How?

The evidence presented above suggests that what sets out as a kind of ideological and moral challenge to conventional foodways is in the process of being "incorporated" into the system. The key factor is the nature of the economic underpinnings which form the basis of the food system. Capitalism has the rational pursuit of profit as its driving force and is essentially amoral, or at least morally neutral, with regard

to the tastes and values of its consumers and clients. Thus capitalism is not likely to attempt to "judge" a challenging or "deviant" nutritional movement. Rather, it will tend to react to such a phenomenon as a new marketing and profit-generating opportunity. Such a movement represents a kind of gift or bonus for a capitalist food system. The movement creates new wants, possibly on a large scale, and hence new demand. In a sense, the system has not had to bear the expense of generating new wants and demands itself. There are close parallels with the Green Movement here, in that manufacturers and retailers have responded with "green" products, often marketed at premium prices and promoted through the use of "green" terminology and ideology.

In addition, we would argue that there has also been an ideological shift which has facilitated incorporation with the emergence of what we have termed "menu pluralism". This represents a situation in which food selection is no longer dominated by traditional or customary principles, but where many selection principles co-exist and compete, e.g. moral, convenience, hedonistic and rational, etc. (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992a, 1992b). In such a pluralistic climate, vegetarianism or veganism can be seen by the public as simply additional options from which to choose. They may no longer be regarded as particularly radical or "deviant". This ideological incorporation itself facilitates their economic incorporation.

Conclusions

We have argued that a capitalist/pluralist setting facilitates the incorporation of "deviant" foodways. There is, however, an alternative view. For example, Fischler (1980) has argued that the erosion of traditional foodways leads to nutritional confusion and anxiety—to what he terms "gastro-anomy". However, the line of reasoning presented in this paper suggests that the food manufacturing/retailing industry may act as a stabilizer, consolidating and "sanitizing" eccentric foodways by commercializing and exploiting them (although not *all* deviant foodways can be incorporated in this way). Hence a diluted, less morally charged form of vegetarianism may be generated commercially. This, along with new products, improved availability and more information, lowers the threshold of entry into vegetarianism (and even veganism) and hence mass recruitment can begin into a popularized set of foodways. Paradoxically, this may even mean a diminishing role for organizations like the Vegetarian Society and the Vegan Society. Hence capitalism, classically seen as characterized by inherent anomic tendencies (Merton 1957), may also produce an anti-anomic effect in certain specific circumstances.

Thus, commercialized forms of vegetarianism may represent novel modes of dealing with the guilt, anxiety and ambivalence associated with the use of animals for food. Traditional modes of dealing with such anxieties have been eroded, and we may be seeing here an example of the emergence of an effective device for re-creating and consolidating nutritional confidence. The emergence of commercialized, "mass" vegetarianism may offer some support for the view that capitalism, while eroding the contrasts *between* the consumption patterns of different industrialized societies, does effectively extend the range of options *within* such societies. However, the question inevitably arises as to how far large-scale vegetarianism is a peculiarly British phenomenon. Such a question can only be answered by systematic comparative studies.

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