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..“Beef. It’s What’s for Dinner”

**VEGETARIANS, MEAT-EATERS AND THE NEGOTIATION
OF FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS**



While many scholars have explored the celebratory role of food traditions—how food is used to create *communitas*—few consider how food may also be used to punish, cajole, or reinforce hegemonic or patriarchal structures. Drawing on qualitative interviews with vegetarians, I explore the transformation to vegetarianism and the ensuing conflicts between the “homeostasis” of family meat-eating traditions and the “deviance” of refusing meat that are enacted via the family meal. By examining how the inversely related food ideologies of vegetarianism and meat-eating are expressed in this context, a theory arises as to how food behavior and ideology may function to negotiate power, belonging, and exclusion in familial relationships.

What is patriotism but the love of the good things we ate in our childhood.

Lin Yutang

A number of folklorists and food scholars have explored food’s expressiveness, emphasizing the role of food in fostering *communitas*, nurturance, identity, and aesthetics.¹ For the most part, these studies focus on how foodways function to bond family members together. Several scholars have suggested that food is one of the first tools used to negotiate power relations, particularly between parent and child (for example, Bossard 1943; Babcock 1948; Newton 1992), crucial even to the development of the self’s subjectivity (Kristeva 1982). These negotiations are not always positive, however, nor do they necessarily lead to social cohesion. Except to give a passing nod to alternative approaches, in fact, too few studies regarding the social aspects of food move beyond its celebratory functions to consider how food behavior may also be used to reinforce hegemonic or patriarchal structures, to punish or cajole, to resist and subvert, or to otherwise negotiate power relations.²

Based on qualitative interviews and ethnographic observation, this article attempts to redress this neglected area of foodways scholarship. Examining the etiological stories of vegetarians, which become a vital part of their storytelling repertoire—stories of how and why they became vegetarian—I explore the emergent nature of the process by which they chose to “violate” family food traditions, and that of the dominant meat-eating culture, by eschewing meat. What strikes me most about these stories is that what frequently begins, seemingly, as a food preference becomes explicitly ideological, later incorporating central concerns about health, ecology, humanitarianism, and spirituality. That is, in many cases the meat that suddenly seemed inexplicably “gross” later comes to mean other things, contributing to the discourse in food studies about how food likes and

dislikes develop (Angyal 1941; Douglas 1966, 1975; Palmerino 1981; Farb and Armelagos 1983).

If these personal experience narratives typically begin with an explanation of why the individual became vegetarian, their depiction of familial reactions to their alternative eating behavior illustrates the extent to which food choices create and express identity and worldview between individuals and groups.³ Changes in food behavior are initially viewed by family members as deviant, strange, or crazy—a threat to the family’s “homeostasis,” its traditions, and its group identity—and thus, the changes are resisted (often very strongly) by members of the family system. The ensuing conflict, then, forms the basis for the negotiation of relationships, played out repeatedly over the family meal. This drama becomes literary when incorporated into the etiological personal experience narratives that are performed quite often—for example, whenever and wherever someone notices the individual refusing meat.

Why They Became Vegetarians

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The vast majority of vegetarians I interviewed, when asked why they became vegetarian, described themselves having “problems” eating meat for no apparent reason other than it suddenly looked, tasted, and/or seemed conceptually “gross” at the time.⁴ To some extent, this contradicts existing research that cites health and ethical reasons as the primary motivations for becoming vegetarian (e.g., Jabs *et al.* 1998a and b). Consider Michael’s account of the single event that spurred his decision:

Well, it always goes back to this moment when I was sitting at my parent’s kitchen table eating dinner. And huh ... I was eating a chicken leg. And I just kinda looked at it. And picked it up ... and looked at it ... and just thought [laughs], “This is disgusting. I can’t believe I’m eating this. Put ... it ... down!” And that was the moment, I think, I decided. (Interview, September 2002)

Similar narratives by the majority of vegetarians with whom I spoke recounted how the individual became suddenly and inexplicably “grossed-out,” deciding then and there to stop eating meat, or to eat only select “less gross” kinds of meat (e.g., fish and maybe chicken). In some cases, however, a more gradual buildup of aversions is reported. Possibly the same could be said of most vegetarians, but that, years later, a sort of “alchemy of mind” inheres, in which all related thoughts and experiences during the time of the pivotal decision-making period become conflated into one story, boiling down multiple events into one defining moment (see Zeitlin 1980).

Proposing a theory about how food aversions develop, Claire Palmerino's study shows that, "When consumption is followed by negative visceral feedback (e.g., nausea, gastrointestinal upset), the palatability of the food decreases," constituting "a unique form of associative learning" (Palmerino 1981: 20; see also Beardsworth and Keil 1991). Biting into bone fragments or veins, therefore, and the nausea that results, may lead to aversions. This notion makes good sense but a minor distinction must be noted. In many cases, there is a psychological construction of disgust (Vollmecke 1986), a cognitive association that suddenly produces the negative visceral reaction—the realization that they are eating a dead animal, thoughts about how the animal was killed, or in a few instances, thoughts about what else is in meat (e.g., chemicals, hormones, antibiotics, ecologically unsound grazing practices, cruelty, "bad vibes," and so forth). Howard, for instance, was "accustomed to eating gross food" in his college dining hall. One day he bit into a bratwurst, however, and had an extremely negative visceral reaction. "It was huge and dripping with grease," he explains, "I felt my arteries going 'crunch!' I immediately threw it away and ate cereal instead" (Interview, May 1995).

For a few of those individuals I interviewed, reading materials or hearing about factory farming, nutrition, ecological, and humanitarian considerations prompted their decision.⁵ In spite of these few cases where concerns over health, ecology, and morality initiated the decision to become vegetarian, for most it was a negative visceral feedback, a gag reflex, a feeling of nausea, a particularly negative mouth feel that quickly brought up cognitive and later emotional associations connecting the killing of animals with the meat being chewed. Put simply, they were suddenly "grossed out" and, according to their "alchemized" narratives, many decided right then never to eat meat again.

The proverb "we are what we eat" suggests that eating "produces a particularly intimate identification with the consumed product" (cf. Guttierrez 1984; Georges 1984; Kalčík 1984; Witt 1998; Heldke 2001). "The eating of meat," Julie Twigg suggests, "involves a literal incorporation of the animal, and as such presents us with the ambivalences and complexities of our own attitudes to animals and the animal, nature and the natural" (Twigg 1983:18). Yet, in the few exceptions to the "gross out" factor, where it was ecological or health issues that first influenced their decision, the end result was very similar—a decided distaste for animal flesh—an actual change in taste/distaste. These vegetarian narratives would seem to suggest that regardless of which came first—the mouth feel or disgusting cognitive associations causing the "gross out"—in the end both become inextricably linked as food aversions, around which a coherent ideology developed. Consider Becky's explanation: "Once I decided out of the 'gross factor' I wasn't gonna eat it again, then I became ... then I became moral about it"

(Interview, March 1995). Christina's account parallels this as well when she says, "I was in seventh or eighth grade and my best friend had become a vegetarian (I don't know why she did), but we had decided together that meat was gross [laughs]. And it was kinda, I think, an independence thing." Later, though, Christina became involved in environmental activism in high school, during which she learned about the "misuse of land that could be used more efficiently to grow produce, or what have you." The ethical issues came after the fact of her becoming vegetarian, however, and she makes it clear that those issues alone would not have made her decide, even expressing some guilt that she did not "do it for the right reasons" (Interview, September 2002).⁶

According to Twigg's structural analysis, vegetarianism represents a "cultural unity" in terms of ideology. Although the phenomenon is diverse, she finds its coherence embodied in four traditional foci: health, animal welfare, economy/ecology, and spirituality. As interconnected entities, these foci draw strength and sensibility from one another

Thus the wrongness of exploiting animals relates also to the wrongness of exploiting the Third World. The ecological arguments concerning the devastation of nature and the destruction of animal species relate both to the rights of animals to exist and to essentially "spiritual" conceptions of the whole and of the balance of Man within Nature. (Twigg 1983: 20)

Although interestingly, Twigg ignores the crucial role taste and aversions play in the development of vegetarian ideology, the experiences of my vegetarian interviewees validate aspects of Twigg's structural analysis. Even when the change in eating habits emerges corporeally as a result of negative visceral experiences, therefore, it begins to evolve into a full-fledged ideology. Once they began avoiding meat due to the "gross-out factor," ethical, moral, ecological, and spiritual considerations soon followed.

Food communicates using a rich symbolic language, if you will, through its color, texture, smell, and taste, and through its combination with other foods. Theorists such as Mary Douglas (1975) and Roland Barthes ([1961] 1997) present food as a system that, like language, has its own grammatical structure. If food is structured like language it is crucial to consider vegetarianism as an alternative discourse within the larger language and discourse of the dominant meat-eating culture and, especially in the case of my interviewees, within the context of the "typical midwestern American meat-and-potatoes" family meal where the clash of ideologies is enacted. Structurally speaking, Western vegetarianism inverts the dominant meat-eating culture. Meat-eating ideology places red meat at the top of a hierarchical pyramid where it is given highest status, around which the meal is arranged, and standing "for the very idea of food itself" (Twigg 1983: 21). Grains/vegetables/fruit are then positioned at the

bottom where they are regarded as “weak,” “insufficient for the formation of a meal, and merely ancillary” (Twigg 1983: 22). Reversing this structure, vegetarian ideology places grains, nuts, and raw fruits and vegetables at the top—the center around which the meal is formed. In its reversal, vegetarianism both draws on and disrupts traditional attitudes and beliefs about meat, creating a symbolic inversion.

Vegetarianism involves both subtle and not-so-subtle “redefinitions” for the meaning of meat, for example meat’s traditional association with masculinity is reversed: “Meat can here stand not for maleness in an approved sense, but for what is seen as false, macho stereotype of masculinity. Thus ‘strength’ and ‘power’ becomes ‘cruelty’ and ‘aggression’; masculine vigour and courage become violence and the forces of human destructiveness” (Twigg 1983: 27). It is in this vein that Warren Belasco observes about vegetarianism in the 1960s and 1970s:

Also, perhaps simplifying one’s diet to a few “Oriental” staples (brown rice and soy products) symbolized solidarity with poor but spiritually strong Vietnamese peasants. The soybean was a particularly expressive oppositional staple for ecological reasons as well ... eastern civilizations discovered early on that soy was well adapted to a society pressed by growing population, limited land, and scarce energy—the very opposite of the American core food, the burger, which took so much land and energy to produce and distribute. (Belasco 1989: 56)

We see, therefore, that vegetarian ideology does not merely reflect the traditional food hierarchy minus meat; rather, it challenges and subverts it. Employing the language of “alive” and “dead” in ways that subvert normal usage by the dominant culture, the paradox of vegetarianism inheres:

... thus they do not eat living things and yet we find vegetarians speaking of vegetarian food as “alive” and meat as “dead” (and this deadness is extended also to the deadness of over refined processed foods). The ways in which these oppositions are worked through are complex. Put briefly, however, vegetarianism asserts the existence and importance of a different sort of “power” and “vigour” from that traditionally embodied in meat; the “life” in vegetarian food is closely connected with images of lightness, sunshine and eternal youthfulness in conscious opposition to what is perceived as meat’s embodiment of death, decay and corruption, and these opposing qualities underwrite a series of political, aesthetic and moral perceptions. (Twigg 1983: 29)

Ideologically speaking, meat-eating culture inherently involves sexual politics, as scholars have shown, as meat-eating is identified repeatedly with

maleness, masculinity, virility, and strength (Twigg 1979, 1983; Adam 1994; Gruin 1994; Martin 1994). The American vernacular terminology of meat-eating reflects this masculine bias (e.g., “a man’s meal,” “man-sized portions,” “hero sandwich,” “manhandlers,” “meat-and-potatoes men”), and many examples of gendered beliefs exist that posit men needing meat more than women do, or even in some cases of children and pregnant or lactating women cautioned about being too vulnerable to eat the powerful red meat for fear they will be overcome by it (Twigg 1983; Adams 2003). It follows then that meat manifests as a symbol of male dominance, a celebration of patriarchy itself.

In her classic essay, “Deciphering a Meal,” Mary Douglas suggests that such details as the order in which food is served, the foods that are expected to be present at a meal, and so on, reflect a “taxonomy of classification that mirrors and reinforces our larger culture.” The center of the dominant meat-eating culture’s meal, of course, is meat—the standard by which other meals are judged—and the pattern and order of dishes leading up to this main entrée is evidence of cultural and familial stability. Hence, says Douglas (1975: 273), “the strong arousal power of a threat to weaken or confuse that category.” A vegetarian’s decision to remove meat from her or his individual plate is perceived to be, in this light, threatening to the structure of the larger family system, perhaps to patriarchal culture itself (Adams 1994). As such, Mary McCarthy’s *Birds of America* describes an encounter that illustrates how a woman’s eschewal of meat is taken by the male host, a NATO general, as a subversive act requiring an aggressive response. The vegetarian’s refusal of turkey at the Thanksgiving meal angers the general, “as male dominance requires a continual recollection of itself on everyone’s plate” (Adams 1994: 555). In response, the general piles turkey onto her plate and ladles the meat-based gravy over the potatoes as well as the meat, “thus contaminating her vegetable foods.” This description of the general’s actions with food mirrors the customs associated with military battles, as McCarthy writes, “He had seized the gravy boat like a weapon in hand-to-hand combat” (1971: 196). Although extreme, this example compels us to view meat-eating in families as a form of patriarchal domination that “requires a continual recollection of itself on everyone’s plate.” In fact, this kind of incident was frequently described in vegetarian personal experience narratives that recount conflicts occurring when vegetarians and meat-eaters “gather together” to eat within the institution of the family meal.

Family Reactions to Vegetarianism

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If patriotism is indeed “the love of the good things we ate in our childhood,” as Lin Yutang remarks, then it makes sense that vegetarians are initially perceived by their families to be unpatriotic, un-American, and even

downright un-family like. Noting the importance of family foodways as a “vehicle for the transmission of the family culture,” James Bossard (1943: 297) observed that the family meal “serves constantly as an evaluating conference, especially to the experiences, needs, and interests of family members.” Writing of his own experience becoming vegetarian in the 1970s, Belasco (1989: 7) describes the ensuing “family food fights”: “within two years, we too were vegetarian ... Back east my sister-in-law Leni was provoking loud dinner table arguments by refusing meat and championing granola; when her younger sister Marty defected too, family dinners became intense indeed.” It is largely through the institution of the family meal, in fact, that families express their opinions about the individual’s decision to become vegetarian. It follows, then, that anecdotes regarding conflicts during family meals are central to the genre of vegetarian personal experience narratives, usually following their explanation of why they became vegetarian. A study by Jabs *et al.* (1998a: 186) similarly notes that most of the opposition to vegetarianism comes from family members.

In general, respondents’ nuclear families were not supportive of vegetarian diets. Respondents’ parents often attempted to discourage them from adopting a vegetarian diet in their youth. For respondents who adopted a vegetarian diet as adults, their non-vegetarian children were often unsupportive of their parents’ dietary changes. A 72-year old, pescovegetarian relayed her interactions with her “meat eating” daughter at Thanksgiving. “We don’t interact too much with them [daughter and her husband] as far as food is concerned ... She said to me ‘Are you going to make a turkey?’ ‘No’ I said ... ‘Oh well, then we’re not coming.’ That was very hurtful.”

Conflicts ensue not just because the change poses logistical challenges (for example in terms of what the vegetarian will eat), but also because the change is initially perceived as a challenge to established food traditions. Because of the close connection between food and identity—as in the well-worn adage “we are what we eat”—and because the sharing of food enables the family to maintain *communitas*, does *refusing* to eat some symbolically laden food item affect one’s ability to belong to that family? It would appear that this very question is a part of what is negotiated via these conflicts and is the root of why, in some cases, the change is taken to be a threat to family foodways and hence a threat to familial identity itself.

While the reactions of families to each individual vegetarian vary in tone and degree, they seem to parallel each other in several ways. The vegetarians who shared their stories with me described their families reacting in a number of ways, which I have tried to group together conceptually into seven categories. Obviously, however, some of these reactions bleed over into more than one category.

I. TREATING THE CHANGE AS “JUST A PHASE”

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First, family members dismissed the vegetarian’s decision as “just a phase,” which possibly suggests wishful thinking as well as an intuitive understanding that changing food behaviors “goes with” changing lifestyles (see *Jabs et al.* 1998). Scott recounts:

I’d told my family about it and they were like, “Yeah, whatever.” And I remember my mom saying at dinner one night to my younger brother, “Are you going to eat that chicken, it’s good for you?” And I was like, “Who told you that, Mom?” And she started yelling at me about how, “blah, blah, blah,” and I said something to my dad, and he yelled back, “I eat meat because I LIKE IT!” (Interview, October 2002)

This attitude of the change only being temporary can function in some instances as a form of denial, allowing the family to not worry excessively about the change or its consequences. In other cases, though, this response was intended to allow the phase to pass quietly and quickly, as in Dan’s case:

Well, my family thought I was weird anyway, before that. They just thought this was just another weird thing. But they assumed it was just temporary. It would pass. And they didn’t make any effort to cook anything different.

Well, that’s their attitude toward my eccentricities in general, you know, “Whatever ...” ... My mom just thought I was, you know, a crazy teenager going through a phase, and it would pass. And the least big a deal they made of it [laughs], the faster it would probably pass. (Interview, September 2002)

Because vegetarianism presents an “explicit food ideology,” it can be used to look at the ideology of the dominant meat culture, which is more pervasive and implicit. Everything being vegetarian represents has its opposite in the midwestern agricultural communities, in the attitudes, beliefs, and traditions surrounding the self-proclaimed “meat and potatoes people.” Vegetarian ideology exists within the context of meat-eating ideology, a fact revealed via billboards that stretch across the highways of the Midwest that could be taken as a warning to potential vegetarian visitors: “Beef. It’s what’s for dinner.” Twigg suggests that “The Western ... vegetarian is very much a product of individual choice, and indeed, requiring one, as it does, to step outside the culturally prescribed forms of eating, depending on the development of a highly individuated sense of the self” (Twigg 1983: 19). Adolescence, explain Michael Nichols and Richard Schwartz (1998: 151), “is a time when children no longer want to be like Mommy and Daddy; they want to be themselves. They struggle to become autonomous individuals,

and they struggle to open family boundaries.” In a similar vein, John Leo (1979: 112) argues that American youth who become vegetarian represent an example of how food can be employed to act out generational battles. Belasco likewise suggests that

The high that came with breaking food conventions stemmed in part from the shock value. As many neovegetarians discovered when they first requested alfalfa sprouts and chopsticks over roast beef and stainless steel, the countercuisine brought the [Vietnam] war home to the family dinner table. At first parents and friends might easily dismiss the defection as adolescent perversity—a predictably familiar desire to be different. (Belasco 1989: 28; see also 179)

Perhaps the decision to become vegetarian, therefore, reveals early power struggles with authority. Indeed, most of my interviewees were teenagers (or just beyond) when they made their decisions; and with the advantage of hindsight, many cited a desire for independence as part of their reasoning although, at the time, this seem unrelated to them. When Howard informed his family of his decision to become vegetarian, he says, “My parents sort of chuckled. They thought I was being faddish.” Similarly, Christina said that looking back on her decision now, nearly two decades later, “It was kinda, I think, an independence thing ... an attempt to separate myself. And, yeah, I think it worked. I mean, I think I felt like, ‘Yeah, I’m a vegetarian!’ you know, ‘I’m different’” (Interview, September 2002).⁷ Also present in the family’s reaction of treating it as a phase is awareness on the part of family members that vegetarianism accompanies other significant life transitions (see Jabs *et al.* 1998).

2. ATTEMPTING TO PRESSURE, PERSUADE, TEMPT OR TRICK THE VEGETARIAN INTO EATING MEAT

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While family members articulated concern about nutritional needs, vegetarians perceived that family members often tried to pressure or persuade them to eat meat. There are numerous examples of these kinds of responses from the vegetarians I interviewed; they seem, in fact, to be an important part of the story. The younger sister of one vegetarian whose father was a cattle farmer pleaded with her to “at least eat it around Dad,” to avoid offending him (Interview, September 1996). Michael’s mother, for nearly ten years, kept “badgering” him to “Eat some ... just a little ... eat just a ... eat a piece of fish ... eat something ... it’s not going to hurt you,” claiming she feared he was “going to get sick and die.” And his father would periodically encourage him to eat some fish by saying, “It’s alright. You can go off the wagon now and then” (Interview, September 2002).⁸ Similarly, at

a family wedding, Beth's extended family pressured her to give up being vegetarian.

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And I remember becoming really frustrated because at every meal, while I was eating, people would question me about why I don't eat meat and this and that. I mean, people did that at every meal this summer. Whether it was an aunt or a cousin, they would get on my case, "Really, you should eat meat." "You're really not getting all your recommended nutrition." "You really need to eat meat." And at every meal, I was just getting so frustrated because I would just want to eat and they'd be just watching what I put on my plate, what I'm eating, and just drill me about it. I would get so mad at them! (Interview, October 2002)

Likewise, Cora's family tried to change her mind on the basis of nutrition:

I never really declared myself vegetarian to my family. It was more that my eating patterns changed over time. And their reaction was more like, "Do you have an eating disorder?" As opposed to, "Are you now a vegetarian?" Just because I was becoming more concerned with healthy eating in general. My family eats really unhealthfully; they just don't like anything healthy. So they kinda reacted negatively just because they're like, all of a sudden I was eating all this healthy stuff! [laughs]. (Interview, October 2002)

Beth found that her family also tried to "tempt" her to eat meat, even seven years later: "Still, every once in a while, my mother will try to tempt me with something I used to really like (e.g., teriyaki chicken). 'Are you *sure*, you used to like this?' But I think she was mostly concerned about my health." And sometimes they even tried to "trick" her into doing so:

My family would try to trick me into eating meat. For example, they'd cut it into little pieces, tell me it's something else, just to gross me out. Or once my brother put a big piece of bacon on top of my food because he wanted to see if I would still eat it, after the bacon had touched it. It was a really immature thing, but for some reason, they really got a kick out of like grossing me out with the meat or telling me there's not meat in something and trying to get me to eat it. I don't really understand the pleasure in that. (Interview, October 2002)

3. CHALLENGING THE LOGICAL/PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS OF THE CHOICE

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It seems that from the moment their decision is made known, the vegetarian individual finds her or himself repeatedly bombarded with questions from

friends and family. Howard's Catholic family was first exposed to his decision at Christmas time. "My parents sort of chuckled. They thought I was being faddish," Howard says. When Howard refused to eat fish, "The conversation stopped." "Fish isn't meat," his cousin challenged, to which Howard retorted that fish were once alive. "We haven't gotten along ever since!" Howard jokes, "But I never really liked her that much anyway" (Interview, May 1995). Belasco (1989: 60–61) likewise observes this phenomenon, recounting some of these philosophical challenges to vegetarians:

As for the humanitarian argument against flesh, wasn't it murder to eat a seed before it sprouted, to pull weeds or kill bugs that through no fault of theirs interfered with your own predatory needs or social conventions? Wasn't it inherently imperialistic to tame vegetable species? Were those who kept animals for dairy products so free from blame? Wasn't the domestication of animals similar to the subjugation of women in households? How could a vegetarian support abortion?

In fact, sometimes they are challenged so successfully on logical or philosophical grounds that it seems necessary to formulate a more "logical justification." If they still consume some animal products (i.e., wearing leather shoes) or eat other things like Jell-O and Twinkies (which contain gelatin, made of horse hooves), these behavioral inconsistencies were enthusiastically pointed out to the vegetarian. According to several of the vegetarians with whom I spoke, because they could not justify or understand their own contradictory behaviors and beliefs, they either tried to adjust their behavior or, for example, avoid "morality" as an answer to the question of why they do not eat meat, creating cognitive consistency, "the desire of people to reduce dissonance and find agreement between existing beliefs and values and new information" (Jabs *et al.* 1998b: 196).

4. ANGER AND ACCUSING THE VEGETARIAN OF BETRAYING FAMILY VALUES

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Especially if the eschewal of meat conflicts with traditional beliefs and practices (e.g., that fish is not really meat), the vegetarian's behavior is viewed as deviant and threatening, perhaps even a betrayal to the family identity itself. "In general," according to one study, "the symbolic foods of holidays, such as turkey and lamb, were sources of tension between vegetarians and non-vegetarian family members. Non-vegetarian family members often decreased their social interactions with respondents due to them following a vegetarian diet" (Jabs *et al.* 1998a: 186). One interviewee, who had been beginning to adopt a vegetarian diet, abandoned the cause for fear of his family's reaction:

It began in graduate school. I hadn't been eating very much meat ... At the time, I realized that I didn't like ham at all. When I went to my family's house for a meal, I said before the meal, "I don't want ham. I don't eat ham." And my dad got really mad and made a really big deal about it, saying, "Oh, you don't eat ham now, huh? Now you're a vegetarian, huh?" He made jokes about it at times; at other times, he'd get upset about it. Of course, I was thinking about becoming a vegetarian, but I didn't want to deal with my family's reaction every time we ate ribs, barbeque, and stuff. And I also didn't want to feel excluded from my family's traditions. I couldn't even imagine myself going home for Thanksgiving and not eating turkey. They wouldn't even understand if I didn't. (Interview, October 2002)

In a similar vein, Cora explained, "Like for Christmas dinner, we had like nothing really good for you [laughs], and so I would eat the stuff [meat] just to like ... not cause conflict at the table. Because I don't want to be like, 'I don't like Christmas dinner, you know'" (Interview, October 2002). On the other hand, Scott finds that sometimes holiday meals are easier times to be vegetarian because there are more food options than at non-holiday meals: "Like at Thanksgiving, for example, I don't need to eat it [meat] because there are tons of other side dishes" (Interview, September 2002).

Family systems theory can be usefully employed here to understand the reactions of families towards the vegetarian. Nichols and Schwartz (1998: 244) explain that, "Family structure involves a set of covert rules that govern transactions in the family ... [a rule] will be manifested in various ways depending on the context and which family members are involved ... but altering the basic structure will have ripple effects on all family transactions ... Whatever the chosen pattern, it tends to be self-perpetuating and resistant to change." Many theorists like to think of families as systems trying to maintain equilibrium, characterizing them as "rule-governed homeostatic systems" (Nichols and Schwartz 1998: 90). The concept of "homeostasis" refers to the tendency of systems to self-regulate to maintain cohesion in response to changes in the environment. Coined by French physiologist Claude Bernard in the nineteenth century to describe the regulation of such bodily conditions as temperature and blood sugar levels, the term is useful in the modern context to describe the tendency of families to resist change (Nichols and Schwartz 1998: 114). Some theorists have suggested the counter term "morphogenesis" (e.g., Speer 1970) to account for the individual's desire to seek, in addition to resisting, change. The vegetarian's decision manifests basically as a disruption or reversal of the "family script"—the continuity of family values, practices, beliefs—which supports Paul Thompson's assertion that, "influence can be handed down

[by families] either through imitation *or through rejection* of a previous generation's pattern" (Thompson 1993: 32–33; emphasis added).

In folkloristic parlance, the “reversal” of the family script can be seen as “innovation,” while the process of family systems resisting change is often referred to as the constant negotiation between innovation and tradition (e.g., Georges and Jones 1995), between conservatism and dynamism (e.g., Schoemaker 1990), or sometimes, “like the Sisyphus myth, the rock is pushed up the hill, but then it is rolled partially back down again” (Baraka 1994: 5). Thus, although the vegetarians I interviewed emphasized to their families that their decision resulted from personal reasons (e.g., usually taste), and although most avoided trying to persuade other members of the family to stop eating meat, somehow their families inherently understood that being vegetarian “goes with” much more than simply not eating meat, that food choices represent a broader system of ideologies than the immediate challenge of finding alternative food options at family meals.

In fact, the non-food changes many of these vegetarians enacted (e.g., going to college, changing dress and hair styles, experimenting with alcohol/drugs, sexual activity, religious orientation, and so forth) were not mutually exclusive but rather they were interrelated, as Twigg suggests. Their highly politicized alternative social values—suggesting alternative visions of the dominant culture's social structures, institutions, and relationships—were symbolized by their choice to become vegetarian. Because these values, however, undermine familial structures that embrace the dominant culture's conventional ways of thinking and doing things, in effect their vegetarianism represents radical, subversive ideology to their families. The families recognize this dynamic process of changing identity and ideology through food choice and resist the ripples of changes created within the homeostasis of their system, which “threatened to destroy that which was traditional and meaningful in the old life” (Gutierrez 1984: 171).

The common family reactions discussed above demonstrate resistance to what is initially perceived as a threat to a traditional way of life. On one level families know the vegetarian is resisting more than just meat; they are resisting an entire “outsider” ideology that they understand to accompany it. Hence, many of their behaviors are intended to effect a change in the family member's food behaviors, in hopes of returning the family's foodways—and the family itself—back to its homeostatic condition; or in folkloristic terms, to resist the attempted innovation on the family's established food tradition.

5. MAKING CONCILIATORY GESTURES AND AVOIDING CONFLICT

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As seen above, many vegetarians are willing to eat some meat, especially items symbolically connected to holidays, to avoid generating conflict with the family

and to continue to feel they are still a valid part of the family. Additionally, most avoid going into detail about exactly why they chose to eschew meat with their meat-eating families. Simple statements such as, “I don’t eat meat” or “I’m vegetarian,” might be all they offer as an explanation, as if not eating meat were no less symbolically charged than saying, for example, “I don’t eat chocolate.” Their efforts at downplaying the meaning of their status in front of meat-eating family members reveals something interesting—that in spite of the need to assert their independence there is a concurrent desire to avoid conflict and to avoid the appearance that they’re lecturing to their family, or otherwise making them “feel guilty” by remarks about eating meat being “gross” or “morally wrong.” Around other vegetarians, however, they are much more explicit in their explanations. On this note, some food scholars have pointed out that meat’s ability to provoke unease, a phenomenon typically not found in vegetable-based foods, may reveal “an underlying unease, even guilt, within the dominant culture over meat-eating evidenced in myths and legends” (Twigg 1983: 22; see also Adams 2003). And vegetarians have also remarked that the reason meat “has’ to be cooked is precisely to disguise its bloody taste, hide its true nature. Meat can be stomached [by most] because in the process of cooking the ‘power’ in meat is to some extent tamed ...” (Twigg 1983: 25). This alleged phenomenon of guilt might shed light on why several vegetarians referred to their “relapse” from vegetarianism as a “fall from grace,” referencing the Edenic myth of the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve are depicted as having been vegetarians.

In spite of the possibility of underlying guilt, a number of my informants report that on rare occasions they ate meat to avoid offending a host, who, unaware of the vegetarian’s diet, had prepared meat dishes for them. Christina recalls:

This was when I was a sophomore or junior in high school. I was a guest at someone’s grandmother’s house, and I was too embarrassed to say anything about it [being vegetarian]. And they served steak, of all things. And I took maybe two bites of it, to be polite. And I felt physically ill the rest of the night. I mean, I was literally ... I had a tummy ache. [laughs] I mean, I was disgusted—physically and mentally. And so that taught me a lesson. I thought, I’ll never eat meat again ... ever. (Interview, September 2002)

Beth recalls that once, early into her vegetarianism, she was at a boyfriend’s parent’s house for dinner. “And his father cooked pork chops, of all things, on the rib. And I ate it. I hadn’t been away from it for very long. But I remember the family ... they were intimidating parents, so there was no way I could have been like, ‘I’m sorry, I can’t eat that.’ And I had to bite it off the rib and it was disgusting. It was horrible!” (Interview, October 2002). Similarly, Michael, an otherwise very strict vegetarian, recounts:

There's another story that comes to mind. I went to Korea for a few weeks as part of my work. And I went to a family's home for a night. And the person who organized the home visits knew the family whose house I was going to, and she knew I was vegetarian, and she said she would tell them that I was vegetarian. Well, I got there and they started bringing out all these meat dishes, just one after the next, and the next. And it was obvious that she hadn't told them. So I ate it, you know, I just figured I'm not going to insult these people. I just didn't feel strongly enough, I guess, in my conviction ... I don't know what it was, but I just decided to eat it. And then later, I saw the woman who'd organized the trip, and she said, "Oh, how was your dinner?" And I just said, "Oh, it was fine," I didn't want to say anything ... but then she said, "Oh, good. I didn't tell them you were vegetarian, since there are so many vegetables in Korean cooking, anyway." [laughs] But they [the family] made a special attempt ... because we were Americans, you know, they thought we had to have a lot of meat, so they did away with all the traditional vegetables and they served us a lot of meat. (Interview, September 2002)

In these cases, which are common, the vegetarian's desire to avoid social conflict or offending the host and to have a social communion with the host is so powerful that it overrides the decision to not eat meat and yet is perceived by the vegetarian in some cases as a sign of weakness—"I just didn't feel strongly enough, I guess, in my conviction." This willingness, even of strict vegetarians, to make "an exception" tends to occur, significantly, more often in meals of which the vegetarian is not a family member.

Undoubtedly, either the family or the vegetarian (or both) eventually adapt, family members make accommodating gestures, and the frequency and intensity of conflicts decreases. Recalling how he gradually began to make exceptions for the sake of some family meals, Scott noted that

Now that I've matured, though, what I want to communicate to my family when I'm with them is that there is a communal sense and that they feel love coming from me, not that I'm just putting in their faces that what they do [eating meat] is wrong in my eyes. So I avoid making a big deal about it now. (Interview, September 2002)

Beth, who makes no exceptions to her own vegetarian practice, recalls a transformation with her mother: "Now she'll make tofu or polenta. She's been interested in trying new things. She now understands that I can't *just* eat steamed veggies, that I need protein and stuff too. She'll come home from the store with all sorts of things for me to eat."

The lack of extensive commentary in vegetarian personal experience narratives about efforts their families made to accommodate their changed diet might give

the impression that the family is always adversarial toward the vegetarian. This is not the case, however; when asked pointedly, many of the interviewees reported their family making conciliatory gestures of some sort after a period of time. These gestures sometimes simply included fewer instances of arguing or challenging the vegetarian's behavior, acquiring non-meat protein alternatives at family meals, inviting the vegetarian herself or himself to cook a dish for the meal, and so forth. The fact that this dynamic is routinely absent from the vegetarian narratives I collected, unless the vegetarians were specifically asked about it, however, suggests to me that the personal experience narratives are designed largely to account for the etiology of the decision to refuse meat and to cope with the stress of ensuing conflicts by talking about their more painful experiences, perhaps creating their own sense of *communitas*, even, with other vegetarians via such storytelling sessions.

Conclusion

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Comparing these kinds of vegetarian personal experience narratives proves fruitful in beginning to understand the dynamic transformations in behavior, thought, emotion, philosophy, and taste that tend to occur when individuals decide to resist the dominant meat culture by becoming vegetarian. Vegetarianism manifests as an explicit ideology, subverting the values and beliefs expressed via the dominant meat-eating culture's implicit ideology, and this is crucial to understanding these intrafamilial conflicts.

How families with traditional meat-centered diets respond to vegetarian ideals, however, also reveals a great deal about family psychosocial dynamics. Family systems theory illuminates these strong reactions, in which the family resists the vegetarian's new role, exhibiting contradictory impulses toward the "deviant" family member and attempting to maintain the family's homeostasis as manifested through its foodways. As such, vegetarianism, like other major life changes, disrupts the status quo of the family structure at a very emotionally laden point—its food traditions. Considering food behavior in this way forges promising new directions for further research into the interrelationship among food behavior, family foodways, family and individual identity, and family relational dynamics in ways that move beyond celebratory depictions of familial meal traditions, toward a theory of how food behavior and ideology also work to negotiate power, belonging, and exclusion.

Notes

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- 1 See, for example, Chappelle (1972); Graham (1981); Georges (1984); Humphrey and Humphrey (1988); Turner and Seriff (1993); Shuman (2001).

- 2 Some exceptions to the celebratory approach to foodways that come to mind include Bordo (1997); Adams (1998); hooks (1998); Witt (1998); Heldke (2001); Schell (2001).
- 3 For work on how diet is linked to ideologies of class, ethnicity, and gender, see Turner (1987); Levenstein (1988); Fiddes (1991); and Inness (2002).
- 4 I spoke informally with roughly forty current and former vegetarians and conducted in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews with thirty, recruited via snowball sampling. Of these, 85% were European American, the remaining 15% claiming African-American, Japanese-American, and Jewish-American ethnicities. Ages ranged from twenty-two to forty-two years of age, 75% being female, 25% male. All were well-educated and reported being middle class. They varied in terms of both duration and kind of vegetarianism practiced. A few of my interviewees were residents of California but most were currently living in Missouri. In the case of the California group, their families hailed from other states (e.g., Florida, New York, Virginia). For the most part, therefore, my data set is weighted towards Caucasian, middle-class, Midwestern Americans. In light of these limitations, this study should be viewed as suggestive, rather than generalizable to all American vegetarians and their families. Differing geographical regions, ethnicities, age, class, and so forth, might produce different results. In addition to the interviews, I observed how this issue manifests in popular American culture (for example, via film, literature, cartoons, and so forth) for further insights. It is important to note that I did not interview the families of vegetarians, but only the vegetarians themselves. One would expect family members to present a different point of view and different versions of the narratives—an issue left unexplored here.
- 5 This motivation for becoming vegetarian is revealed in Dan's case:

When I was in eleventh grade, I read the book *Diet for a Small Planet*. And the book made an argument that the beef industry and the meat industry of the U.S. was ecologically unsound, and that all of the grazing land and grain that was used for raising animals for meat, could be better used for raising food to feed people. And that the problem of world hunger would be solved more quickly simply by not raising animals for food. So I started trying to be a vegetarian after I read that book, because that argument made perfect sense to me.

We see how this story of how/why he became a vegetarian moves quickly from ecological and political considerations to the more spiritual, for in the very next sentence he adds the explanation:

The other thing was that I grew up where I saw animals slaughtered, you know, butchered for meat. So between the two things—just the humanitarian idea of, “wouldn't it be nice if we didn't have to kill these animals?” and the ecological part of it ... that's really why I decided to be vegetarian ... I just don't think it's right to eat blood. Animals eat blood. In my mind, on some level, I guess I'm making it moral: human beings don't eat blood; animals eat blood. I know people do really eat blood [laughs], but it just seems like you shouldn't. (Interview, September 2002)

- 6 As a matter of fact, five of my female interviewees mentioned that, considering most meat was “gross” to them anyway, their motivation to eliminate all meat was influenced by the desire to lose weight. Following a “gross-out” experience, therefore, becoming vegetarian seemed to be a convenient technique for weight control (see Bordo 1997). “I'll say it was probably for all the wrong reasons,” explained Cora, “because it was connected to my concern about my weight.” Likewise, Beth said “Because of my eating problems, it [vegetarianism] was a good excuse.” And Christina added in hindsight that, “I also think it may have been an attempt for me to control my diet, for weight reasons.”
- 7 If becoming vegetarian manifests as a form of protest against parental food norms, it is intriguing to ponder how the children of vegetarians might rebel. Consider Belasco's (1989: 247) description of his own family:

Like most parents nowadays, both my wife and I work full-time. Although we've found quick vegetarian recipes for ourselves, we still don't know what to serve our seven-year-old, who hates beans and bulgur, barely tolerates tofu, but loves fish sticks, McNuggets, and fries; once he gets molars, our toddler will no doubt side with her.

Belasco happily reported as an update that “My kids turned out well ... they eat very little

meat—so we didn't have the vegetarian backlash I initially feared" (e-mail communication, February 22, 2005).

- 8 Borrowing language from alcohol/drug recovery programs to describe this food behavior is intriguing; it seems that both vegetarians and their families use this kind of language. Many vegetarians repeatedly make reference to themselves and others being "addicted" to meat. Michael, however, vehemently protested his father's use of the term ("he said it as if I were *addicted* to meat"), whereas Christi reports that she only "relapsed once" on a McDonald's chicken sandwich, Christina had "one lapse," and Howard reports he "went cold turkey" off of meat but now describes himself as a "lapsed vegetarian."

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