

# Studying Social Aspects of Vegetarianism: A Research Proposal on the Basis of a Survey Among Adult Population of Two Slovenian Biggest Cities

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## ABSTRACT

*The article discusses the fundamental characteristics of vegetarianism as a heterogeneous and controversial practice, and tries to assess its scope in contemporary Western world. In the central part it presents the main results of the empirical study of vegetarianism and its perceptions on a representative sample of adult residents of the two largest cities in Slovenia, Ljubljana and Maribor. On this basis, the author proposes a more comprehensive design of quantitative and qualitative research on social aspects of vegetarianism and responses to it.*

**Key words:** *vegetarianism, social aspects, survey, veganism, public perceptions of vegetarianism, Slovenia*

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## Introduction

»Tell me what you eat, and I'll tell you who you are.« This famous saying, which was allegedly first written by a French lawyer and politician, and in particular a gastronome, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin in his *Psychology of Taste* in 1825, reflects the central meaning of nourishment for human life as a whole. It's not just for the fact that the food is essential for the existence of human as an organism, which he needs for his performance. The significance of eating goes beyond the mere biological necessity and food as a cultural practice carries a whole range of both conscious and often covert meanings to the eater. What we eat and what we don't does not depend only on biological edibility of specific food, but on the very complex set of broad cultural factors. In addition to what we eat, also the way we eat is important. The food is linked to a series of conceptions, myths and taboos, among which some have roots in the in/edibility of concrete ingredients, while a number of others mainly establish and/or reflect broader cultural meanings. So food is never 'just food', thus the biological nutrient for human physical performance, but it always symbolizes much more and is necessarily intertwined into social relations of power, hierarchy, in the processes of inclusion and exclusion...

Through the majority of human history, the importance of food was, to a large extent, centered around the issues of sufficient quantities. In the modern world, at least in the Western societies, this has not been a problem for a long time. Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards we have experienced radical changes in the mode of food production, the food industry has developed, which has exponentially increased the amount of food and thus eliminated hunger in the Western world. But it also sparked a spate of serious health, environmental, ethical, social and political dilemmas and uncertainties. As a result, also the ways of our eating have altered in many respects.

These violent changes, which we have been seeing in the last decades, are gradually becoming the subject of serious considerations. At the turn of the centuries, critical social studies on the general issue of food begin to appear in larger numbers<sup>1-5</sup>, the topic becomes interesting to the general public as well. In 2004, Morgan Spurlock records an extremely successful documentary about the harmfulness of fast food with the title of *Supersize Me*. This, for many a cult documentary, triggers a wave of documentaries that address the various aspects of the

complex issues of the modern food industry and its consequences\*.

Between specific dietary practices that reflect and create a variety of different cultural meanings, a conscious refusal of consuming meat, fish, sometimes also milk and dairy products and eggs, is one of the more interesting and controversial. Foodstuffs of animal origin have constituted an important part of the human diet, in a biological context they are a very convenient source for substances needed for life. So why would the human give up, from the biological point of view, clearly the most useful food? And why is this sacrifice practically through his entire history accompanied by negative sentiments, frequent ridicule and sometimes also active persecution?

A mass increase in vegetarianism in the West coincides with the decision milestones of the 1960s and the then countercultural searches of alternatives. When Frances Moore Lappé in 1971, in his book *Diet for a Small Planet*<sup>6</sup>, draws attention to the ecological breakdown of mass consumption of meat, and four years later, an Australian philosopher Peter Singer issues today a classic book *Animal Liberation*<sup>7</sup> and offers an ethical justification for vegetarianism, the terrain for the growth of the vegetarian subculture is settled. From the 1980s onwards, the West is becoming progressively more obsessed with the topic of health, and within this context, we can monitor the progressive change in the general perception of meat, which among the staples for healthy human development becomes one of the main health threats. With the publishing of the *China Study*<sup>8</sup>, probably the most comprehensive clinical study on the effects of meat consumption on human health, the ancient self-evidence of the dominant role of meat in the Western culture is finally shaken.

At the turn of the millennium – in addition to floods of vegetarian cookbooks\*\*, more serious studies on vegetarianism appear. In addition to the more general reviews of vegetarianism as a phenomenon<sup>9,10</sup>, most of them are dedicated to the history of vegetarianism<sup>11–14</sup>, some also to basic philosophical and/or ethical arguments for vegetarianism<sup>15–17</sup>, while the more comprehensive and systematic social studies remain still unusually rare<sup>18,19</sup>.

In our contribution to a growing, but still relatively humble corpus of in-depth information about the phenomenon of vegetarianism, we will first briefly define the fundamental characteristics of vegetarianism as a heterogeneous and controversial practice, then we will present the main results of the empirical study that we have done in the context of a broader survey with the title *Culture*

and *Class* on a representative sample of adult residents of the two largest cities in Slovenia, Ljubljana and Maribor. In the end, we will, on the basis of the results of our research, suggest a more comprehensive design of quantitative and qualitative research on social aspects of vegetarianism and responses to it.

## Vegetarianism as a Social Phenomenon

The word vegetarianism itself is relatively new, as it was only in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that it was introduced to the public by the founders of the British Association of Vegetarians. The word comes from Latin *vegetus*, which means healthy, safe, fresh and vital<sup>11</sup>. Thus the newly formed word vegetarianism originally indicates an integrated way of life that is inextricably linked to philosophical and ethical dimensions of dieting without meat. Today, that tag in a nutshell marks the ways of eating which do not include meat, fish, sometimes also milk and dairy products, and eggs – the latter is marked with a tag *veganism*, which was created later, in the 1940s<sup>10</sup>.

It should be stressed that it is anything but the uniform appearance – many individuals and groups who identify themselves with the word vegetarian, show very different eating patterns. While we have at one extreme vegetarians who consume only those parts of plants which leave the plant alive (that is, as a rule, nuts and fruit, such vegetarians are called *frutarians*), and many of them consistently avoid in daily life the use of any ingredients of animal origin (leather goods, animal substances in cosmetics and medicines, etc.), in the other extreme those can be found who more or less consistently avoid red meat only, and at least occasionally consume fish or even white meat. Between these two extremities is a range of vegetarian types which in a nutshell could be systematised into three major groups: (1) *veganism* includes food practices that consistently reject any consumption of ingredients of animal origin (eggs, milk and dairy products, often also honey), as a rule, vegans reject the use of the products from the raw materials of animal origin, such as fur, leather, cosmetics and chemical products tested on animals, etc.; (2) *lacto-ovo-vegetarianism* is the tag for the ways of eating, which in addition to meat consistently exclude fish, but not eggs, milk and dairy products\*\*\*; (3) *partial vegetarianism* is the tag for a variety of dietary practices that consistently exclude only red meat, but include fish and sometimes even white meat (for various forms of more or less permanent versions of partial vegetarianism also the term *flexitarianism* is used).

\* Our Daily Bread, 2005; Fast Food Nation, 2006; The Real Dirt on Farmer John, 2006; King Corn, 2007; Food Inc., 2008; The Garden, 2008; Food Matters, 2008; Killer at Large, 2008; Food Fight, 2008; Fresh, 2009; What's on Your Plate, 2009; Forks Over Knives, 2011; Food Stamped, 2011; Hungry for Change, 2012; Vegucated, 2012.

\*\* One of the indicators of the presence of vegetarianism in the West is certainly the phenomenon of cookbooks. A historian Colin Spencer<sup>11</sup> analyses their publishing in English since the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, and notes that a mass expansion of these kinds of books begins in the years between 1960 and 1980, when 183 vegetarian cookbooks are published, while it really blooms in the eighties, when hundreds of them are published.

\*\*\* Among this type of vegetarians we notice two different sub-versions: lacto-vegetarians reject the consumption of eggs (but not milk and dairy products), ovo-vegetarians avoid dairy products, but consume eggs.

Individuals, who practice different types of vegetarianism, act from different motives. Among vegetarians we find those who perceive it as a holistic lifestyle, some others do not attach special importance to their non-consumption of meat. Some vegetarians are driven primarily by ethical motives of compassion for animals, others oppose the consumption of meat as a result of the wider environmental reasons, the third group practice it due to health, many are dictated by their religious or spiritual beliefs, but some do not eat meat simply because they do not like its taste or because the idea of eating parts of animal bodies disgusts them. Among the proponents of vegetarianism we can trace various activist groups, such as ecologists, anarchists, antiglobalists, etc. It is a highly heterogeneous practice of various motives and objectives.

Contrary to popular belief, vegetarianism is not a new phenomenon. Even though it sometimes seems to be a fashion fad, which has only in the last decades covered, in particular, the urban areas of the Western world, a conscious refusal of meat consumption in human culture has been present for centuries and millenniums<sup>11,12,14</sup>. »Issues which agitate so many today as hatred of unnecessary slaughter, the concept of animal welfare, our own physical health, the earth's balance and hence its ecology would have been perfectly understood in the ancient world, certainly as early as 600 BC«<sup>11</sup>. In addition to the Indian tradition, which originates in the ancient scriptures of Vedas, which in a number of places problematise and even explicitly forbid eating animal meat, we have been practicing in the West a conscious avoidance of meat food products at least since classical antiquity (a little less evident traces lead even further to ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia). With the rise of Christianity, the ancient vegetarianism, resulting as a countercultural critique of the dominant culture of meat consumption and its symbolic association with the herculean power and athletic ideals, which was restricted to the educated elite, began to recede to a new understanding of the world and the human role in it. According to the Christian theology, the world created by God is given to the man into an unconditional use, the man's task, however, is to rule it – in that theological context there is very little space for the ethical issues about the rights of animals and the eligibility of eating them; quite the contrary, the refusal of eating meat can be understood as opposing the orthodox Christian doctrine\*. After centuries of European domination of Christianity, the ancient concepts of vegetarianism came to the open only with the emergence of the Renaissance and humanism, as various thinkers (Erasmus of Rotterdam, Thomas Moore, Michel de Montaigne, etc.) criticized the cruel human treatment of animals; also Leonardo da Vinci, a personification of Renaissance and a devoted vegetarian, publicly objected to the consumption of animal meat. The establishment of the British Vege-

tarian Society in 1847 represents an important turning point, which was soon followed by the establishment of the American Vegetarian Convention in 1850, and the German Vegetarian Association in 1867.

Vegetarianism becomes a really mass phenomenon in the West somewhere from the 1960s onwards. A number of changes in the global culture after World War II crucially contribute to that, including a comprehensive youth counterculture, which at different levels stands against the prevailing political, cultural and spiritual values in the society. Under its influence the West experiences a real boom in Asian philosophies and religions, within which vegetarianism represents a significant segment. This influx of Asian ideas and concepts (which today often remains hidden, and the predominant majority of vegetarians in the West is not even aware of), has had an insignificant impact on the gradual change of the Western culture<sup>20</sup>, which in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shows a clear turn from a predominantly anthropocentric to a more ecocentric perception of nature and the world. Thus vegetarianism can be understood as an expression of a wider cultural flow, which in the context of the changed perception of the environment (along with numerous ecological issues) reflects the new values. Rejecting the consumption of meat shows an important change in the relationship to the world, as a British sociologist Nick Fiddes shows in his inspirational study on meanings to meat<sup>21</sup>. Throughout the entire history meat symbolised the human subjugation of nature, the ability to reside over it and govern. With a twist to the post-modern values, where the key role is given to ecological consciousness, the central idea of dominance and exploitation of nature is gradually replaced by the concept of interconnectedness, care and responsibility towards nature. Thus also vegetarianism reflects the described cultural twist (in this context, feminism and its opposition to the male domination could be among the factors that affect the growth of vegetarianism in the West, as Carol Adams convincingly justified in her today already classic study<sup>22</sup> – an important argument in favour of such an understanding could be the fact that among vegetarians women considerably outnumber men).

In contemporary pluralist societies vegetarianism is one of the ways of eating, it simply exists as one of a number of different life styles. In today's Western world it is becoming more and more accepted, but rarely as a part of the dominant culture, but as a marginal practice, since it still represents a challenge to the dominant dieting paradigm, and indirectly also an opposition to the whole social system. However, vegetarianism remains a perceptual movement in the West, to which also otherwise relatively rare empirical researches attest.

British sociologists Beardsworth and Keil, in their analysis of modern dietary practices and their multiple

\* From 4<sup>th</sup> century onwards, when Christianity gradually became the dominant religion of the Western world, vegetarianism was increasingly associated with the opposition to authority of the Church and was thus recognized as a sign of heresy, and also duly sanctioned. An example of this are the Bogomils on the territory of today's Bulgaria in 10<sup>th</sup> century, and between 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century the Cathars on the territory of Northern Italy and later France; both were brutally repressed by the Church, one of the arguments for this was their consistent denial of meat diet.

contexts<sup>1</sup>, refer to data from some surveys about the number and social structure of vegetarians. So for example, a series of polls in Britain revealed an increase between the years of 1984 (when it detected 2.1% of vegetarians) and 1993 (4.3% of vegetarians). The survey from the same batch in 1995 recorded 4.5% of strict vegetarians, and there were allegedly 12% of those who do not identify with this tag, but, however, do not consume meat. A significant gender difference is clearly shown because the research recorded twice as many female vegetarians (by far the largest proportion of vegetarians was discovered among women aged between 16 and 24). We get a similar image also on the basis of a research carried out in 1991 by researchers at the University of Bradford. In the whole of the British population, 7% of vegetarians were recorded, while this share was slightly higher in the age class of 11 to 18, and significantly more vegetarians among women (10%) were recorded than among men (4%). The authors also point out a sharp increase in members of the Vegetarian Society (which had 7,500 members in 1980, and 18,500 in 1995) and conclude with the assessment that the proportion of vegetarians in Great Britain moves somewhere between 4 and 7%, while in the United States, on the basis of some American research, 3 to 7%. Similarly, Ruby<sup>23</sup> mentions some newer researches, which in 2004 reveal 8% of vegetarians among Canadians and 3% among Americans (in 2009).

Similar proportions of vegetarians are found also in some other recent researches that instead of identifying with the tag measure the actual eating practices: a survey of the British Food Standard Agency in 2009 for Great Britain observes 3% of strict and an additional 5% of partial vegetarians. A survey of the American Agency Harris Interactive in 2008 finds 3.2% of vegetarians and 0.5% of vegans among adult Americans\*. Among them 59% are women, 42% are aged between 18 and 34, and 41% between 35 and 54, and what is particularly interesting, 57% had been consuming exclusively vegetarian food for more than 10 years (an additional 18% between 5 and 10 years), which puts into question the argument of vegetarianism as a short-lived fashion fad, abandoned by most vegetarians after only a few years.

## A Study of Vegetarianism in Slovenia

The following findings are the results of a wider survey with the title Culture and Class<sup>24</sup>, which we carried out between 1 December 2010 and 15 February 2011 on a representative sample of adult population with the permanent residence in the two largest cities in Slovenia –

Ljubljana and Maribor\*\*. The purpose of conducting research on vegetarianism was to assess the prevalence of vegetarianism, find out more about who and why they become vegetarians, and in the next step to analyze in greater detail the attitude of the majority to the different vegetarian practices. In the analysis we were also interested in the various socio-cultural factors on the basis of which we would assume the class belonging of vegetarians, but we were also interested in the class distribution of opponents and supporters of vegetarianism as a practice<sup>25</sup>.

### *The scope and structure of the phenomenon*

We can only assume a more precise extent of vegetarianism and its trends in Slovenia, as we have little reliable empirical data. A longterm continued survey the Public Opinion in Slovenia (POS), which has been conducted continuously since 1968 by Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, does not directly address the question of vegetarianism, but from the responses to the question »How many times a week do you eat meat?«, however, we could suggest the number of vegetarians. To that question, 1.2% answered by »never« in 1994, 1.4% in 1996 and 2.9% of respondents in 2001 (after that year the question was no longer included in the research). Data on the number of vegetarians are also found among the results of two other empirical surveys (which were, as well as surveys of POS, carried out on a representative sample of the adult population): the research on the dietary habits of the Slovenians, which was in 1997 carried out at the Biotechnical Faculty, University of Ljubljana<sup>26</sup>, reveals 0.5% of »strict« vegetarians and 2.5% of lacto-ovo vegetarians, to that we could add another 3% of macrobiotics\*\*\*; a similar study on the life styles, which was carried out in 2001 by a group of researchers from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the same University, discovers 3% of vegetarians and 2% macrobiotics<sup>27</sup>.

In the attempt of empirical measurement of the prevalence of vegetarianism in our study, similar to the aforementioned research above, but unlike some foreign research, we did not ask whether respondents classified themselves under the category of vegetarians (or in more detail under each type of vegetarianism), but we tried to measure the actual incidence of this eating practice (how often do respondents consume white and red meat, fish, milk and dairy products, and eggs). In this way, we almost certainly got lower shares of vegetarians as we would otherwise. The American sociologist Donna Maurer<sup>18</sup> draws attention to the differences between the data on the self-declared vegetarians and the results of measuring actual practices: there are usually significantly

\* These research reports are available at <http://tna.europarchive.org/20111116080332/http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/publicattitudestofood.pdf> and <http://www.vegetariantimes.com/article/vegetarianism-in-america/>, 24 April 2012).

\*\* The sample consists of 400 completed questionnaires carried out in Ljubljana and Maribor (total N=800). After the completion of the survey, we checked the consistency in the structure of the realised sample with the structure of the population and assessed that for the purposes of statistical analysis an appropriate weighting is carried out. With this, a potential partiality due to irregular sample realization in different categories of the population is eased. In the context of the aforementioned survey we estimated that weighting makes sense in the case of sex and age.

\*\*\* Macrobiotic diet is based mainly on cereals, for additives it recommends local organic vegetables, and occasionally eating (mainly white) fish.

**TABLE 1**  
THE FREQUENCY OF CONSUMPTION OF MEAT, FISH, MILK AND DAIRY PRODUCTS, AND FISH (IN %)

	Never	Only exceptionally	Occasionally	On a regular basis
White meat	2.4	2.2	25.2	70.2
Red meat	3.3	4.8	32.1	59.8
Fish	7.6	10.3	46.5	35.6
Milk and dairy products	2.3	1.6	12.6	83.5
Eggs	1.7	5.6	34.3	58.4

more self-declared vegetarians than those who actually do not eat meat, fish, milk and dairy products\*.

We can see in Table 1 that a relatively large part of Slovenians at least occasionally avoid fish, eggs and red meat. Among them majority never (or only in exceptional cases) consume fish, red meat follows pretty far behind: a little more than 8% of the population will never consume red meat, or only consume it exceptionally. However, since this does not give us the right conception of the share of the vegetarians in the overall studied population, we have designed three additional variables: (1) partial vegetarians who do not consume red and white meat (these questions were answered with »never« or »only in exceptional cases«), but occasionally or on a regular basis they consume fish and milk and dairy products; (2) lacto-ovo vegetarians, who in addition to meat, do not consume fish, milk and dairy products and eggs; and (3), vegans, who do not consume neither meat nor fish, dairy products nor eggs (the sum of the answers »never« and »only exceptionally«).

We have thus in the studied sample discovered a mere 0.4% of vegans, 0.8% lacto-ovo vegetarians and 1.6% partial vegetarians (who do not consume meat, but eat fish). Thus measured shares for each category of vegetarians are considerably lower than the shares of those who do not consume individual categories of foodstuffs (Table 1). Due to the (expectedly) low shares of vegetarians according to individual categories in the strict statistical sense, more detailed analyses of vegetarian groups are not sufficiently reliable, so they can serve only for more or less rough assessments, that could in the future be checked with other research methods (qualitative research on as representatively designed groups of vegetarians as possible). However, we can with a great certainty conclude that among vegetarians in Slovenia\*\* women strongly dominate in the sample, since we were able to get only one man in the sample. According to age they highly clas-

sify in the middle two classes: three-fourths of them are aged between 30 and 60, a quarter under 30, we had noone older than 60.

As we mentioned earlier, individuals opt for vegetarianism for a variety of reasons: some people don't like the taste of meat, others are vegetarians because of concern for their own health, and the third are prohibited the consumption of meat by their religious or spiritual beliefs, the fourth group are vegetarians due to the massive exploitation of environmental resources, which is caused by the intensive rearing of animals for human consumption, while the fifth oppose the suffering and the general exploitation of animals. Our research shows that among all those that do not consume meat, fish and/or milk on a regular basis (Table 1), the most widely used is health motive, and the least spread are religious and environmental motives. Ethical motive is noticed in red and white meat. However, when the analysis is directed on the vegetarians only (when you eliminate the occasional consumers), it shows a significant increase in the ethical motive, which is the dominant reason for the denial of meat and fish (Table 2). This clearly shows an important difference between those who limit their meat consumption from time to time and the more strict vegetarians. In this context, Slovenian vegetarians could be closer to those from Great Britain, where the ethical motive seem to be traditionally dominated, unlike the United States, where most seem to be vegetarians due to health motives<sup>18</sup>.

According to the literature, in Western societies vegetarianism is supposed to be the most widespread in the middle class<sup>23</sup>. The lower classes buy more meat when climbing the social ladder because they can afford it and understand that as a sign of their broader economic and social success. On the other hand, the people from the higher socio-economic strata may show the distance to the lower class with vegetarianism\*\*\* (as opposed to the

\* Maurer summarizes the results of the various representative surveys, according to which there were supposed to be 2% of self-declared vegetarians among Americans in 1980, 3.7% in 1985, 8.2% in 1986, 5% in 1991, and 7% in 1992 and 1993. In surveys, in which instead of asking about vegetarianism they measured the actual eating practices, the shares of vegetarians (those that declare they do not consume meat) are much lower: in 1992 there were supposed to be 2.3%, 1.5% in 1993, 1% in 1994 and 1997, and 2.5% in 2000<sup>18</sup>. Similarly, the study in London reveals that two thirds of self-declared vegetarians at least here and there consume meat<sup>28</sup>, which coincides with the findings of two Canadian surveys<sup>23</sup>, which show that in 1997, 78% of the self-declared vegetarians in Canada at least occasionally consume fish, 61% poultry and 20% red meat; the share of the latter grew to 34% in 2001.

\*\* Due to the low shares of the discovered vegetarians in the sample by individual types, we took into account the single category of vegetarians in the further analyses (the sum of all in research covered partial vegetarians, lacto-ovo vegetarians and vegans), which is 2.7% of the population.

\*\*\* At the end of the 1970s, Bourdieu already draws attention to the fact that higher classes also through food, much like with the intense development in the taste of music, art in general, fashion, etc., express and maintain their social status<sup>2</sup>.

**TABLE 2**  
THE REASONS FOR NONCONSUMPTION OF MEAT, FISH, MILK AND DAIRY PRODUCTS AND EGGS (IN %)

		Taste	Health	Religion	Ecology	Ethics
Occasional consumers	White meat	48.6	27.2	5.8	1.9	16.5
	Red meat	33.3	50.8	2.7	3.1	10.1
	Fish	83.9	9.9	0.9	2.8	2.5
	Milk	43.9	45.3	–	4.9	5.9
	Eggs	26.0	67.7	–	2.3	4.0
Vegetarians	White meat	10.0	25.0	10.0	5.0	45.0
	Red meat	10.5	26.3	10.5	5.3	47.4
	Fish	11.1	22.2	11.1	22.2	33.4
	Milk	–	50.0	–	–	50.0
	Eggs	12.5	50.0	–	25	12.5

lower strata they do not persist anymore with traditional symbolic connotations of meat as a term of vitality and power)<sup>18,21</sup>. At the same time it should be added that the American »counterculture helped to brake down the class barriers and, though still middle class at its centre, its converts came from across the range from working to upper«<sup>11</sup>. However, the smallest number of vegetarians is found among the highest stratum, most of them coming from those engaged in the creative professions, such as artists, writers, journalists, academics, social workers, teachers, librarians, etc.<sup>11</sup>.

The dominant affiliation of vegetarians to the middle class is confirmed also by our research. Distinctly above average, vegetarians are (self-)classified in the middle and higher class: 71% identify with the middle class, 25% of vegetarians in upper middle and higher class, while 60 and 15% of the population rank in these two-classes. Vegetarians also fall into the middle class by the income\*, and this is also evident from their professions: only a little less than 6% perform routine or lower jobs (43% in the whole population), while higher and leading positions are occupied by two thirds of vegetarians (compared with barely a third of the total population). Vegetarians also have above-average high education: 58% of vegetarians (compared with 33% of the total population) have at least college education; on the other hand, only 8% have only vocational education or lower (such is a quarter in the entire population studied). The entire education (school attendance) of vegetarians took, on average, 15 years, while the average in the rest of the population is 13 years.

### *The attitude of the general population to vegetarianism*

Vegetarianism has always risen mixed, often also quite emotional responses. As a rule, these responses are negative, ranging all the way from ridicule to the active persecution of vegetarians. Already in ancient times the Pythagoreans (as vegetarians were known in the West until 19th century) were often mocked, not infrequently they were for example the subject matter in the Attic comedy<sup>11</sup>. Even today the vegetarians are a gratifying topic of jokes, from those for private use to more public sketch performances or stand-up comedies. It is a significant fact that the jokes about vegetarianism, as a rule, do not fall under the orders of political correctness, as it has become quite common for jokes on the subject of race, sexual orientation, women, etc.

That's why we measured in our research also general attitude of the population towards the vegetarian practices, which we have set on two levels: first, we wanted to know what respondents think of vegetarianism as a personal choice of adult people and then we also wanted to know about vegetarianism as a choice for young children\*\*. As can be seen in Table 3, the relationship of the total population to the personal choice of adults for vegetarianism and also for veganism is surprisingly leaning in a more positive direction. The attitude to vegetarianism as a choice for children is expectedly negative, in which case maybe there is a slight surprise in only a slightly more negative opinion, which is, compared with the vegetarian diet, conveyed by exclusive vegan diet for

\* 64% of vegetarians declare that their last monthly income was between 1000 and 2000 euros (only one-quarter of the whole population is such), but unlike the rest of the population, no one reports an income higher than 2000 euros (approx. 5% in the whole population).

\*\* In the question "What do you think about the decision that some individuals do not consume meat and fish / milk and dairy products?", respondents chose between the following options: (1) It seems a reasonable decision to me, and therefore I support it (in the table marked with a ++), (2) I don't have a specific opinion about the decision, dieting is a matter of free assessment of each individual (+), (3) Such a decision doesn't seem reasonable, but this is a matter of free individual assessment (-), (4) Such a decision seems harmful, people should also eat meat and fish/milk and dairy products (--), (5) I don't know, it's hard to say (?). In the second question, »What do you think about the decision of many vegetarians that their children are not fed with meat and milk and dairy products / fish?« respondents answered with one of the following responses: (1) Excellent decision, they only do the children good that way (++++), (2) It is a matter of free assessment of the parents, their decision does not have a significant impact on the lives of children (+), (3) It is a matter of free assessment of the parents, but they thus harm their children (-), (4) Such parents should deal with social services, children should be protected (----), (5) I don't know, it's hard to say (?).

**TABLE 3**  
THE ATTITUDE TO VEGETARIANISM / VEGANISM

		++	+	-	--	∞
Adults	Vegetarianism	9.9	37.8	21.5	9.9	20.9
	Veganism	7.4	35.0	23.2	12.5	21.9
Children	Vegetarianism	2.8	11.6	51.0	8.5	26.1
	Veganism	2.2	10.5	51.4	9.9	26.0

children (however, more are indeterminate on this issue). A large proportion of the population understand vegetarianism as (at least potentially) harmful to health, but it is, presumably, easier to tolerate if its supposedly negative effects affect only adults who have made their own decision for it. But when it comes to the issue of vegetarian diet for children, on whose behalf decisions are made by their parents, the general tolerance is expectedly significantly lower. When it comes to a more severe opposition to vegetarianism in children it is also likely to be about a covert (and to a large extent unconscious) fear of transmission of deviating practices to the next generations, which represents a serious threat to the established social order.

We were especially interested in those highly inclined to and highly critical of vegetarianism and veganism (in relation to the child vegetarianism and veganism we analysed in detail only those who are critical, because very few are inclined). We have found that men – except in a clearly negative attitude to child vegetarianism and veganism – have a little less pronounced views on vegetarianism and veganism than women. The middle generation dominates among those most inclined to vegetarianism and veganism, among the highly critical there are least younger ones. Severe opponents of child vegetarianism and veganism are on average less happy than the overall population, they are also slightly less satisfied with the material living conditions and trust human beings significantly less (which only in a lesser extent also applies to the opponents of vegetarianism and veganism among adults)\*.

In the end, we further analysed how attitude to vegetarianism is distributed across the different social strata. Table 4 shows that among those inclined to vegetarianism and veganism both among adults and children, the highest-educated prevail, who least oppose vegetarianism and veganism among adults and children. According to the self-definition of belonging to a social stratum we

can say that the smallest number of the inclined to vegetarianism and veganism among adults and children can be found in the lower, i.e. working class, this stratum also most highly opposes child vegetarianism and veganism. Most supporters of vegetarianism among adults and children come from the upper middle and upper class; this group is also the least opposed to a child becoming a vegetarian or vegan.

The importance of a social stratum when examining the attitude to vegetarianism and veganism is even more explicitly confirmed by occupation analysis, since very obviously the smallest number of supporters of vegetarianism and veganism both among adults and children come from the group which has lower professions (routine jobs, lower employees); this group is also the most opposed to veganism of adults as well as vegetarianism and veganism of children. On the other hand, most supporters of vegetarianism and veganism belong to those engaged in higher professions (senior and leading positions). At the same time, it should be noted that a more detailed analysis of monthly income as well as the ownership and the type of residence does not detect significant connections in terms of attitude to vegetarianism and veganism. This would perhaps suggest not so much the material as a cultural dependence of stratum distribution of the attitude to vegetarianism. Also a noticeable influence of another variable on the attitude to vegetarianism and veganism, which has no direct connection with the stratum, bears witness to that fact, i.e. the self-declared political orientation. We can state that most supporters come from the Liberal group, while most opponents define themselves as conservatives.

## Discussion and a Research Proposal

When talking about nutrition and its social and cultural dimensions today, we cannot ignore vegetarianism. It is in line with some contemporary food trends, such as

\* Among the distinctly inclined there are slightly more women (58% favourable to vegetarianism and 52% to veganism). Most of them come from the middle two age classes: about two-thirds of all favourable to vegetarianism and veganism are aged between 30 and 60, and the other one third are approximately evenly distributed among younger than 30 and older than 60. Among the distinctly inclined to child vegetarianism and veganism the prevalence of the middle generation is only slightly smaller, since still nearly 60% of all come from the middle two age groups. The supporters of vegetarianism and veganism, in comparison with the entire studied population, trust other human beings significantly more. The gender ratio is more balanced among the particularly critical ones: there are a little more adult women among those critical to vegetarianism (56% critical to vegetarianism and 55% to veganism), while there are a little more men who are critical to child vegetarianism (54% critical to vegetarianism and 52% to veganism). The smallest number of them are younger than 30, the others are more or less evenly distributed in the other three age groups. Among the ardent opponents of child vegetarianism and veganism there are above-average of »unhappy« and »less happy« ones (the share of medium unhappy is comparable to the entire population), the opponents are, compared to the entire sample, also a bit less satisfied with material conditions in which they live.

**TABLE 4**  
ATTITUDE TOWARD VEGETARIANISM/VEGANISM (INDETAILS)

		Vegetarianism and veganism of adults								Vegetarianism and veganism of children							
		Vegetarianism				Veganism				Vegetarianism				Veganism			
		++	+	-	--	++	+	-	--	++	+	-	--	++	+	-	--
Educa- tion	Elementary	8.1	53.2	24.2	14.5	6.7	51.6	26.7	15.0	1.7	12.1	72.4	13.8	1.7	8.3	73.3	16.7
	Vocational	11.1	45.6	28.9	14.4	7.8	44.4	27.8	20.0	1.3	11.8	67.2	19.7	1.3	10.5	68.5	19.7
	Technical school	11.3	47.8	30.8	10.1	8.1	43.5	32.3	16.1	5.1	10.1	75.9	8.9	2.5	10.7	77.4	9.4
	Gymnasium	10.2	47.2	32.4	10.2	5.6	40.2	38.3	15.9	2.8	18.9	68.9	9.4	1.0	12.9	73.2	12.9
	College or higher	15.1	47.8	22.9	14.2	14.5	47.2	23.8	14.5	5.0	21.1	63.3	10.6	5.4	21.3	60.4	12.9
Stra- tum	Lower, working	7.0	50.0	27.9	15.1	7.1	42.9	31.0	19.0	1.2	14.3	66.6	17.9	3.6	9.5	69.0	17.9
	Lower middle	13.0	53.7	23.2	10.1	11.1	47.2	26.4	15.3	4.2	14.1	70.4	11.3	2.9	13.2	67.7	16.2
	Middle	12.2	45.1	29.4	13.3	9.7	43.5	30.9	15.9	3.8	14.5	71.6	10.1	2.6	13.6	72.2	11.6
	Upper middle and upper	15.7	49.4	24.1	10.8	8.8	47.4	27.5	16.3	5.5	24.7	61.6	8.2	4.2	23.6	58.3	13.9
Profes- sion	Lower	8.5	49.8	30.0	11.7	7.5	43.6	31.5	17.4	2.6	12.4	71.6	13.4	0.5	10.5	73.0	16.0
	Middle	12.1	46.8	29.0	12.1	8.7	48.1	28.8	14.4	3.1	15.3	70.4	11.2	2.1	15.5	69.0	13.4
	Upper	15.0	44.4	26.7	13.9	13.6	44.6	28.8	13.0	5.6	18.0	66.3	10.1	5.6	15.8	66.2	12.4
Political orient.	Conservative	11.1	38.9	22.2	27.8	11.1	36.1	22.2	30.6	3.2	19.4	54.8	22.6	3.1	18.8	53.1	25.0
	Central	9.7	48.9	27.6	13.8	7.7	50.8	24.6	16.9	2.2	14.1	71.8	11.9	4.4	11.1	71.9	12.6
	Liberal	14.7	50.3	25.2	9.8	14.3	45.7	26.4	13.6	5.1	20.3	64.5	10.1	5.2	18.5	62.2	14.1

favouring locally grown food, self-sufficiency and self-provisioning (e.g. the recent rise of urban/community gardening, also the rise of pickling, canning, preserving food, etc.). Together with the pandemic health consequences of consuming excessive quantities of industrially grown and processed food, and the specific dietary disorders, which reflect the special and in some way unnatural relationship of humans to their own body,<sup>8</sup> vegetarianism is one of the more dynamic segments of modern dietary practices. Its social significance is much bigger than statistical shares of vegetarians in contemporary Western societies.

In everyday discourse vegetarianism is understood as something marginal, not infrequently also strange. It often receives more or less articulated resistance and/or ridicule. The reason for this could be searched in its subversiveness since it challenges a complex hierarchical system of values in which meat is still the key. A series of cultural and social factors contribute to the maintenance of the status quo. People know and understand badly their daily world; the greater part of our lives takes place in nonreflected automatisms, so we rarely consent to more radical changes. A quite pragmatic, financial dimension must be added to that. The food industry na-

mely significantly contributes to the conservation of the situation, within which huge financial flows rotate. The existing agribusiness in Western countries is based in an ever greater degree on »the production of meat«, but considerable profits derive also from State subsidies for the meat-processing industry. In its most active efforts to preserve the existing system on the world level it is very successful, with no choice of means<sup>3, \*\*</sup>

In spite of the fact that vegetarianism has been a part of the Western world from its beginnings in Ancient Greece and that it has always provoked controversial reactions, it seems to be surprisingly under-researched. While it is true that historical studies of vegetarianism are not uncommon anymore and the analyses of the ethical dimension of modern mass production of meat have been similarly multiplying in recent years, there has been surprisingly little written about broader social and cultural contexts of vegetarianism. How to understand the fact that among numerous international survey projects, which continuously measure almost each and every aspect of contemporary societies and cultures (like for example International Social Survey Programme, World Values Survey, European Values Study and European Social Survey),<sup>\*\*\*</sup> there has not been a single one devoted to

\* Anorexia and bulimia are unnatural in the sense that, due to certain culturally-specific reasons, they limit the individual to meet basic biological needs for food.

\*\* The example of the American and international TV star Oprah Winfrey eloquently shows how extremely serious that can be: when in 1996, at the time of the so-called mad cow disease in a show on the problems of industrial livestock production, she stated that she would never again eat a hamburger, she was sued by an organised group of cattle breeders – they eventually lost the charge, but only after many years of judicial processes at various stages, and after staggering judicial costs (which the accused, unlike ordinary individuals, could afford anyway).

\*\*\* International Social Survey Programme (ISSP): <http://www.issp.org/>; World Values Survey (WVS): <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>; European Values Study (EVS): <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>; European Social Survey (ESS): <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>.

vegetarianism? Among existent surveys measuring different dimensions of vegetarianism (many of them are conducted or ordered by vegetarian organisations) we cannot find one that would allow competent comparisons among more than two national samples. Therefore we would strongly emphasize the need to expand the research focus of social dimensions of vegetarianism to international level in order to answer the obvious need for interculturally comparable research data. We would propose to do this in a multidisciplinary manner using quantitative as well as qualitative methods, focusing on two directions: on one hand we should learn as much as possible about small, but perhaps growing shares of vegetarians in contemporary Western societies, and on the other hand we should study the perceptions of vegetarianism among general population.

In order to achieve this we should develop a set of survey questions about vegetarianism and its perceptions and include it into one of the big international survey projects, so such set of questions would simultaneously be exercised on numerous nationally representative samples. The results would uncover the percentage of self-declared vegetarians and vegans in different societies and their actual eating patterns in practice, we would also learn about the motives of vegetarians in different societies. Not only would we get a good comparative socio-demographic picture of vegetarians, but it would be highly desirable to put such a set of questions together with other thematic sets, which would allow a possibility of further cross-analyses to uncover the attitude of vegetarians towards different social topics, their values and worldviews, religious beliefs and practices, their lifestyles, etc.\* It would also be good to consider in more detail the prevalence of vegetarianism and the attitude to it depending on the type of the environment: is it about a dominantly urban phenomenon and is the rural population more prejudiced? All of these variables could be further interculturally compared to finally be able to come up with a more comprehensive picture of the similarities and differences in the mode of existence of vegetarianism in different social and cultural contexts.

As we have learned from our study, the quantitative surveys on the representative samples are often not the most suitable methodological tool for the study of vegetarian populations since they are usually simply too small and can only offer relatively raw estimations of the number of vegetarians, their main socio-demographic characteristics, values and their attitudes towards different social questions. Therefore on-line surveys could be developed for the special samples of vegetarians. We would get bigger samples and statistically much more reliable results. Such a focus solely on a vegetarian sample would allow us a more detailed analysis of different types

of vegetarianism and the comparison between them: very likely we can expect important differences between vegetarians and vegans, there are also expected differences between the primarily ethically motivated vegetarians and those who are motivated primarily by health, etc. But we would have to be well aware of the problem of representativity of such a sample (how well would such results reflect the total population of vegetarians?).

In order to better understand the social and cultural aspects of vegetarianism, different additional research methodologies, primarily qualitative ones (focus groups of vegetarians, interviews with vegetarians, etc.), should be implied. We should in more detail examine with them how and why an individual becomes a vegetarian, how social and cultural environment affects his / her decision, which factors particularly affect such a decision (as promotional or as inhibitory), how his / her attitude toward vegetarianism fluctuates over time, etc. It would be most interesting and relevant to examine the constancy of the phenomenon (are the ones who claim that a relatively large part of the vegetarians abandon their decision through their life right?) and what factors affect it – this could be studied on the focus groups of ex-vegetarians. We should also consider whether there are significant differences between most people who become vegetarians as a result of their conscious decision, and among the very small, but growing share of children who are born in vegetarian families and become vegetarians so to speak with their birth. It would be interesting to find out in more detail what share of such children actually remain vegetarians (so how successful vegetarian socialisation is) and further to compare their attitudes to vegetarianism and the various social and life issues with other vegetarians.

As we already mentioned, the quantitative (survey) methodologies produce statistically completely valid results where we measure the perception of vegetarianism and veganism among the general population. That especially makes sense due to the highly controversial attitude of different public groups to the appearance of vegetarianism, therefore a short set of questions should be included as soon as possible in any of the above-mentioned international survey projects and then conduct it periodically every few years. This would reveal the basic stereotypical perceptions of vegetarianism, their sources and means of constructions of stereotypes of vegetarianism. It would be particularly interesting and relevant to identify how the attitude of the general population is distributed in different societies and cultures. Are there any significant differences between the traditional livestock environments and the more crop oriented ones on the other side? What about the differences between the more and less patriarchal societies: could we expect that there

\* According to the results of our survey, pretty much the same share of Slovenian vegetarians claim to be (non)religious as is the situation among the general population, but they very obviously do not attend religious services as much as the general population. At the same time vegetarians seem to be much more inclined towards ideas and practices of alternative spiritualities than the Slovenians in general. It also seems that vegetarians assess their health as considerably better than the general population does, and in fact live more healthy lives: they report to drink less alcohol, smoke less and are more physically active than the general population.

is more vegetarianism in less patriarchal societies and, above all, is the general attitude there towards vegetarianism more tolerant than in the more patriarchal societies? Are there, in the societies with different religious patterns, any differences in the existence of vegetarianism and responses to it?

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## STUDIJA SOCIJALNIH ASPEKTATA VEGETARIJANSTVA: PRIJEDLOG ISTRAŽIVANJA NA TEMELJU UPITNIKA MEĐU ODRASLIM STANOVNICIMA DVA NAJVEĆA SLOVENSKA GRADA

### SAŽETAK

Članak raspravlja o temeljnim obilježjima vegetarijanstva kao heterogene i kontroverzne prakse te pokušava procijeniti svoje područje u suvremenom zapadnom svijetu. U središnjem dijelu predstavlja glavne rezultate empirijskog istraživanja o vegetarijanstvu i njegovim spoznajama na reprezentativnom uzorku punoljetnih stanovnika dvaju najvećih gradova u Sloveniji, Ljubljani i Mariboru. Na temelju toga, autor predlaže sveobuhvatniji dizajn kvantitativnih i kvalitativnih istraživanja o socijalnim aspektima vegetarijanstva i odgovora na njega.

\* The proposed research approach could (and should) in the future be combined with some critical and interpretative approaches that could productively be applied to the topic of vegetarianism. We could, for example, use psychoanalytical tools to analyse the complex reasons behind the negative perceptions of vegetarianism in the symbolic and imaginary order. Or we could borrow some findings from the Queer theory which explains the similarly negative perceptions of the general population of the alternative sexual practices and identities. In order to better understand the general perception of vegetarianism and its complex social dimensions, we could perhaps also lean on the Governmentality studies as developed on the basis of the analyses of Michel Foucault in the late 1970s and early 1980s (with the application of the biopolitics of food which might uncover different layers of social interests and power plays).