

Meat Consumption and Vegetarianism

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Introduction

The role of meat in the human diet has been placed as the center of attention of a wide range of studies and professionals from different backgrounds have analyzed its cultural and nutritional significance. According to Verbeke & Viaene (2000) and Fessler & Navarrete (2003), no other group of foodstuff is so widely valued and at the same time the focus of so many taboos and prohibitions.

Whether due to health implications of meat consumption or because of the moral and environmental dimensions of meat production, many controversies challenge the meat centered western dietary habits. Several studies have been conducted about health implications of meat consumption (Burr & Sweetnam, 1982; American Dietetic Association, 1997), which have suggested that vegetarian diets or low meat intakes are related with lower rates of several diseases and a greater life expectancy. Society has also started to show concerns about ethical issues, such as animal welfare and the environmental costs of their consumption patterns, as meat production is very resource inefficient compared to other types of food production and places a burden on the ecosystem by using a great amount of water, land and energy (Goodland 1997; Dutilh & Kramer, 2000). All of these factors have been influencing and shaping the development of modern vegetarianism.

During the research I have conducted to write this paper I have discovered that the grounds of vegetarianism are vast and complex. Thus, the objectives of this paper are to explore symbolism and values related to meat consumption, the trends of vegetarianism in the western society and the difficulties attached to vegetarianism.

Meat: much more than food

Modern vegetarianism in the western world has been described as a consequence of a fundamental shift within the way nature is perceived by society, moving away from the desire of control, of a purely predictable science and a mechanical world to be exploited by humans towards a new conception of responsibility and stewardship towards nature (Fiddes, 1991). Fiddes (1991) argues that the high status of meat in the western diet is related to an expression of power of humans over the rest of the natural world. This explains why meat has historically been highly valued by powerful elites and denied to marginalized minorities and less powerful groups. In an empirical

study, Allen & Hung (2002) explored the correlation among foods utilitarian benefits, human values symbolized by meat and individuals identification with meat and found that the endorsement of hierarchy and inequality values was more relevant as meat identification increased. According to the same study, nutritional factors are important in shaping attitudes towards meat for low meat identifiers, however, they decrease in importance as meat identification increases. Thus, people who identify with the symbolic values represented by meat are not likely to change their habits regardless of the information they possess.

Authors like Adams (2000), Beardsworth et. al. (2002) and Leneman (1997) relate meat eating with virility and the patriarchal culture. In her argument, Adams (2000) points out symbolisms attached to meat consumption, stating that society's gender politics are deeply reflected in our relationship to animals and the construct of manhood. Several studies have shown that women are more likely to be vegetarians or to eat less meat (Beardsworth & Bryman, 1999; Kubberod et. al, 2001), what can also be related to Adams argument. Women have also shown to be more health conscious and tend to be more willing to change their behavior for social or environmental reasons as they are more emotionally involved, more concerned about the environment and have less trust in technological solutions (Fliegenschnee & Schelakovsky, 1998; Lehmann, 1999). Prättälä et al. (2006) compared gender differences in dietary habits in Finland with the Baltic countries. Contrary to what they expected, the gender differences in food habits were equally systematic in the Eastern European transition countries as they were in Finland, a Nordic welfare state with a high degree of gender equality. Hence, food habits seem to be a major factor in the gender gap in different societies.

According to Lupton (1996), on the contrary of red meat, white meat is related to the female identity. In countries like the United States, Germany, Finland and Great Britain beef consumption has steadily decreased since the 1980s, while poultry and fish consumption have increased (Schroeter & Foster, 2004; Becker et. al., 2000; Glitsch, 2000). The reasons for this phenomenon have largely been attributed to health concerns (Becker et. al., 2000; Kinnucan, 1997) or to the increasing participation of women in the labor force (Schroeter & Foster, 2004), as they were spending less time at home and needed easy-to-prepare meals were becoming more important. I argue that both arguments can be combined and that they increasingly reflect feminine values. With women gaining power, it is possible that their influence on the families dietary habits increased. According to Vinnari et. al (2010), the gender of the highest earner in a household has an influence on its dietary habits and reduced meat consumption is identified more commonly with women in this position.

Vegetarianism: the revolution of our food system or a niche in the modern market?

Feminism, Egalitarianism and Universalism seem to be linked to meat avoidance and even though recent developments suggest that vegetarianism is challenging conventional foodways as part of a societal change, many authors are questioning if vegetarianism has reached its peak and will just remain a small market niche as it is being incorporated into a market driven food system (Beardsworth & Keil, 1993). Just as ethical consumerism, which is represented by well educated people with higher income and prestigious occupation (Roberts, 1996; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001), vegetarianism seems to be constrained to the well educated, more prestigious members of society.

On an eleven year survey conducted between 1992 and 1997 in the UK on first year undergraduate students, Beardsworth & Bryman (1999) found that after 1997 vegetarianism and meat reduction showed a downward trend and a clear upward trend was identified for people with no changes in their meat consumption. Their sample was in no way representative but it was considered to be especially susceptible to vegetarianism as it represented well educated, young people from the middle class with a majority of females. However, when comparing their results with the Realeat surveys carried out in the UK population, they found them to be consistent in their patterns, despite of the fact that the first sample had a higher percentage of vegetarians. Both studies showed a peak in vegetarianism in 1997, which coincided with a strong media coverage of a BSE scandal in the UK. According to Vinnari (2010), the macro data of Finland does not indicate any trend towards vegetarianism and that meat consumption seems to have stabilised but not to decrease. Nevertheless, the author also states that the amount of households that do not buy meats in Finland have been growing since the 1980s and have then stabilised at around 6%. Hence, while the majority of Finland's population was increasing its meat consumption, a small, middle class group of people stopped buying meat at all. These results suggest that vegetarianism could have reached a plateau in society, since they are not pointing towards a revolution or a deep change in large sectors of society.

Difficulties and constraints towards vegetarianism

As we have established before, meat consumption can be related to certain values, however, personal values seem to be weak predictors for actual behavior (Lea & Worsley, 2000). Personal values play a major role in shaping attitudes and beliefs, however, their influence on behavior is not direct (Grunert et. al., 1994). The gap between attitudes and behavior is well known and has been explored by a number of authors (Rajecki, 1982; Hines et. al., 1986; Stern et. al., 1993). Rajecki (1982) explained that when attitudes are about a broad issue, which is difficult to relate with the behavior itself, it is less likely for people to engage in it. Thus, when people are asked they state being worried about climate change, but they do not reduce their frequency in car driving or meat eating. Hines,

Hungerford and Tomera (1986) related several variables to pro-environmental behavior, among which they stated locus of control, which is related to the perception of having the ability to change something by our own actions. People with an internal locus of control are likely to be more proactive, on the other hand, people with an external locus of control tend to feel impotent as for them change can only be brought by powerful people or organizations. This is very common since the consumer cannot directly see the change he might be contributing to.

According to Holm and Mohl (2000), many people in modern western societies hold negative attitudes towards animal farming, but this is not reflected in the overall trends of meat consumption. In the field of social psychology, this phenomenon is often attributed to cognitive dissonance (Rabin, 1994), a psychological theory according to which a negative feeling comes with inconsistent beliefs and to eliminate this negative feelings, people justify their inconsistent actions against all evidence or knowledge they might have or just choose to live with these inconsistencies. Less complex approaches just attribute this phenomenon to the fact that people do not want to think about the moral dimensions of their food choices (Singer & Mason, 2006).

Other difficulties considered important in an empirical study conducted by Lea & Worsley (2000) were health concerns, lack of knowledge about vegetarianism, convenience and social concerns. Generally, factors like health concerns and appreciation of meat were the most mentioned difficulties in the study, however, for men this aspect was less important than number of vegetarian friends and beliefs about meat. This is also one of the major constraints mentioned by Vinnari (2010) for the development of vegetarianism, as people identify themselves with certain type of food and this is related with a sentiment of belonging to a group.

Conclusion

In this review, I could not find evidence towards a rapidly progressing and increasing vegetarian society. However, I believe that the development of vegetarianism is a slow process and that the shift from red meat to white meat consumption, the perceived negative attitudes towards our commercial food system and the shift towards more communalist values are certainly part of this development. Modern vegetarianism has developed over the past 200 years and established institutions which have promoted vegetarianism and the creation of alternatives to meat consumption. In the UK, the first Vegetarian Society was established in 1847 and the first Vegan Society in 1944. In the United States the American Vegetarian Society was established in 1850. In Germany, a Vegetarian Society was established in 1892, even though vegetarianism was already promoted by the German Natural Living Society established in 1867. In Finland the Animal Welfare Institution of Helsinki was founded in 1870 and the Finnish Vegetarian Society in 1913.

I do not know if humans will be able to totally disattach their food system from animals, but it is certainly imperative to dramatically reduce our meat consumption, especially considering the increase of meat consumption in the developing world in recent decades. In a qualitative study based on interviews conducted on experts by Vinnari (2010) about the probable future of meat consumption and influencing factors, social, technological, environmental, political, economic and value based grounds were mentioned. It is not my goal to clarify all of them but to highlight the complexity of the issue. This also means that there are innumerable opportunities to influence meat consumption in society. Some examples cited by Vinnari (2010) are the progress of technology for the development of alternative protein sources and the modification of economic factors, such as the current subsidy system. Another suggestion is to impose an increase of alternatives to meat products in shops. A very interesting proposition is the environmental tax system proposed by Goodland (1997), in which the least efficient meat converters as pork and beef would be highly taxed, followed by more efficient converters, like eggs and poultry. Grains used for animal nutrition would be moderately taxed while rice and wheat would have no taxation. These are just some ideas of interventions that could reduce our meat consumption in the future.

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