

## **Vegephobia is Speciesism**

“Every Sunday my family was cursing and calling me names”, “My father violently pushed my head into the plate, yelling at me”, “My mom stood up and slapped me in the face”, “My parents refused to see me and their grandchildren during 4 years” - those are just a few of the testimonies collected during the First International Veggie Pride in May 2013 in Geneva, telling how family members reacted when they heard their daughter or son would no longer eat animals. If there are vegetarians/vegans who, at their “coming out” as such, weren't greeted with either disapproval or aggression from their family, it is because they were either lucky or from vegetarian/vegan parents.

But even those lucky few still have trouble finding balanced vegan food – something more than lettuce and potatoes – at canteens, most restaurants (in some parts of the world almost all restaurants), carnist friends' parties, hospitals, planes, and so on. And they still remain the target of laughter, offensive comments, exclusion and sometimes even bullying from people outside their family; people who in most cases are friends or co-workers. “I would have invited you for dinner but you're a vegan, so it's no fun” (in Veggie Pride vegephobia testimonies).

And then there are the real unlucky ones. Vegetarians/vegans who stopped trusting their doctor because – obviously having received no proper education on the subject – he/she told them they cannot survive without eating meat and/or animal products, and who, in case of an illness, try to treat their children themselves but don't realize the illness is more serious than they expected and lose their children... There are those who are misdiagnosed because every problem is thought by their doctor to be caused by the meat free diet and die from a completely different illness which the doctor didn't look for... And, there are those who lose the custody of their child because they are vegans and raise their children as vegans, like the parents of Joachim, the French toddler ( <http://www.soutien-affaire-joachim.fr/> ).

For all those reasons, a group of French activists coined the word “vegephobia” during the first Veggie Pride in 2001. “Vege” meaning vegetarian/vegan for the animals (ethical reasons) and “phobia” meaning fear, rejection and all its consequences, as in “homophobia” or “xenophobia”.

### **Proud not to eat animals**

It is important to realize why this word was created precisely during a Veggie Pride: Veggie Prides began in France in 2001 and are annual demonstrations during which people who refuse to eat animals “come out”, speak up about it, show to everyone that they exist and remind society that they have rights. One of its aims is to bring vegans and vegetarians together and to ask every one of them to become a spokesperson of the animals' cause instead of remaining unnoticed and hidden. The Veggie Pride manifesto states the following:

“We encourage them to express their pride in being veg\*an, to join the fight against prejudice against veg\*ans and to defend their rights as citizens. In effect, the oppression of non-human animals also implies a violation of the rights of human beings. Amongst these are the following:

- The right to eat correctly in works canteens, in hospitals, in prison and in any other location of communal eating.
- The right to impartial medical advice and information.
- The right to raise our children in accordance with our convictions and without their being marginalized as a result.

- The right to refuse work that goes against our ethical convictions.
- The right to respond in the media to all those who choose to criticize our way of life.”

And adds:

“We are not willing to have our taxes used to support the raising and killing and the fishing for the tastes of others.

We are no longer willing for our actions and our ideas to be systematically silenced. We no longer accept that the only public voices should be those of the corporations and intellectuals who defend the consumption of flesh.

We demand an open debate.”

### **A political solidarity**

The Veggie Pride is therefore a political demonstration. The Italian philosopher Agnese Pignataro wrote that because the Veggie Pride says *no* to the exploitation, killing and production system, the pride that it expresses is that of disobedience. She adds that the goal of the demonstrators is not to convince particular individuals to become like them but to show their gesture of saying no as a public one, as a contestation of one of the pillars – the most secret and hidden one – of society and that by asking that their rights must be respected they are not – as some may think – egoistically protecting themselves and their community, but, on the contrary, they are extending their solidarity in the biggest possible way. “A solidarity that consists precisely in projecting on the non-human animals, who in the human society are the non-being, the emptiness, the nothingness, the being which is doubly recognized to us, as humans and as citizens. For that reason, among others, the Veggie Pride is an experience that goes beyond compassion. [...] Consequently, in the Veggie Pride, the identification with the non-human animals exploited in the food industry experienced by the vegetarians does not represent a simple emotional projection, but the expression of an acknowledgment of a community of a common destiny inside a world of common relations, that of sentient beings: in short, it is a political solidarity.”

### **The physical denial of animals by the symbolical denial of vegetarians**

Why is it so crucial for the organizers of the Veggie Pride demonstrations to ask vegans and vegetarians to be the voices of the non-human animals? Because too many of them have stopped. Unwilling to face the social pressure, the mocking, the teasing, the omnipresent demand for justification, the ostracism, many vegetarians/vegans start citing health or/and environmental reasons (those are respected and accepted by everyone) or even simply a distaste for meat (you cannot argue about tastes) as being the reason why they don't eat animals. This is when vegophobia achieves its aim: it erases the issue of animal rights from the public debate and makes not eating meat a personal choice. And the animals lose pretty much the only voice they have in our society.

The social pressure for eating meat is so big, that some even stop being vegetarian/vegan because they don't want to be excluded, because they don't want to constantly be the target of teasing and mockery and everlasting questioning, which, in most cases, is of no intellectual value (“What would happen to all the pigs and the cows if we stop breeding them for food?! Do you want them to die?”). All vegetarians are not equal in facing such pressure. A new vegetarian, a child, a timid person, isolated in their social group, will not necessarily be capable of dealing with it.

For the same reasons, others refrain from ever becoming vegetarian/vegan. Even such prominent intellectuals as Richard Dawkins, who, in an interview with Peter Singer, admitted that

the only reason why he is not vegetarian is because it is not the social norm. Or the French philosopher Elizabeth de Fontenay, who, even though having devoted most of her work to animal rights issues, including her over 1000 pages long essay *Le silence des bêtes*, says she cannot be vegetarian because, though never forgetting about the killing of animals, she takes the tradition of conviviality too much into consideration.

### **A patriarchal domination**

Why is the social pressure for eating meat so big? There are two main reasons for that: one is that we live in a deeply speciesist society and the other is that society in large doesn't like anything that stands out from the norm.

By their mere presence, vegetarians question the status quo. Because to not consume meat is a way of questioning human domination and its privileges. For centuries, humans have gotten into the habit of using and exploiting other species for their own ends. Some think the problem goes even further than that. In *Toppling Patriarchy with a Fork*, Marti Kheel wrote: "A major factor that buttresses meat-eating in the Western world, I have argued, is its intimate ties to masculine self-identity. Meat eating is both an expression of a patriarchal worldview as well as one of its central supports. It is a symbol of dominance over the natural world that has been intimately tied to the domination of women." She adds: "Animals are kept on "farms," just as women are kept in "families." Significantly, the word "family" derives from the Roman word "famulus," meaning "slave" and refers to a husband's legal ownership of his wife and children." In *Eating Well*, Jacques Derrida introduces the idea of "carnophallogocentrism". It is, as explained by Matthew Calarco in the preface for Carol J. Adams' *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, "an attempt to name the primary social, linguistic, and material practices that go into becoming and remaining a genuine subject within the West. [Derrida] suggests that, in order to be recognized as a full subject one must be a meat-eater, a man, and an authoritative, speaking self."

The link between meat eating and patriarchal domination is something that is also explained in the first brochure on Vegophobia by its authors Sara Fergé and Yves Bonnardel: "Vegophobia often has sexist overtones: sensitivity and irrational feelings are „female qualities“; a „real man“ is rational and always in control of his emotions, he must eat meat with no qualms." There are many testimonies of men, who, once they decided to become vegetarian, were automatically suspected of being gay. "Next thing you're gonna tell me is that you are gay!" is what a friend of mine heard from his father. "Then you are not even a real man!" is what another vegan friend's father heard from his doctor. The resemblance between vegophobia and homophobia appears clearly.

### **Challenging the norm**

Homophobia stems from a social order based on clear assignation of male and female gender, male domination and heterosexuality. It wants to suppress male and female homosexuality (by ridiculing, hiding, attacking) because it constitutes a threat to dominant gender ideals and patriarchal domination. Similarly, vegophobia stems from a system based on a strict differentiation between animals and humans, on the refusal to consider the interests of animals and on human domination of animals.

"Individuals who defy the mandatory norm of meat-eating encounter similar obstacles to those faced by people who challenge the norm of heterosexuality. Just as a woman is considered incomplete without a man, so, too, vegetarian foods are viewed as incomplete without the addition of flesh. And just as people often wonder how a lesbian can possibly find sexual fulfillment without a man, many people wonder how vegetarians can possibly find dietary fulfillment without meat. People ask vegetarians, "What do you eat?" with the same combination of incomprehension and

bewilderment that they ask lesbians, “What do you do?” In each case, people imagine the person to be deprived or incomplete, lacking a full sexual or dietary identity. A number of vegetarians report that they had more difficulty “coming out” as vegetarians than coming out as gay.” Marti Kheel in *Toppling Patriarchy with a Fork*.

To see the resemblance between vegophobia and homophobia is not meant in any way as an unhealthy competition that would show who suffers more (as some people seem to think...) but to understand that the roots of the problem come from the same source and to see that the mechanisms are similar.

### **Fearing vegetarians is fearing slaughterhouses**

“Animals are subjected to an incredible violence. From the moment we say and show that we stand in solidarity with them by not eating their bodies it is inevitable that this violence comes out on the way we are treated. Vegophobia is the trace on us of the violence caused to them.” wrote David Olivier in his article *Vegophobia is an integral part of animal oppression*. He adds “The violence caused to animals is not a simple mechanical process. It is first and foremost based upon a refusal to hear: to hear the scream of the pig who is afraid and doesn't want to die, to hear the cow who wants to find her calf. Vegophobia is the refusal to hear vegetarians: the refusal of any real debate on the legitimacy of meat consumption. The violence caused to animals is then an imposition: that of dying. To us, vegophobia wants to impose the act of eating them.”

People don't like to hear vegetarians/vegans talk about why they refuse to eat animals. They fear discussing with them because they would have to face the horrifying fact of being part of a system that causes such tremendous suffering and billions of deaths every year, not to mention the destruction of the environment and the pauperisation of societies in third world countries. Vegetarians/vegans remind them that the world is full of injustice, and if they feel they cannot or do not want to do anything about it, they prefer to laugh at it and do anything they can to make themselves feel better. They might not even realize that when they mock vegetarians/vegans they mock the suffering of animals.

### **A social issue**

To state that vegetarians/vegans for ethical reasons are victims of vegophobia is not meant to turn them into yet another oppressed group. It is meant to bring the issue of speciesism to the public debate. Vegophobia is a hostility against questioning speciesism. Highlighting vegophobia is meant to help its victims handle the attacks better and understand that it is not them who are targeted but the animals killed for consumption. It is also meant to show that those who attack vegetarians/vegans are victims of our speciesist society and only reproduce patterns which they were taught. We should not blame the individuals, but the system. It is very important for everyone to see that vegophobia is not a personal issue, but a social issue related to the fact that vegetarians/vegans are opponents to a system of domination. This system defends itself by creating an ensemble of social rules that have been named „vegophobia“ and that prevent any improvement to the fate of animals because it stops the diffusion of ideas and distorts the debate. That is why it is so important to expose it and fight it because as long as vegophobia will not be considered harmful and will not be taken seriously it is the animals killed for consumption who will not be taken seriously.