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## Veganism: How Socioeconomic Forces Shape Normative Eating Behaviors

### Introduction

In recent years, veganism has gained significant traction in mainstream culture. One sign of the times: a quick search in YouTube today for vegan recipes yields nearly four million videos, of which a growing number are posted by creators who dedicate their entire channels to promoting veganism. This begs the question: why are so many people becoming vegan? Even more importantly: why do we eat what we eat? This paper explores the role that social forces play in food consumption and the extent to which individuals exercise personal agency in their food choices. My argument will be that although individuals possess the capacity to reconstruct their eating behavior and exercise some level of agency in that decision, they ultimately exist within an inescapable system of social controls that shape their dietary habits. I will first explain the forces that influence food consumption, focusing on socioeconomic forces for the sake of brevity. I will then discuss the recent emergent vegan movement and examine whether individuals who adopt veganism truly exercise personal agency in their decision.

### Socioeconomic Determinants of the Choice of Diet

Arguing the limitations of nutrition as an approach in studying eating habits, Patricia

Crotty (1993) wrote that there exists a “domain of behaviour, culture, society and experience” surrounding food consumption that goes unexamined in nutrition studies (109). Indeed, the scientific discipline of nutrition has largely ignored the social nature of dietary choices, which is a central component of how individuals decide what to eat. The health benefits of a plant-based diet (Craig 2009), for example, are insufficient in explaining changes in normative eating behaviors. One study conducted by Marcia Hill Gossard and Richard York (2003) concluded that meat consumption is “a practice embedded within a complex of social forces” (7). In the following paragraphs, I will explain how socioeconomic determinants specifically have contributed to existing eating norms.

Peter L. Berger (1963) characterizes the class system determined by economic criteria as “[the] most important type of stratification in contemporary Western society” (79). Citing Max Weber, Berger (1963) explains that “one’s class position yields certain probabilities, or life chances, as to the fate one may expect in society” (79). This socioeconomic reality also affects food consumption. Studying the relationship between social class and diet quality, Nicole Darmon and Adam Drewnowski (2008) found that groups of higher socioeconomic status (SES) were more likely to consume whole grains, low-fat dairy products, lean meats, and fresh vegetables, while “the consumption of fatty meats, refined grains, and added fats was associated with lower SES groups” (1109). The two suggested that the “observed SES gradient in diet quality may be mediated by” the lower costs of unhealthy foods, the lower accessibility to grocery stores in lower-income neighborhoods, as well as the lack of nutritional knowledge and interest in cooking within lower SES groups (1111). In light of this realization, it comes as no surprise that in Gossard and York’s study (2003), subjects “in laborer occupations eat both more beef and total meat than those in either service or professional occupations” and “people with

more education eat less beef and total meat” (6). Social class exerts substantial influence on meat consumption, as a lower SES is more conducive to unhealthy eating habits.

This relationship between social class and meat consumption highlights the existence within lower SES groups of a descriptive norm regarding meat consumption, which Robert B. Cialdini (2003) claims is a highly persuasive social force. A 2013 study (Prinsen, de Ridder, and deVet) confirms Cialdini’s argument about descriptive norms in the context of food consumption —when subjects saw previous participants selecting healthy foods, they were more likely to choose healthy foods. As a result, since individuals of lower SES groups view eating meat as what people of their social class typically do, they consume increased levels of meat as compared to those from higher SES group.

It is important to note that another determinant of meat consumption is the economic and political power that the meat industry has gained over the years. As Gossard and York (2003) commented in their study, “the economic elite control consumer preferences through means of social, psychological, and cultural manipulation—for example, by the use of advertising” (2). The meat industry, in other words, exerts the second and third dimensions of power as coined by Steven Lukes (1974), because it shapes the very wants of consumers. In this sense, meat-eating norms have been largely determined by the meat industry’s corporate interests. It is thus unsurprising that meat consumption for much of the world is a “deeply engraved social norm and habit” (Raphaely and Marinova 2016, 268). Just as individuals’ socioeconomic statuses control the foods that they can afford to consume and contribute to the normative eating patterns within their social class, external forces exerted by the meat industry also establish and reinforce normative eating habits of the general public.

### Veganism and Personal Agency

With this understanding of socioeconomic determinants and normative eating behavior in mind, we can now examine the recent growth of veganism. Kathryn Asher and Che Green's survey (2014) revealed that more than fifty percent of vegans and vegetarians cited health, taste preferences, animal protection, or environmental concerns as reasons for their dietary decisions. To add, food photographer Maria Siriano confesses, "the hardest part of going vegan hasn't been cravings, which are surprisingly few..., [for] me, the social ramifications of going vegan were far more discouraging" (Siriano 2017). Asher and Green's study along with Siriano's comment underline an important fact: on a microlevel of analysis, the individual does exercise some level of personal agency in their decision to become vegan. Cutting out animal products for personal and altruistic reasons requires tangible sacrifice and independent action, especially when meat consumption is the norm. In line with the previous analysis of socioeconomic forces, individuals of lower SES groups exercise even more personal agency when they decide to become vegan, as meat consumption is a greater descriptive norm within their social class. In this sense, individuals do possess personal agency and exert pressure to their social milieu in their dietary decisions.

On the macro-level of analysis, however, individuals are still part of a greater system of socioeconomic controls, and their decision to become vegan does not remove them from this system. The reality is that the main demographic group of vegans and vegetarians in the United States are "middle-class and upper-class individuals" (Lindquist 2013). Asher and Green's survey (2014) also displayed an obvious positive relationship between education level and identification as vegan or vegetarian. Essentially, when an individual from a higher SES group makes the decision to become vegan, there exists an illusion of personal agency, because, in fact,

the individual is acting within the boundaries of their socioeconomic reality. The implications of these studies are similar for individuals from a lower SES group, who are also constrained by the realities and norms of their social class when they make decisions about their diet. Rather than an illusion of personal agency, however, their location in the class system yields norms that discourage them as a whole from choosing plant-based diets.

Moving beyond the scope of socioeconomic forces, the fact that veganism is now trendy also contributes to the idea that individuals' decision to become vegan is the result of greater social forces. According to the Plant Based Foods Association, plant-based food companies in the United States is growing faster in sales than the entire food business in general (Strom 2016). This trend isn't restricted only to North America; data from Google Trends shows a spike in "vegan" searches over the past five years in countries like Israel, Australia, and Germany (2017). We refer again here to Asher and Green's survey (2014), which found that 63 percent of former vegan and vegetarian subjects disliked the fact that their diet made them "stick out from the crowd" (10). Although this observation explains why former vegan and vegetarians opted out of their lifestyle, it supports the overarching argument that individuals' eating habits are heavily shaped by their social context. We can assume that individuals are less likely to adopt veganism if it was not trending, because there would exist less social forces (i.e. desire to be part of a fad) pushing the individual to exert pressure against meat-eating norms and incentivizing them from sticking out from the crowd.

### Conclusion

The role that social structure and personal agency plays in shaping food consumption is perhaps best illustrated by the analogy of a dog's toy ball (Haslanger 2015, 114-115). After a

treat has been stuffed into a hole in the ball, while it is free to move within the ball and exert some levels of pressure against the ball, its behavior is determined by the ball's movement. In the same way, although individuals are able to exercise some levels personal agency in their dietary habits, their behavior is still bounded by the parameters of the social structure in which they live. My analysis mainly highlighted the effects that socioeconomic forces have upon normative eating behavior, but, as I tried to show in the previous paragraph, there also exist other factors that represent other limits to our behavior as individuals. This understanding of social forces and food consumption creates further implications for public health and environmental studies as it provides the social impetus of unhealthy and environmentally unsustainable eating habits.

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