Dietary Choices as Reflexive Responses to Modern Food Practices: Vegetarian, Vegan and Low-Meat Eating Students in St Andrews

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One evening, when I had not yet started my encounters project and had no more than the vague idea of doing it on veganism, my flatmates, Marian and Lukas, and I were in the kitchen preparing dinner. I was recounting my encounter at the Korean-cooking class the previous night. My project in mind, I had approached one of the participants, Raul, inquiring whether he ate meat. This question triggered a long conversation, at some point of which Raul referred to his vegan friend who 'drinks milk, eats eggs … because, he says, what is veganism about? Caring about animals. So he buys what doesn't hurt the animal.' This dietary choice excited me. Vegetarian myself, the result of a long process of eating less meat, I had been exposed to the ideas of my vegan friend Marian and was searching for an adequate expression of my beliefs in my eating choices. But on expressing my enthusiasm for this diet to Marian, she protested against his chosen label. Lukas agreed: 'I do not call myself vegetarian, although I am 99% meat-free.' This choice Marian emphatically affirmed: 'Yes, because you have an objection towards the amount of meat we eat and towards the industry, not towards the principle.' This spontaneous exclamation hints at two fascinating topics concerning dietary practices, that of definition and that of motivation. And these two questions of 'what' and 'why' subsequently guided the research I conducted among students with vegetarian, vegan and low-meat diets during two weeks of March.

Prior to these two weeks I continuously agonised over method. My research question prevented me from conducting 'participant observation,' the core means by which anthropologists have delved into the richness of social life since Malinowski invented fieldwork in the 1920s. Instead, to gather my data I would be forced to reduce fieldwork to a series of stand-alone interviews which could only bring me to the periphery of people's lives. As I subsequently found out, my worries were shared by others facing the same situation (Hockey, 2002). As Hockey points out, anthropologists tend to regard interviews as 'an off stage commentary, rather than a centre stage set, complete with scenery and props, which an entire cast of players can enter and exit' (2002: 215). Aiming to overcome this distinction between research interview and 'real life', she highlights the parallels between the two: 'Everyday social interaction in the West is often spatially dislocated, time-bounded and characterised by intimacy at a distance' (2002: 210). Interviewing, then, closely matches Western experiences of social relations and starts to emerge as a form of participant observation.

Indeed, my worries turned out to be unwarranted. The interviews I led resembled less a formal inquiry than an informal chat. We would sit down in a café or someone's home over a cup of tea and, following some small talk, my simple question 'So, what's your diet?' would elicit extensive, avid, reflexive replies. People, I soon realised, loved talking about food. Many times, when I had told others about my project, they responded with an excited 'You can interview me!' In the end, I had accumulated fourteen conversations with seventeen people, some of which had approached me, some of which I had approached, lasting about an hour each. Every single person had told me, as I realised re-reading my notes, a beautiful story, imbued with meaning, and in itself complete, if not coherent. Lévi-Strauss' claim that food is

‘good to think with’ must contain some truth, then, an impression I will consider towards the end of this ethnography. In what follows, I realise I will not be able to do justice to all the stories I was told but will have to privilege some and bits of some over others. I will attempt to find a middle ground between respecting the stories in their fullness and analysing the dominant themes and tropes they share.

My decision to pursue the topic of motivation rather than definition necessitates me to make some preliminary statements. My interviews with vegetarians, vegans and meat-eaters suggest that these three categories do not, in fact, stand as distinct categories. Instead of any congruent pattern of particular (self-)definitions, dietary choices and motivations, I discovered a confusing mess in which each individual constituted its own category. My findings echo Willetts’ study of vegetarianism and meat-eating in South-East London where ‘in many instances it is impossible to see a clear distinction between the diets of the two groups’ and they ‘share many similar views on health, animal rights, factory farming and environmental issues’ (1997: 114). Willetts’ deconstruction of the dichotomy of meat-eating and vegetarianism conflicts with the analyses of other social scientists, like Twigg (1979) and Fiddes (1997), for whom the two diets reflect oppositional world-views, one denoting a relationship of domination, the other one of gentleness towards the ‘natural world’. To a degree, their analyses yet prove helpful when considering the rhetoric my interviewees employed in their stories. For the shared theme that emerges constitutes dietary choices as reflexive responses to modern food practices.

For my first encounter I joined the two flatmates Esther and Scarlet for lunch. Both, I noticed, firmly identified themselves as ‘ethical vegetarians,’ so I asked if they rejected killing animals. While Esther affirmed that ‘it’s not ethical,’ Scarlet meant: ‘It’s okay, if the animal is ethically reared and killed… As a species we have always eaten meat. …The problem is farming, factory farming.’ I continued posing that question – what do you think about killing animals? – in every of my conversations, and the responses I received reiterated either of the reactions above. Excepting two cases, my conversational partners judged killing acceptable on the condition that it is done ‘humanely’ or ‘ethically’. Rather than illustrating this condition further, they readily identified what was ‘wrong’, what failed to satisfy the condition: factory-farming, the term symbolising the ‘exploitation’ and ‘abuse’ of animals. For Scarlet, being ‘shown a video about the meat-industry’ caused her to become vegetarian. Modern farming methods, then, rather than killing animals, seemed to present a crux for the dietary choices of my conversational partners. While few explained their rejection in greater detail, Atkinson attributes the vilification of ‘factory-farming’ to the term’s merger of ‘factory,’ an urban place of mass production, and ‘farm,’ a rural place and source of natural products (1983: 16). Indeed, those that referred to ‘good’ farming practices portrayed the farm as embodying the ‘good life’, with ‘happy’ animals leading ‘a nice life running around outside’ in their ‘natural environment’, out of which factory-farming takes them to place them on ‘conveyer belts’. ‘Factory-farming’ thus presents a contradiction in terms, an ‘abomination’ confounding the binary opposites nature/culture.

Additionally to modern meat-production, modern meat-consumption was presented as another ‘unnatural’ practice. Iris and Raul, a couple I interviewed together, confirmed each other: ‘It is natural for a lion to eat a zebra, and it is natural for a human to eat deer. What just isn’t natural is the amount. Like in medieval times, they didn’t have meat all the time, not even kings. It was like a feast to have meat.’ – ‘Yes, it is natural for animals to eat each other. It’s just we who aren’t natural anymore. If we lived in close contact with nature we would hunt.’ A meatless diet would not bring these two closer to ‘nature,’ but a low-meat diet does, allowing them to escape the ‘artificiality’ of modern meat consumption. Similarly to others, their story ties conceptions of ‘the natural ’ to conceptions of ‘the past’ in which first, repeating Scarlet, ‘we have always eaten meat’, and secondly, meat was a rarity. One of my conversational partners actually explicitly argued: ‘[Vegetarianism] is a reaction to the current meat-obsession and meat-availability. It’s to do with the cultural representation of food. Meat used to be something special, now you just have it every day.’

Modern food production and consumption were not only perceived as ‘unnatural’ but also as a source of risk, which according to MacClancy is a direct consequence of the former (1992: 155). Their dietary choices, some of my conversational partners felt, helped avoid these risks. As Lisa explained, sitting over her salad, ‘If I go out, I choose vegetarian usually. Especially if it’s a slightly dodgy place. I’d rather eat crappy vegetables than crappy meat. For example, now I chose not to have chicken in the salad, because I don’t know where it comes from.’ Lisa’s explanation fits within Beck’s concept of the ‘risk society’ in which consumers are subjected to a ‘double shock’, deriving from the realisation that they might consume something harmful and ‘the loss of sovereignty over assessing the dangers’ (1992: 54). Its members ‘know’ enough to

become anxious but not enough to act upon their anxiety. Anxiety was certainly strongly felt by Maria: 'I also like to make things from scratch, not so much processed stuff. I don't eat that. When I went to Ireland, I spent a day in a youth hostel just to cook food.' This opposition of 'processed' and 'natural' foods, with its moral associations, Lupton argues, makes everyday life easier in a climate of risk (1996: 92).

Maria's parents, just as Tamsin's, became vegetarian during the 1980s salmonella and mad-cow disease scare in Britain. As Tamsin explains, 'They didn't like the meat industry, meat is so processed and lots of preservatives and e-numbers are put into it. Like basically, the mad-cow disease came about because they were feeding sheep to cows and so the disease of the sheep was transferred to the cows. That isn't how it should be, they should be eating grass." The source of anxiety, for Tamsin, lay in the 'unnatural' production of beef through feeding animal products to herbivorous animals. This concern, rather than the causal linkage of contaminated meat and human death, MacClancy maintains, constituted the driving force of the scares (1992: 155).

Before turning from negative to positive tropes and themes, I want to provide an insight, extending beyond rhetoric, into the different motivations of my conversational partners for their diets, which extends beyond animals and the self to the environment and other people. In representation of all stories, I will let Carolyn tell hers. In slow, calm words she told me: 'A lot of vegans cling to factory farming. But I think there is a way around it, if you for example only buy at local farms. For me it's more about the environmental impact. I don't agree with all arguments. I think you can be a meat eater and still be sustainable. And a vegan diet has its own impacts, like the soy industry, the whole GMO-issue, and it's driving small

farmers out of business. So I try to be more ethically vegan, eating lentils and stuff. […] I thought about going back to be vegetarian, but I didn't, mostly because I like what I eat, I have more energy, I am healthier, happier. […] I want everyone to think about how they nurture their body and the consequences it has to other people, the planet and animals.'

In Carolyn's story, as in indeed most, her different motivations to be vegan entangle into one web. Lisa also argued, 'one is going to affect the other, environmental impacts, impacts on animals, impacts on humans.' A highly emotive response, through most claims ran what might be termed an all-encompassing ethics of care. As Josh said, 'What guides what I eat? At a fundamental level, concern and respect for life in all its parts.' While none engaged in derogatory discourses about other diets, most appealed to, like Carolyn had, 'awareness' or 'consciousness' as a key word. Accordingly, there can be 'a good meat-eater', Maria argued, while a 'bad meat-eater' 'is someone who buys meat in a package and does not know where it comes from and then gives it to his children who probably think it grows in a package.' The 'alienated' experience of the latter type of consumer as of the producer who has, as some put it, 'lost all touch which the food they produce' is contrasted unfavourably with the former type of conscious consumer who is 'closer to what they eat.'

Part of the awareness my conservational partners encouraged was making the connection between the meat one eats and the animal that has been killed for it. Modern industry was felt to conceal this connection: 'Now, if you go to McDonald's, you see the hamburger not the cow.' Sinead deeply rejected this lack of awareness: 'Greg's sausage roll, it doesn't even look like meat. You should be really aware that you're eating an animal.' Commonly articulated was the notion 'if you cannot kill the cow, don't eat the hamburger.'

Anything else was regarded as ‘unfair’, ‘morally wrong’, ‘disrespectful’ or ‘hypocritical’. For Amina, ‘The reason I became vegetarian is I accompanied somebody fishing. I looked at the fish – and I couldn’t kill it. I concluded that I shouldn’t eat meat anymore till I was able to hunt.’ Only one disagreed, ‘Killing an animal is a skill. It’s okay if someone does it for you. As long as you acknowledge that an animal has been killed so you can eat it …which is really hard if you don’t see the animal.’ Assuming responsibility for the killing of animals expressed respect for the animal and reversed the process that had turned them into absent referents. It meant, Lisa felt, ‘having some sort of relationship with the animals. Not to give them names and hug them, but to appreciate that they are animals, not something you grow, slaughter, eat, grow, slaughter, eat.’ Carolyn looked back in nostalgia at ‘the Native American way of hunting: they used every part they possibly could, they saw it as a waste of life not to. And if we could bring that mentality back, to see the animal as a gift.’

While my conversational partners identified a hierarchy of farmers’ market over butcher over supermarket, they felt that this appreciation of animals was best accomplished by the self. Many envisioned a future in which they would have a farm. Maria explained, ‘I know this wonderful place in Ireland where they live sustainably. They have veg, milking sheep, and a little grain. I looked at their life and thought: that’s what I want to do too. When I grow up, I want to sustain myself, not rely on other sources.’ This, to her, would reverse ‘the step away from a natural way of living.’ In her story of the ‘natural’ life on and off the land Maria articulated nostalgia towards a life of self-sufficiency and autonomy and emotively connected ‘nature’ and ‘rural life.’ The same discourse that privileged ‘nature’ over ‘culture’ thus also privileged rural over urban living. A ‘rural life’ meant to my conversational partners the

realisation of a complex community incorporating humans, animals and plants instead of the modern hierarchy in which, Maria felt, ‘humans think they are superior to all animals.’ And while all emphasized that ‘animals are living’, for Armina, ‘everything is sort of living. In my ideal life I would try my best to create a meaningful way of relating to all.’

These stories do indeed reflect an ideology of care and responsibility and explicitly reject an ideology of mastery (Fiddes, 1997). Moreover, they indeed conceptualise ‘nature’ as a realm characterised by harmony in contrast to modern society, which has lost touch with that ‘nature’ and become distorted (Twigg, 1979). However, these stories likewise did not present vegetarianism and veganism as absolute expressions of this ideology and conceptualisation. Rather, they presented these diets as reflexive responses to ‘artificial’ modern food practices that could be otherwise escaped, for example through ‘the rural life’ symbolising reunion with ‘nature.’ For my conversational partners, whether vegetarian, vegan or on low-meat diets, this ‘rural’/ ‘natural’ life included responsible relationships with animals used for food products. For Josh, a meat-less diet even represented alienation from ‘nature’ of which humans, animals and plans are a part. About vegetarianism he said, ‘Killing isn’t cruel. Everything kills. Other animals, all plants kill.’ And on veganism, ‘such an environment is entirely human-centred. It’s a human-based web of life. That’s why I never considered it an ethical choice.’

The dietary choices of my conversational partners thus escape any straightforward justifications but are tied to complex philosophies of meaning. Why, I asked myself, have they chosen food to express these? I received one answer to this unspoken question: As our conversation drew to a close, Josh remarked, ‘People use what they eat to define who they are… we keep coming back to that, don’t we? It’s true in a very real sense: you are what you

eat.' Eating, as Josh had discerned, is central to our identity, or, following Lupton, our subjectivity. It is one of the central practices by which we 'inscribe' our subjectivity on our bodies which is then read or interpreted by others (Lupton, 1996: 15). Therefore, 'incorporation is an act laden with meaning' (Fischler, 1988: 277). Expanding on his original observation at a wild food walk a month later, Josh argued, 'It is so important to eat wild food because the environment becomes part of you. There is nothing more intimate you can do with the place you live in than … eat it. It isn't only spiritual either. It physically becomes you as it enters your digestive system.' In terms similar to Josh, Fischler argues 'to incorporate food is to incorporate its properties. The saying 'you are what you eat' is literally, biologically true; the food we absorb provides not only the energy our body consumes but the very substance of our body.' (1988: 279). Incorporation of unknown foods calls one's subjectivity into question, incorporation of the wrong type of food may lead to transformation of the self (1988: 281).

The story I have just told, about the stories my conversational partners have told me, is one in which the fully conscious and reflexive self is privileged, in which a 'good' diet results from the way in which the food is produced, in which the categorisations of 'good' and 'natural' foods are merged and contrasted with those of 'bad' and 'artificial' foods and in which their meanings are transferred to the individuals who incorporate them. I consciously use the phrase 'the story I tell of their stories' because, when preparing to write up this project, I came to realise that I was going to take apart these whole stories to fit pieces of them into my planned structure of what I considered their shared dominant themes to be. And writing this, I made up a new story which will, without doubt, reflect myself as well as the other.

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