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Dhont, Kristof and Stoeber, Joachim (2020) The vegan resistance. *The Psychologist*. (In press)

DOI

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Author's Accepted Manuscript

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The Psychologist, in press

The Vegan Resistance

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Kristof Dhont and Joachim Stoeber on ideological pushback against the rise of veganism.

What drives people to lash out at others who choose to eschew eating animals out of compassion? And what does it say about those who get upset and angry when someone else decides to give up meat?

In January 2019, the largest bakery chain in the UK, Greggs, launched a vegan version of its best-selling product: a vegan sausage roll. The launch did not go unnoticed. Within hours of Greggs announcing the new addition to their menu, British television broadcaster Piers Morgan fulminated on Twitter: ‘Nobody was waiting for a vegan bloody sausage, you PC-ravaged clowns’. A few days later Morgan continued his tantrum during his television programme by declaring the start of ‘the vegan resistance’ while posing next to a stall full of raw meat.

While it was evident that Morgan was not waiting for a vegan sausage roll, numerous customers clearly appreciated its addition to the menu. Indeed, six months after the launch, Greggs reported an exceptional profit gain of 58 per cent for the first half of the year, pointing to the vegan sausage roll as the key driver of the boost in sales. It’s now planning to provide vegan versions of all its top-selling products.

But what is it about a vegan sausage roll that unsettled Piers Morgan so much that he resorted to name-calling? How can the introduction of a new product – a sausage roll of all things – provoke so much anger and cause controversy on national television?

Consider also the reaction from journalist Janet Street-Porter after seeing Tesco’s advert for vegan ‘pork’ sausages. The advert led to an opinion piece in which Street-Porter compared vegans to Stalinists and reported feeling nauseous after viewing the advert. Note that the advert does not show footage of pigs’ living conditions inside factory farms, which in most viewers would cause nauseating reactions (Gellatley, 2016). It merely shows a family at dinner time expressing care, love and compassion when a little girl says ‘I don’t want to eat animals anymore’ and the father – in response to his daughter’s wish – decides to replace the pork sausages in their favourite dish with Tesco’s plant-based sausages.

These examples of backlash against vegan products are not isolated incidents. They exemplify the broader, widespread phenomenon of hostility and discrimination against vegans and vegetarians (hereafter veg*ns) and a general pushback against veganism and vegetarianism (hereafter veg*nism). Where does this anti-veg*n resentment come from? A relatively nascent but fast-growing body of psychological research throws light on this, and how prejudice against veg*ns is connected to other types of prejudice.

Prejudice and discrimination

A recent survey of hundreds of veg*ns found that over half of them had experienced situations of everyday discrimination because of their veg*nism (MacInnis & Hodson, 2017). Almost 10 per cent reported that at least one of their family members broke off contact after respondents revealed they were veg*n, and a similar percentage reported not being hired for a job because of their veg*n lifestyle. Clearly, prejudice against veg*ns is common and strong.

Some meat eaters lash out at veg*ns because they feel that veg*ns, by not eating meat, express moral disapproval of the omnivore's meat-eating behaviour. This uncomfortable feeling of being morally judged, even if just tacitly, motivates meat eaters to take measures to protect the positive view they hold about themselves and their sense of morality. One way of doing so is derogating the source of the perceived threat to one's positive self-image. Such defensive reaction against morally motivated others is known as 'do-gooder derogation'. The mere presence of a veg*n, salient when having a meal, can provoke such a hostile reaction. Consistent with this idea are observations that anti-veg*n prejudice is not only stronger against vegans than vegetarians (who still consume some animal products), but also stronger against veg*ns who are veg*n for moral reasons (i.e. ethical concerns about animal welfare) rather than for health reasons, and stronger with increased levels of anticipated moral reproach (MacInnis & Hodson, 2017; Minson & Monin, 2012).

However, rather than an attempt to restore or protect the moral identity of meat eaters, many instances of anti-veg*n pushback appear to be ideologically motivated. Research investigating the role of ideology found marked differences between people on the political right (hereafter right-wing adherents) and people on the political left (hereafter left-wing adherents) with the former eating more meat and expressing greater anti-veg*n prejudice than the latter (Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Hodson et al., 2020).

While these ideological differences may not be surprising to many readers, the more important and arguably more interesting question is why such differences exist. To address this question, a more detailed look at the two distinct ideological motives and the components underlying right-wing ideologies is needed.

Valuing traditions and social norms

The first ideological motive underlying right-wing ideologies is the need for social cohesion, collective order and stability. Compared to left-wing adherents, right-wing adherents express this motive in a stronger endorsement of traditional norms and values, greater compliance with authorities and an intolerance towards those deviating from cultural and social conventions. This collection of socially conservative principles is also termed 'right-wing authoritarianism' (Altemeyer, 1981). People high in right-wing authoritarianism are more likely to support, engage in and defend traditional practices – and in our culture, this includes practices that involve eating or exploiting animals (Dhont & Hodson, 2014).

Indeed, the habit of eating animals is deeply entrenched in our cultural traditions (Joy, 2009; Zaraska, 2016). Moreover, it forms part of our social identity and collective history, often situated at the heart of our warmest memories about family gatherings and moments of social bonding. In Britain, the Sunday Roast brings extended families together on the weekend and, for many Britons, is associated with fond childhood memories of siblings, parents and grandparents united around the dinner table. Turkey is the meat dish central to many of our Christmas or Thanksgiving stories, and some of our friendship bonds would be weaker if not

for those summer barbecues where the act of cooking meat together: steaks, burgers, sausages, drumsticks. Sharing the cooked meat among friends is centre stage, contributing to the formation, maintenance and strengthening of social relationships. In other words, these meals are never just about the food we eat but also about the social connectedness, group values and festive habits symbolised by the meal. And because of the prominent place of meat in these meals, eating animals has become an inherent part of many people's social narrative and their norms and traditions.

Because veg*ns disengage from this tradition of eating animals and advocate for an alternative lifestyle challenging the status quo, right-wing adherents tend to perceive the rise of veg*nism as a threat to their cultural traditions. And the more people perceive veg*nism as a threat, the more they tend to actively push back against veg*nism by, for example, consuming more meat, caring less about farmed animals and expressing stronger prejudice against veg*ns (Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Leite et al., 2019; MacInnis & Hodson, 2017).

Group dominance and human supremacy

The second ideological motive is the desire for group dominance and superiority. Compared to left-wing adherents, right-wing adherents express a stronger preference for strict intergroup hierarchy and social inequality, a construct known as 'social dominance orientation' (Pratto et al., 1994). People high in social dominance orientation believe that a functioning society requires that some groups deemed superior belong at the top (and possess the political and economic powers and resources) while other groups belong at the bottom and are deemed inferior.

Social dominance orientation also generalises to how people view and treat animals. Specifically, people high in social dominance orientation tend to perceive a greater hierarchical divide between humans and animals and feel authorised to exploit animals and eat animal products based on their belief in human superiority over animals (Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Dhont et al., 2016). Such ideologically motivated beliefs in human supremacy not only encourage feelings of entitlement to use animals as humans see fit, but also push animals outside people's moral circles of concern (Caviola et al., 2019; Leite et al., 2019). Hence, desires for dominance and supremacy among those on the political right underpin their higher levels of meat consumption and their support for a range of practices of animal exploitation beyond farming animals, such as hunting, animal testing and the use of animals for entertainment.

Consequently, right-wing adherents tend to experience the rise of veg*nism as a threat not only to valued traditions, but also to their sense of entitlement to enjoy meat and other animal products and to their privileged status of human dominion over animals. Therefore, lashing out at veg*ns represents an active pushback from the right against ideologies and practices challenging both mainstream traditions and the dominant ideology supporting the use and consumption of animal products, particularly meat (Dhont & Hodson, 2014; MacInnis & Hodson, 2017).

Speciesism and prejudice towards human outgroups

The importance of social dominance orientation is further highlighted by studies simultaneously considering gender- and ethnicity-based prejudices against humans (sexism, racism) and prejudice against non-human animals, termed speciesism (cf. Dhont et al., 2020). Prominent scholars outside psychology such as Peter Singer (1975), Carol Adams (1990) and

Breeze Harper (2011) have long argued that exploitative practices towards human outgroups (i.e. disadvantaged or minority groups) and exploitative practices towards animals are interconnected forms of oppression. Such connections not only manifest on a systemic level but also on a psychological level. The way people think about and treat human outgroups is meaningfully associated to the way people think about and treat animals.

Putting this idea to the test, we collected data from four different countries including the UK and found that – across countries – people who expressed greater ethnic prejudice also expressed greater speciesism (Dhont et al., 2014; Dhont et al., 2016). Furthermore, our studies confirmed that social dominance orientation is key in explaining why ethnic prejudice is associated with speciesism. The meaningful association between ethnic prejudice and speciesism disappeared (i.e. became non-significant) once individual differences in social dominance orientation were statistically controlled for, indicating that social dominance orientation is the common ideological core underpinning both ethnic prejudice and speciesism.

Active reaching out

To conclude, there is a growing body of psychological evidence showing that ideologies endorsed by right-wing adherents – valuing traditions and social dominance – have downstream consequences for a range of outgroups including animals and veg*ns. Such ideologies may foster attitudes supporting the exploitation of animals and the derogation and marginalisation of those who refuse to eat meat and other animal products. Furthermore, hierarchically- and traditionally-minded people are more likely to deny that we humans are responsible for climate change, support exploitative practices that deplete our natural resources and push back against initiatives protecting our environment because they are perceived as threatening (Hoffarth & Hodson, 2016; Meleady et al., in press; Milfont & Sibley, 2014).

Such findings highlight that the ideological motives involved in human intergroup biases are intimately related to how we think about and treat animals and nature. The same ideological motives may explain why some people become angry and even aggressive in the face of the increasing popularity of veg*nism – to an extent that even the introduction of a vegan sausage roll is met with strong resentment.

Increasingly, academics in psychological science recognise the interconnections between prejudicial attitudes and behaviours in human intergroup and human–animal relations. Serious attention is now devoted to improving our understanding of the psychology of veg*nism and animal exploitation (Dhont & Hodson, 2020; Dhont et al. 2019). Going beyond psychological science, we think that all behavioural and social sciences have a crucial role to play in advancing our understanding of the individual, social and societal factors that influence attitudes towards the consumption of meat and other animal products and how people see other forms of oppression and exploitation in human-animal relations. Moreover, we think that academics involved in this endeavour should actively approach veg*n outreach and animal advocacy organisations not only to share their research findings, but also to receive input from these organisations to make this research more practically relevant and have greater individual, social and societal impact.

[ONLINE ONLY]

To kick-start conversations and active collaborations between academics and people working

for veg*n outreach and animal advocacy organisations, we will be hosting a conference titled *Animal Advocacy: Insights from the Social Sciences* from 24-26 June 2020 on the Canterbury Campus of the University of Kent (for more info, please see: <https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/animaladvocacy/>). And everyone interested in the topics we touched upon in this article is welcome – whether they were waiting for a ‘vegan bloody sausage’ or not.

Note. This article will also be part of a special collection to be published by *The Psychologist* later in the year.

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