

Questioning the Concept of Vegan Privilege: A Commentary

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Abstract

This article examines and analyzes the credibility and utility of the critique of veganism as a privileged lifestyle, both by those inside and by those outside the vegan community. Using the theory of intersectionality, I explain that the concept of vegan privilege is vague and lacks contextualization. I propose that veganism itself is not a privilege, but rather the ability to make food choices is ultimately the privilege. In addition, I argue that allegations of “vegan privilege” conceal and reinforce the cultural invisibility of speciesism and carnism. Although the ultimate mission of veganism is to eradicate animal exploitation, vegans must understand the animals are not the only ones that suffer. The structural and interactional process of “mindless eating” exploits both consumers and workers. I conclude by encouraging vegans and carnists alike to expand the circle of compassion and to understand the human costs of the capitalist industrial food complex.

Keywords

veganism, privilege, carnism, mindless eating, speciesism, intersectionality

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Personal Reflexive Statement

I conduct research and teach in the fields of gender, animals, and society, and the culture and politics of food. I adopted an ethical vegan politic and lifestyle in 1996. Since 2010, I have presented my research on veganism at national sociological conferences. I noticed the discussion following my presentations focused on a critique of veganism as a privileged lifestyle and not on the content of my research. I also read multiple online blogs and commentaries that both supported and condemned the concept of vegan privilege. At first I outright rejected these claims. It was my defensive reactions to this critique that inspired me to unpack the meanings and purposes of the concept “vegan privilege” and to highlight when the phrase is useful and when it is problematic.

There are multiple interpretations of what it means to be vegan. Some people are apolitical and eat a plant-based diet for personal health benefits. Others reject animal consumption to protect the environment from the harm caused by the system of industrial farming. Some vegans, whom I call *ethical vegans*, choose veganism as an ethical lifestyle to reduce the suffering and exploitation of animals (Greenebaum 2012a, 2012b). Ethical vegans adopt a definition of veganism coined in 1944 by Donald Watson of the Vegan Society of the UK, which promotes animal rights by rejecting the use of all animals for food, clothing, and entertainment (Vegan Society n.d.).

Veganism as an ethical position based on the belief of animal rights and animal liberation, rather than a personal dietary health choice, is more controversial because it challenges mainstream food ethics, rejects food consumption as “personal choice,” and rejects the ideologies of speciesism and carnism. Leaders in the vegan community debate whether they should encourage people to reduce their consumption of animals or promote a total abolition approach. Simultaneously, they question whether emphasizing health, environmental, or ethical arguments will be the most effective way to advocate for veganism (Greenebaum 2012a, 2012b).

When veganism is promoted within the context of animal rights activism, a backlash emerges. For example, bloggers have been actively writing posts and commentaries debating the notion of “vegan privilege.” These bloggers debate whether veganism requires affluence, whether it assumes whiteness, first world privilege, and cultural insensitivity, and whether it encourages self-righteousness and condescension towards non-vegans.¹ This vegan privilege debate is not divided by whether one is vegan or not since a group of vegan activists and animal rights activists also promote the concept of vegan privilege.²

While privilege is important to examine, I propose the general concept of vegan privilege is limiting and vague. It approaches veganism as a monolithic movement and lacks contextualization. Privilege is defined as the invisible, unearned, and often unwanted advantages granted based on membership to ascribed social groups such as race, class, and gender (McIntosh 1997; Johnson 2005; Wise 2008). Veganism, on

the other hand, is an achieved status and identity that reflects the shared beliefs, values, and politics of people.

The commentary I provide here uses the theory of intersectionality to explore and deconstruct the concept of vegan privilege. Intersectionality, a theory developed by black feminist theorists, critiqued the essentialist notion of the universal woman and argued that the experience of femininity and sisterhood differed for all based on one's social location. The theory of intersectionality recognizes that racism, sexism, class exploitation, and other forms of discrimination and oppression are part of a matrix of domination and therefore must be dismantled together, not separately (Collins 1990). An intersectional analysis also recognizes that levels of privilege and oppression exist on a spectrum. Due to the different arrangements of social identifiers, not all women experience privilege and oppression in similar ways. Even so, Collins (1993:26) warns us that we should resist the temptation to rank oppressions since it "locks us all into a dangerous dance of competing for attention, resources, and theoretical supremacy." Furthermore, not only can people be oppressed and privileged simultaneously, one can be oppressed and an oppressor at the same time. As Hooks (1989:21) states:

Clearly, differentiating between strong and weak, powerful and powerless, has been a central defining aspect of gender globally, carrying with it the assumption that men should have greater authority than women and should rule over them. As significant and important as this fact is, it should not obscure the reality that women can and do participate in politics of domination, as perpetrators as well as victims—that we dominate, that we are dominated.

Therefore, critical animal studies (CAS) use intersectionality to expose the fact that animal liberation and human liberation are, as Jenkins and Stanescu (2013:74) state, "one struggle."

We contest the naturalness of the human-animal dichotomy and reveal how the interlocking of classicism, ableism, nationalism, gender norms, and racism contribute to the oppression of all animals, whether human or nonhuman. CAS articulates the call to respond to the violence perpetuated in the name of such norms; veganism is the corresponding commitments to minimizing violence against all (human or nonhuman) animal life.

I argue that the purpose of the criticism from within and outside the vegan community has different goals and deserves a different response and reaction. Criticism from nonvegans, particularly those with economic privilege, operates to dismiss the vegan ethic and allows nonvegans to better enjoy an animal-based diet without questioning their own values, privileges, and participation in the animal industrial complex. The concept of vegan privilege conceals the role that political and economic elites (Milner 2015; Nibert 2002, 2013) have in reinforcing the cultural

invisibility of speciesism and carnism (Singer [1975] 1990; Ryder 2010; Joy 2011; Weitzenfield and Joy 2013), an ideology that endorses the legitimacy of eating animals.

Vegan scholars and activists who critique vegan privilege, often work within the field of CAS and insist that veganism needs to move beyond a limited focus on equality and justice for animals and broaden our circle of compassion to people. They critique the campaigns, strategies, and foci of the mainstream animal rights and vegan movements. They remind vegans that although the plight of animals may be the primary concern for ethical vegans, animals are not the only ones that suffer and are exploited by the capitalist industrial food complex. They urge vegans to go beyond an individual and collective boycott of nonvegan products and goods and promote an “engaged veganism” that is “committed to minimizing violence against all (human or nonhuman) animal life” (Jenkins and Stenescu’s 2014:77). Veganism must be a movement that challenges normative mindless eating, which fosters the exploitation of nonhuman animals, poor and marginalized human animals, and the environment.

Examining Claims of Privilege from Outside the Vegan Movement

In this section, I use the theoretical perspectives of intersectionality and CAS to analyze and deconstruct the notion of vegan privilege by nonvegans. I not only challenge that veganism requires affluence, but also question why nonvegans focus on veganism and not the other types of specialty “diets” that are equally, if not more expensive. Furthermore, I propose that focusing on the cost of veganism, rather than the ethic and ideology behind veganism, endorses speciesist privilege and the capitalist industrial system, which exploits and kills animals, workers, and carnists themselves.

Privilege: The Ability to Make Food Choices

Contrary to popular belief, a vegan diet is not inherently costly and is possible for people of various income levels.³ One does not need to purchase expensive and exotic ingredients, although it does make the food more varied and interesting. The basic dietary staples for vegans such as rice, beans, and potatoes are budget friendly. Beans and nuts are more affordable, if bought in bulk. Most people think veganism requires shopping at Whole Foods or a health food store and eating organic, locally grown fruits and vegetables and “superfoods.” Conventionally grown fruits and vegetables are reasonably priced, while frozen and canned ones are the most affordable and accessible. In addition, if you check out People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals’ (PETAs) “accidentally vegan” food list, you will find that many types of junk food are vegan.⁴

Vegan products like soy, mock meats, dairy substitutes, and other prepackaged or convenience foods can be expensive and are not always sold in mainstream grocery

stores and neighborhood convenience stores and are certainly unavailable to those residing in food deserts (Food Empowerment Project 2010, 2014c). Mock meats and dairy substitutes are convenient and tasty and useful for transitioning to a vegan diet, but they are neither necessary nor particularly healthful if eaten in large quantities.

The problem of the concept of vegan privilege is when the idea of veganism as a privileged diet or lifestyle is couched as a fundamental or essential characteristic of veganism itself. Veganism does not require wealth. There are vegans who are unemployed, underemployed, or of low income, and their shopping cart will look very different than that of a wealthier vegan. This statement holds true for non-vegans. Those with wealth can afford to dine on lobster and foie gras, while others rely on cheap, convenient fast foods. The affluent will always be able to buy expensive food, regardless of their dietary preference. In the United States, an individual does not have to be economically privileged or economically disadvantaged to consume animal products and coproducts.

I propose that anyone who has the ability to understand what food they eat, has access to knowledge and information about how their food choices affects animals, nature, and other humans, and has the availability of multiple food options is privileged. Those who have the ability to shop at a supermarket, who have time to prepare meals, or who can eat out at non-fast food restaurants are privileged, although not everyone is privileged equally. If you can afford to go to the store and purchase the cut of beef or deli meat of your choice, even if you have the budget, then you have the ability to make alternative food choices.

Furthermore, while it is true that prepackaged and prepared convenient vegan foods are pricey, it is not the only type of specialty diet that is expensive. Gluten free, kosher, Paleolithic, free range or organic meats, dairy, and egg food products are very expensive and also not widely available. Certainly eating local, organic, farm raised, grass-fed meat costs more than organic tofu and sprouts. As a result, to be able to choose any diet or specialty diet in this country requires some level of privilege. Therefore, to be vegan is not itself a privilege, but rather one of many choices that a privileged consumer can choose to make (Switaj 2010).

Yet those who eat a specialty diet, such as a gluten-free diet, are not the targets of the same level of anger and criticism of privilege. Although these diets are also attacked as elitist, I argue those who follow other privileged meat-based diets do not seem to create the same visceral reaction as ethical veganism does since they do not problematize the practice of eating animals. Ethical veganism challenges the basic values and ethical beliefs of carnism and speciesism and demands recognition that the ability to ignore the exploitation of animals in order to eat or wear them is a type of speciesist privilege.

Carnism, Speciesism, and Mindless Eating

Vegan and animal rights activists and scholars seek to end speciesism; the ideology that promotes allegiance to one species (human animals) over other (nonhuman

animals). Speciesism has been equated to racism and sexism as systems of discrimination (Ryder 2010; Singer [1975] 1990), has been understood as a form of domination, and working as a system of oppression. A subideology of speciesism is carnism, the invisible “belief system in which eating certain animals is considered ethical and appropriate” (Joy 2011:29). Carnism is structurally and systematically embedded into the institutions and norms of human cultures so the idea of eating some animals and not others seems normal, natural, and ethical? Joy (2011:30) argues that the term “carnist” is a more appropriate term to define a meat eater than “omnivore” because omnivore “is a term that describes one’s biological constitution, not one’s philosophical choices. Carnists eat meat not because they need to, but because they choose to, and choices always stem from beliefs.”

The term carnism exposes an ideology of human privilege and speciesism.⁵ To not to have to think about, feel, or observe the effect of your diet on animals, the environment, and/or other animals, is a type of privilege. Carnism encourages people to eat animals and to use their speciesist privilege and *be mindless eaters* in society. The discourse on mindless eating focuses on our national obesity epidemic and the quest for weight loss. The theories behind mindless eating emphasize how individuals eat for emotional nourishment. We seek comfort in the taste, smell, and textures of food. We eat in our cars, on the couch, or hurriedly at our office desk (Wansink 2010). Multiple food industries including marketers, retailers, government regulators, food technologists, the agricultural industry, and manufacturers encourage mindless eating. I expand this concept of mindless eating to emphasize how these food industries actively encourage it. Individuals have been removed from the production and processing of food. Carnists are generally mindless about what and whom they are eating, and the conditions of Centralized Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) and slaughterhouses for farm animals and workers.

Following the work of McIntosh (1997), Wise (2008), and others, below I compile a short list of privileges that carnists have, which vegans do not enjoy. (Note: All privileges of mindless eating may not apply to people with food allergies or sensitivities or other health concerns. Many of these examples apply only to carnists with economic privilege.)

- Carnists can ignore hidden ingredients in restaurants and do not need to ask multiple questions about preparation.
- Carnists can ignore the ingredients list on food packaging and not have to learn how to interpret covert ingredients to adhere to their diet.
- Carnists can find food to eat at any fast food environment.
- Carnists can feel at ease when images of animals as food are “shoved in their face,” even though they are the target demographic for commercials and advertisements.
- Carnists can use euphemisms to mask the animal source of meats. For example, carnists eat bacon, sausage and ham, not pig.

- Most carnists can ignore the process of butchered animal bodies by purchasing precut and clean animal parts wrapped in saran wrap.
- Most carnists can ignore animal suffering since this knowledge requires self-induced inquisition and investigation.
- Carnists can ignore the environmental devastation of their food choices.
- Carnists can ignore the benefit they receive in the form of Government subsidization of milk, meat, dairy, and eggs, enabling them to buy animal products relatively cheaply.

Examining carnism from an intersectional standpoint helps expose how mindless eating is both a privilege and a detriment, since the short-term advantages of eating animals can lead to long-term problems. Having privilege does not always make you happy, nor does it make you healthy. People may suffer greatly even though they experience privilege. As Johnson (2005:38) states, “to have privilege is to participate in a system that confers advantage and dominance at the expense of other people, and this situation can cause distress to those who benefit from it.”

The speciesist privilege of eating other animals has also oppressed individuals in economically and racially disparaged communities (Harper 2010). There are many health consequences for eating a diet heavy on meat and dairy. Meat eaters endure higher rates of many cancers, obesity, diabetes, and other diseases associated with animal-based proteins (Colb 2013; Fulkerson 2011; Robbins 2012). Mindless eating has hidden the cost of our health-care crisis, even though the top three illnesses of our time, cancer, diabetes, and heart disease cost Americans US\$900 billion annually (Simon 2013:107). While those with economic means eat a diet heavy in meat, eggs, and dairy, it is true that disenfranchised poor people and people of color suffer the most by lack of healthy food options, environmental harm, and disease (Food Empowerment Project 2010, 2014c; Harper 2010, 2012a, 2012b).

Mindless eating patterns are not an individual lifestyle problem; they are a structural issue and are purposefully reinforced by the food industry that depends on this pattern for its financial success. Corporate advertising campaigns convinced Westerners that meat, dairy, and eggs were essential to a healthy diet. They not only targeted middle-class mothers who were enticed by claims of feeding their families nutritionally sound and convenient food but also pursued American youth to encourage brand loyalty (Nibert 2013).

Corporate advertising campaigns in the global north obscure the connection between the animals on our plate and the animals on the farms. For example, in 2007, the California Milk Advising Board launched a US\$40 million advertising campaign to promote the image that “Great Milk comes from Happy Cows and Happy Cows come from California” (Holland and Bee 2007:2). In addition, many states with an economy based on animal agriculture have passed or attempted to pass Ag-Gag bills and anti-whistle-blower bills, which criminalize undercover investigations of factory farms and slaughterhouses, defining animal rights activists as

domestic terrorists (Humane Society of the United States [HSUS] n.d.; Lovitz 2010; Potter 2011).

Government intervention on the pricing of meat, dairy, and eggs creates a failure to understand the true financial cost of eating animals. According to the Environmental Working Group (n.d.), between 1995 and 2012, the United States provided US\$177.6 billion in commodity subsidies. Sixty-eight percent of the Crop Insurance Program went to subsidize corn, wheat, and soybean (O'Donoghue 2014), some of the main crops fed to livestock animals (Simon 2013; Winders and Nibert 2004). According to Simon (2013:76), "to estimate the total cost to consumers of animal foods [one needs] to add external costs to retail price." Thus, Simon's (2013:76) analysis of the 2011 Consumer Expenditure Survey from the U.S. Bureau Labor Statistics suggests "the true cost of a \$5 carton of organic eggs is roughly \$13. A \$10 steak actually costs about \$27." He points out that whether you eat animal products or not, we all pay for the cost of cheap animal products, since we pay for the true cost in taxes.

The shifting of costs means each of us—rich or poor, sick or healthy, omnivorous or vegetarian—pays the true costs of these goods, not their producers. Further, contrary to the oft-repeated claim that producers pass low prices on to consumers, the externalization of costs does not really save us money because we simply pay the costs in other ways. (Simon 2013:78)

Consequently, the accusation of vegan privilege deceptively masks the investments by the political and economic elites (Milner 2015) to make meat, dairy, and eggs profitable, more widely available, and cheaper, than vegan alternatives.

Mindless eating also encompasses the lack of thought about the environmental devastation a diet may entail. The practice of animal food production, whether it's exclusively eating organic or humanely raised meat, is not sustainable on a global scale due to the significant environmental costs including land and water use, deforestation, climate change, destruction of wildlife, destruction of biodiversity, endangerment of species, and overflow of animal waste (Foer 2010; Simon 2013; Vegan Society n.d.). A vegan diet, however, reduces the requirement for land and water use and is actually more sustainable on a global scale.

The focus on vegan privilege by itself does not challenge corporate greed and the economic system that makes both the quality and the cost of meat cheap and vegan alternatives costly. This misguided target not only harms the vegan movement but keeps humans and animals exploited under the industrial food complex. Additionally, the emphasis on vegan privilege deflects the moral and ethical ideology of ethical veganism and reinforces the legitimacy of carnism.

Veganism as "Other" and Carnism as Norm

As emphasized earlier, in order for vegans to have vegan privilege, they would need to be able to create the standards of food industries and would play a major role in

influencing laws, values, and norms toward animal rights. Unfortunately, vegans are not a part of the economic and political elite (Milner 2015). While vegans are privileged in the fact that they are able to make food and lifestyle choices, this is not unlike nonvegans who are also capable of making food and lifestyle choices. However, vegans in fact lose social status and become culturally and socially marked as different and “othered” once they deviate from the mainstream carnist society. This is highlighted by Johnson (2005:33) who states, “To have privilege is to be allowed to move through your life without being marked in ways that identify you as an outsider, as exceptional or ‘other’ to be excluded, or to be included but always with conditions.”

Cole and Morgan’s (2007) analysis of newspapers in the UK, found a “vegaphobic” bias toward vegans. This bias revolved around five themes: ridicule toward vegans, emphasis on asceticism, veganism as a fad, the oversensitive vegan, and the hostile vegan (p. 139). Cole and Morgan suggest that the mainstream discourse of “vegaphobia” emphasizes the need to discredit the moral and ethical components of veganism as a social movement (pp. 147-50). This is understood by Stanely Cohen’s (2001:61) “condemnation of the condemners,” which is when individuals “try to deflect attention from their own offence to the motives and character of their critics, who are presented as hypocritical or disguised deviants.” Calling vegans out on their privilege, while ignoring their own, enables nonvegans to engage in moral deflection and feel exonerated from potential feelings of one’s own moral shortcomings (Cole and Morgan 2007).

In the list below, I provide examples of ways that vegans often become stigmatized by outsiders once they make the choice to engage in mindful, compassionate eating. Although vegans forfeit their speciesist privilege to oppress animals, it is important to remember that due to their membership in the human race, they could choose to quit veganism at any time. In addition, vegans are still capable of speciesism and some may value certain animals over others.

- Vegans give up eating at many restaurants or whatever is offered at picnics, potlucks, barbeques, school dining halls, family gatherings, or friends’ houses.
- Vegans may face being mocked and ridiculed by their friends, family, and strangers for the foods they eat.
- Vegans are often asked to explain their food choices and face questioning at every meal. Questions include but are not limited to where do you get your protein? Don’t plants have feelings? Do you mind if I order chicken? What would you do if you were stranded on a desert island? (Colb 2013)
- When learning about an individual’s vegan diet, many carnists feel comfortable to list all the animal-based foods that they love to eat without having to consider how this may make vegans feel uncomfortable (e.g., I just love bacon).

- Vegans are often attacked for “sacrificing cultural authenticity” (Robinson 2010) or rejecting their religion, national, ethnic culture, and identity, since holiday and family traditions often revolve around animal-based foods.
- Vegans are often made to feel unwelcomed, “a pain in the neck,” or “a buzz kill” for their food ethics.
- Vegans are accused of pushing a radical agenda.
- Veganism is criticized as being a fad diet or a privileged lifestyle.
- Vegan men are judged as being weak or feminine for the choice not to consume meat (Adams 1990).

The above list is not comprehensive nor is it meant to imply that vegans are oppressed because they fail to enjoy the same carefree ease and convenience when thinking about food as carnists. Vegans are not oppressed; animals are. It is true that many vegans hold and express prejudicial feelings and attitudes toward nonvegans. However, I find most of the critiques of vegans and claims of vegan privilege come from equally economically privileged meat eaters. They often feel judged and attacked by vegans for eating animals and have developed their own list of comments heard from vegans (see Note 2). However, it is important to distinguish between prejudices that both meat eaters and vegans have and oppression. Both groups engage in microaggressions and interactions but neither is oppressed. The goal of my list is to emphasize how carnist ideology is embedded in our culture and that because of their countercultural ideology, vegans are deemed deviant and threatening to mainstream carnist culture.

Examining Claims of Privilege from Vegans

Just as nonvegans need to recognize their carnist privilege and understand how animal liberation must be essential to issues of food justice, vegans must include issues of social class and race issues into the analysis. As the theory of intersectionality reminds us, all systems of domination work together. If speciesism shares the same ideological foundation as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class exploitation, then “there is no hope it can be eradicated while these systems remain in place” (Hooks 1989:22). Thus, in this section, I argue that the vegan community must reject the promotion of a “universal vegan” movement and broaden our circle of compassion to include those who lack access to food choices. Vegans must promote food justice in their quest to promote animal liberation.

Vegans Must Reject a Universal Vegan Movement

CAS scholars and activists use the black feminist critique of the universal experience of feminism in order to critique the campaigns and strategies of organizations like PETA that marginalize women, poor people, and people of color. The concept of the universal women’s experience assumes race, class, and sexual neutrality, meaning that women are by default assumed to be white, middle-class, and heterosexual.

Outraged that white, middle-class, heterosexual women assumed their experience was the norm, black feminists refused to be marginalized or to be quiet about their unique experience as black women (Hooks 1984; Lorde 1984; Spelman 1990; Collins 1990). Similarly, vegans of color and feminist vegans argue that when mainstream vegan and animal rights organizations promote exclusionary messages that assume a race, gender, and class-neutral vegan movement, they actually expose the racism, classism, and sexism in the movement (Harper 2010, 2012a, 2012b; Wrenn 2013; Wrenn and Johnson 2013).

For example, according to Kim (2011) PETA's campaigns "The Holocaust on Your Plate" and "Animal Liberation Project, "We Are All Animals" faced criticism from leaders of the Jewish and African American communities for its insensitivity. Protestors were offended that the murder and exploitation of animals were being compared to the Holocaust and to American slavery. Regardless of the motivation or whether the comparison is morally defensible, Kim (2011) argues that these campaigns are politically ineffective since people of color and religious minorities continue to be oppressed. Intentions are misunderstood and create a false belief that vegan animal rights activists care more about animals than people of color.

PETA is also famous for using white, thin, female bodies in pornographic ways to sell veganism (Deckha 2008; Glasser 2011, Harper 2012a; Wrenn 2013).⁶ By doing this, PETA normalizes the white, thin, heterosexual body as the model of health and the normative image of vegans. This deters women who do not fit this image from learning about and participating in veganism, as they feel judged and excluded. Their advertisements and campaign strategies strive to compare the oppression of women to animals. Yet in doing so, PETA misses the mark and both "actively oppress other disadvantaged groups to further their own aims" not recognizing that "utilizing sexism [also] reinforces the oppression of animals" (Glasser 2011:52).

PETA also uses hypermasculine, muscular bodies to promote animal rights causes.⁷ Since patriarchal masculinity has always been tied to meat, vegan men often make an effort to prove their masculinity (Adams 1990; Sobal 2005; Veri and Liberti 2013). Some men do this by reclaiming patriarchal masculinity by emphasizing "real men" do not eat meat. Similar to the idea that real men should protect women and children, vegan men protect animals and the environment by living a cruelty free lifestyle.⁸ In order to reject the association with femininity, differentiating between vegan men and vegan women is vital. Some ways this is done are by publishing vegan cookbooks for men and publishing web blogs for the vegan man.⁹

Vegan cookbooks, websites, and blogs often assume race and class neutrality, implying that vegans are white and economically privileged (Harper 2012a). Harper critiques books like Freedman and Barnouin's *Skinny Bitch*, for assuming a universal vegan that shares equal economic status, geographic location, and cultural traditions. She points out that the authors berate readers into believing that individuals all have

the ability to control what food enters their body, and belittle readers if they cannot afford to eat unprocessed, organic foods. This alienates women of color and also economically struggling individuals and may deter them from considering a vegan diet and lifestyle.

When vegans highlight vegan privilege in the movement, their motivation is to facilitate movement activists to understand that not all vegans enter the movement from the same social and political privileged locations. CAS insists that the movement must focus on the interlocking oppression of nonhuman animals and human animals, rather than a single focus on the exploitation of nonhuman animals (Nocella II et al. 2013; Wrenn and Johnson 2013). If vegan and animal rights activists want to end speciesism and add animals into the analysis of oppression and domination, then it is ineffective to use public campaigns and advertisements that reinforce racism, sexism, and class exploitation. Moreover, a vegan ethic must expand beyond the single issue of animal rights; animal rights must be interwoven with human rights (Jenkins and Stanescu 2013; Nibert 2013; Wrenn and Johnson 2013).

Vegans Must Expand Circle of Compassion

CAS scholars and activists emphasize that veganism should never be separated from its ethical goal of animal liberation. But they insist that the vegan ethic must move beyond a limited focus on equality and justice for animals and broaden its circle of compassion to people, particularly those who are disenfranchised by the industrialized food complex. CAS recognizes that veganism may not be affordable or achievable due to income or geographic location. People who live in poverty are able to make few choices about the foods they eat. Many people do not have equal access to healthy, affordable food. Some may live in food deserts where there are no supermarkets or there is little access to fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, and/or meat and dairy alternatives (Food Empowerment Project 2010; Harper 2010, 2012a, 2012b). Others may work too many hours and have limited time to cook or prepare their own meals, or they may not live in a home with a kitchen.

It also requires vegans to be concerned about the exploitation of workers who make the foods they eat (e.g., fruits, vegetables, grains, chocolate, and coffee), the clothes they wear, and the technology they use (Food Empowerment Project 2010, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d; Harper 2012b; Timmerman 2014).

Furthermore, capitalism is directly connected to the abuse of human animals and nonhuman animals (Nibert 2013; Food Empowerment Project 2010; Jenkins and Stanescu 2013; Nocella II et al. 2013). The industrialized agricultural complex does not just abuse, exploit, and kill animals, it also exploits human labor. Farm and slaughterhouse workers are economically, psychologically, and physically exploited (Eisnitz 2006; Foer 2010; Schlosser 2001). Those who live in communities near CAFOs suffer from air, soil, and water pollution; disease; joblessness; and a decline in property values (Food Empowerment Project 2014c; Pollan 2006; Willis and Willis 2010). The capitalist production of food values profits over nutrition, which

incites institutional violence toward poor people and people of color (Harper 2012b; Food Empowerment Project 2014c). When vegans gloss over or ignore the structural access to food and food preparation, they encourage resentment and justifiable critique of privilege.

Conclusion

I used the theory of intersectionality to analyze how the concept of vegan privilege is harmful and beneficial to the vegan movement. Criticizing vegans for being privileged is based on the stereotype of vegans being arrogant, judgmental, wealthy, and white. Neither are these vegan traits nor are they attitudes held exclusively by vegans. If people who have economic privilege and the ability to make choices about the foods they eat angrily dismiss the vegan diet on the basis of privilege, then they are unconsciously avoiding and minimizing the ethical dilemma of eating animals. The discourse is used to justify dismissing veganism and excludes speciesism from the matrix of domination. It exposes and reinforces the legitimacy of carnism and speciesism, which actually harms the most socioeconomically vulnerable individuals and communities. The case for vegan privilege is deceptive and destructive. Ethical veganism rejects the habit of eating animals as food and has no role in making animal consumption normative and legitimate. In fact, as Francione and Charlton (2013:115) said “there is nothing more elitist than the idea that our palate pleasure can justify imposing suffering and death on a sentient being who values her or his life as much as we do ours.” Finally, this allegation ignores the broader issues that should be of concern to vegans and nonvegans alike—food justice for humans, animals, and the environment.

Critiquing privilege is useful, when the aim is to improve and clarify the mission and goals in the vegan movement. Acknowledging the backlash helps vegans to understand how to present veganism to carnists in a way that is compassionate and inclusive, so our voices will be heard and not dismissed by anger (Greenebaum 2012a). It is important that vegan organizations reject the notion of a universal vegan and include diverse leadership so that the bodies of women are not exploited and the needs of people of color are not neglected to sell a movement.

The discussion of dietary privilege is very important and should be part of a larger dialogue about nutrition, food justice, and inequality. It is not appropriate, however, to be used to shut down a conversation on the ethical treatment of animals. It is critical for vegans—and carnists—to expand the circle of compassion and understand the human and nonhuman animal costs of food production here and abroad. Emphasizing the interconnections between structures, institutions, and ideologies alters the vegan ethic. A multiissue and multispecies analyses challenge the interpretation of veganism as simply individual dietary choices revolving around ingredients, the consumption of vegan goods, and food boycotts (Jenkins and Stanescu 2013). Veganism then becomes a structural solution to a structural problem, not just an individual lifestyle.

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Notes

1. Please see the following websites for examples: <http://whiteseducatingwhites.tumblr.com/post/34047126465/dear-white-vegans-this-is-your-collection-agency>, <http://eightdiverging.blogspot.com/2013/05/veganism-and-privilege.html>, <http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/vegan-privilege>, <http://karnythia.tumblr.com/post/10455875589/thoughts-on-vegan-privilege>, <http://mylifeasafeminista.tumblr.com/post/13762297476/vegan-privilege>, <http://vegansofcolor.wordpress.com/2014/02/03/unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack-redux/>, <http://www.genderacrossborders.com/2010/02/11/choice-isnt-privilege-ability-to-make-one-is/>, <http://heartlessvernon.blogspot.com/2012/09/veganism-first-world-problem.html>, <http://www.vegsource.com/jo/qu/qaaffluent.htm>, and <http://disinfo.com/2012/07/vegan-privilege/>, <http://cadryskitchen.com/2013/04/13/are-vegans-privileged-out-of-touch/>.
2. Please see the following websites for examples: http://eco-health.blogspot.com/2008/11/privilege-us-vegan-movement-whiteness_20.html, <http://sistahvegan.com/2012/07/25/compassionate-talke-about-whiteness-in-veganism-farm-sanctuary/>, <http://sistahvegan.com/2010/04/29/response-to-vegnews-race-and-class-privilege-article-we-the-people/>, <http://rebelwheelssoapbox.tumblr.com/post/69371795005/the-vegan-backlash-pt-3-misconceptions-of-class>, <https://shadowscrescent.wordpress.com/2012/11/28/stop-calling-veganism-compassionate-intersections-of-poverty-feminism-and-veganism/>, <https://buvegetariansociety.wordpress.com/2012/10/31/white-privilege-veganism-the-luxury-of-being-single-issue/>, <http://arzone.ning.com/forum/topics/deconstructing-white-privilege-in-the-animal-rights-movement>, and <http://nycxvoldn.tumblr.com/post/8644447616/nyc-interview-with-lauren-ornelas-of-food>.
3. See the following websites for help with veganism on a budget: <http://www.foodispower.org/eating-on-a-budget/>, <http://www.veganmainstream.com/2010/09/02/eating-vegan-on-21-00-a-week-the-food-stamp-budget/>, and <http://cok.net/blog/2013/08/eating-vegan-on-a-budget/>.
4. Some vegans debate this fact since some of the ingredients include sugar or microingredients that may have animal sources.

5. Joy (2011) uses the term carnism as the opposite of vegetarianism, however, vegetarians do in fact eat products that come from animals, and, therefore, it is more consistent to compare carnism to veganism or a plant-based diet.
6. Some famous print and television advertisements include “save the whales,” “veggie love,” and “fur trim.” <http://www.peta.org/blog/lose-blubber-go-vegetarian/>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUZc1b15xPQ>, and <http://blog.peta.org.uk/2012/10/joanna-krupa-fur-trim-is-seriously-unattractive/>.
7. “Ink not mink” uses muscular men with a “bad boy” image to promote an antifur campaign. “Sexual stamina” promotes sexual virility by using vegetables as a metaphor for a penis. See <http://www.peta.org/features/ink-mink-psas/> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZB94ko3w1Q>.
8. See <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2014/07/21/332329709/for-these-vegans-masculinity-means-protecting-the-planet>.
9. Examples of cookbooks include Brian Patton’s *The Sexy Vegan Cookbook: Extraordinary Food from an Ordinary Dude*, Christina Clark’s *Artistic Vegan: Meatless Mainstays for Modern Man*. Websites for vegan men include: <http://theveganmancave.blogspot.com>, <http://theveganman.tumblr.com>, and <http://www.thediscerningbrute.com>.

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