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Improving the State of Society and Making Men Happy: Rhetorical Citizenship in Historical and Contemporary Vegetarian/Vegan Discourses

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IMPROVING THE STATE OF SOCIETY
AND MAKING MEN HAPPY:
RHETORICAL CITIZENSHIP IN
HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY
VEGETARIAN/VEGAN DISCOURSES

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JAMES SIMPSON, “ACCRINGTON VEGETARIAN ASSOCIATION LECTURE,” 1855

- “Man groans in bondage, because ignorance, error, and self-indulgence have filled his flesh with corruption” (51)
- An “erroneous diet” including meat influenced a person’s “stomach,” “nerves,” and “brain,” and pervaded their “body,” “feelings,” and “thoughts” (55).
 - These physical effects prevented individuals from becoming “aware of the nobility, beauty, height, and capacity of [their] existence” (55).

JAMES SIMPSON, “ACCRINGTON VEGETARIAN ASSOCIATION
LECTURE,” 1855

- “[T]here are intellectual facts, and mental being, into which [he] can never enter, and delights which he can never enjoy, so there are moral facts and moral being, which can never be revealed, and degrees of moral happiness that cannot be enjoyed” (55).

CONTEMPORARY VEGETARIANS/VEGANS

- Today's vegetarians and vegans adopt a meat-free diet for individual health or ethical concerns (Jorgensen 2015).
- Also “sustainable citizenship”: recognizes the responsibilities of the individual to local and global communities on issues of environmental, economic and social justice

THESIS

- Historical and contemporary writers share concerns about diet and citizenship,. Historical sources focus on how an individual can lose their ability to participate in society through the physical and mental transformations inherent in eating meat, whereas contemporary writing centers more squarely on the responsibilities incumbent upon a citizen that disallow the consumption of meat.

CITIZENSHIP AND RHETORICAL STUDIES

- Citizenship is central to English and rhetorical studies.
- The question of who has a right to speak (and who does not have the right to speak) and how citizens can best exercise that right goes back to Aristotle, Cicero, Plato, and others.

DISCOURSE THEORY OF CITIZENSHIP

- Robert Asen: “Citizenship engagement cannot be distilled to a set of rights, condition of membership, or allegiance to a cultural tradition” (Asen 2004, 203)
- Karma Chávez: citizenship practices include civic, community, and activist practices; sexual, social, consumer, and cosmopolitan citizenship (Chávez 2015, 164-5).

DISCOURSE THEORY OF CITIZENSHIP

- Christian Kock and Lisa S. Villadsen: “rhetorical agency”: “citizens’ possibilities for gaining access to and influencing civic life through symbolic action” (Kock and Villadsen 2014, 10).
- Analyzing contingency can lay bare the connections between specific actions and the “maintenance and development of public life” (Kock and Villadsen 2014, 13).

EMBODIED DISCOURSE

- “Embodied discourse”: the use of the body to participate in the public conversations
 - Voting, dancing, running, protesting, etc.
- Eating an animal, or choosing to adopt a more plant-based diet, can limit or contribute to an individual’s recognition as a citizen in a given community.

JUST A QUICK NOTE BEFORE WE PROGRESS

- “Veganism” was not distinguished from vegetarian until the mid-twentieth century
- Therefore, “vegetarianism” in the nineteenth century refers to individuals who would today label themselves as both “vegetarians” and “vegans.”

THE BRITISH VEGETARIAN SOCIETY

- Founded in 1847 by members of the British temperance movement

THE
VEGETARIAN MESSENGER.

If we would increase in the knowledge and love of truth, we must practice the truth which we already possess.

No. 1. Vol. I. MANCHESTER, SEPTEMBER 1, 1849.

{ Price 1d.
Stamp. d 2d.

ESTABLISHED A.D. 1847.

THE VEGETARIAN SOCIETY.

President:

JAMES SIMPSON, Esq., Fox-hill Bank, near Blackburn.

Treasurer:

J. G. PALMER, 34, Temple Row, Birmingham. | W. HORSELL, 13, Paternoster Row, London.

Secretary:

Local Secretaries:

MR. W. H. BARNESLEY, St. John's, Worcester.	MR. H. S. CLUBB, Salford, Manchester.
MR. R. T. CLUBB, Stratford, near Colchester.	MR. C. SIBLEY, Wollaston, Wellingborough.
MR. GEO. DORNBUSCH, Dalston, London.	MR. J. WRIGHT, 95, Deansgate, Bolton.
MR. J. GASKILL, 77, Queen Street, Hulme.	MR. J. WRIGLEY, Burley Wood, Leeds.

Foreign Corresponding Secretaries:

GEORGE COATES, Esq., 18, Leipziger Platz, Berlin, Prussia.	REV. WILLIAM METCALFE, Kensington, Philadelphia, United States.
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Office:

Aldine Chambers, 13, Paternoster Row, London.

OBJECTS. The Objects of the Society are, to induce habits of Abstinence from the Flesh of Animals as Food, by the dissemination of information upon the subject, by means of Tracts, Essays, and Lectures, proving the many advantages of a Physical, Intellectual, and Moral Character, resulting from *Vegetarian Habits of Diet*; and thus to secure, through the Association, Example, and Efforts of its Members, the adoption of a Principle, which will tend essentially, to *True Civilization*, to *Universal Brotherhood*, and to the *Increase of Human Happiness*, generally.

CONSTITUTION. The Society is constituted of a President; a Treasurer; a Secretary; Local Secretaries; Foreign Corresponding Secretaries, and an unlimited number of Members in the United Kingdom, and Honorary Members abroad, above the age of 14 years, who have subscribed to the Declaration of the Society.

DECLARATION. "I hereby declare, that I have Abstained from the *Flesh of Animals as Food*, for the space of *One Month*, and upwards; and that I desire to become a Member of the VEGETARIAN SOCIETY; and to co-operate with that Body, in promulgating the knowledge of the advantages of a *Vegetarian Diet*."

STATISTICS OF MEMBERS. *Positions in Society*:—Ladies, 153. Member of Parliament, 1. County Magistrates, 2. Aldermen, 2. Physicians, &c., 15. Ministers, 5. Authors, 6. Professors, 34. Merchants, &c., 14. Farmers, 6. Tradesmen, Mechanics, and Labourers, 221. Private Gentlemen, 6. *Periods of Abstinence*:—1 abstained eighty-six years; 7, forty years; 74, thirty years; 147, twenty years; 198, ten years; 335, one year; 449, one month; 79, whole lives.



THE VEGETARIAN
MESSENGER

VICTORIAN VEGETARIANISM'S GOALS

- Discouraging individuals from consuming meat
- The creation of “a truly enlightened and merciful civilization” (“The Vegetarian Movement. Its claims upon public attention” 1851, 4)

VICTORIAN VEGETARIANISM'S UTOPIAN VISION

- “...every leaf, fibre, and vein has its service to perform to complete the harmony of its nature, should not every thought, word, and action of our lives, likewise serve to preserve the harmony of our creation?” (“The Vegetarian Principle. Lecture II: Economy; Intellectual and Moral Advantages” 1850, 27).

MEAT-EATING AS CORRUPTING

- Animal slaughter as “unnatural and cruel conduct of man toward those he was designed to protect” (“Introduction” 1849, 1).
- Livestock farming “pollute[d] the air by poisoning our rivers and streams, the banks of which, instead of being the most pleasing resorts for our population, [were], in many instances, rendered highly offensive and unhealthy” (“The Vegetarian Principle. Lecture II: Economy; Intellectual and Moral Advantages” 1850, 30).

MEAT-EATING AS CORRUPTING

- “[T]housands and tens of thousands of our fellow-creatures are in a state of privation and want”, animals were fattened for slaughter “with the produce of our soil” (“The Vegetarian Principle. Lecture II: Economy; Intellectual and Moral Advantages” 1850, 30).

MEAT-EATING, CORRUPTION, AND AGENCY

- “If the mind become, by habit, accustomed to a disregard of moral convictions, the conscience becomes seared, and does not act so powerfully in guarding the mind from its grosser tendencies; and thus, that which would become the greatest blessing, may be turned into a dreaded curse!” (“The Vegetarian Movement. Its claims upon public attention” 1851, 4).

MEAT-EATING'S PHYSICAL EFFECTS

- Meat put the eater at higher risk for disease, such as heart palpitations, inflammation, dyspepsia (or stomach upset), spasms, fatigue, and ill-temper.
- Dangers of food contamination especially a problem in meat.
- Collected accounts arguing that vegetarian diet decreased an individual's risk for conditions such as tuberculosis, asthma, scurvy, cholera, and depression, among others.

MIND AND BODY CONNECTION

- Nineteenth century was a time of shifting perceptions on physical and mental boundaries: the science of the era rejected mind-body dualism (Taylor and Shuttleworth 1998, xiv).
- Vegetarians argued that this meant that what an individual ate could have significant ramifications for their mental well-being.

MIND AND BODY CONNECTION

- “[T]he unfortunate victim is frequently sunk into the most awful despondency; every pursuit becomes tedious and wearisome; life itself is rendered not worth caring for; suicide is frequently contemplated, and sometimes actually committed, in consequence of this dreadful disorder, which is frequently mistaken for a mental disease, beyond the possibility of human skill to remedy” (“The Vegetarian Principle. Lecture I: Introductory, Physical Advantages” 1849, 22).

MEAT-EATING AND APPETITES

- “[L]iving on prey” would make humans “carnivorous, ferocious, or unclean in our dispositions, practices, and desires” (“The Vegetarian Principle. Lecture II: Economy; Intellectual and Moral Advantages” 1850, 34).
- Eating meat would “enable us to fight and kill each other on the battle field, just as [animals] delight to do in the forests and plains” (“The Vegetarian Principle. Lecture II: Economy; Intellectual and Moral Advantages” 1850, 34).

MEAT-EATING AND APPETITES

- “[T]he inhabitants of this country, living on flesh and nothing but flesh, continually engaged in slaughtering, and everywhere surrounded with blood and decomposition, have themselves grown savage and blood-thirsty; and that too often they give proof that they hold the life of a man in little higher estimation than that of a bullock [steer] or a horse. Living exclusively on animal food *must necessarily tend to make man ferocious*; and the hand once used to the knife, becomes too familiar with it” (“The Slaughter Houses of Buenos Ayres” 1854, 65)

MEAT-EATING AND APPETITES

- Eating animals put the eater's body into a feverish state, while the mind, "has its tone, its elasticity, and its freshness weakened through sympathy with the body" ("Diet in Relation to the Mental and Moral Powers" 1854, 103).
- Eating meat "induces a ferocity of temper, unknown to men whose food is chiefly drawn from the vegetable kingdom" ("Diet in Relation to the Mental and Moral Powers" 1854, 105).

MEAT-EATING AND “MENTAL SLAVERY”

- The “perverted appetite” and “unnatural passion for slaughter” imposed by a carnivorous diet placed a person in “fethers,” a “yoke of bondage,” and “thralldom” (“Take Up Your Freedom” 1850, 17).
- An appetite for meat would “perpetually subjugate individuals [...] to conditions and states of mind, which, if properly looked into, cannot but be considered as chargeable to the want of conscientious consideration, even in those who profess to regulate their conduct in accordance with the highest moral standard of truth” (“Social and Moral Responsibility” 1852, 35).

MEAT-EATING AND AGENCY

- “[M]an must be consistent to be happy, and live in harmony with his whole moral, intellectual, and physical nature, which forbids the slaughtering and preying upon the brute creation, as grounded in error, a remnant of fallen and acquired savage nature, and ultimately to disappear before the progress of a real and enlightened civilization” (“The Preying Upon Animals The Trainer for War” 1855, 44).

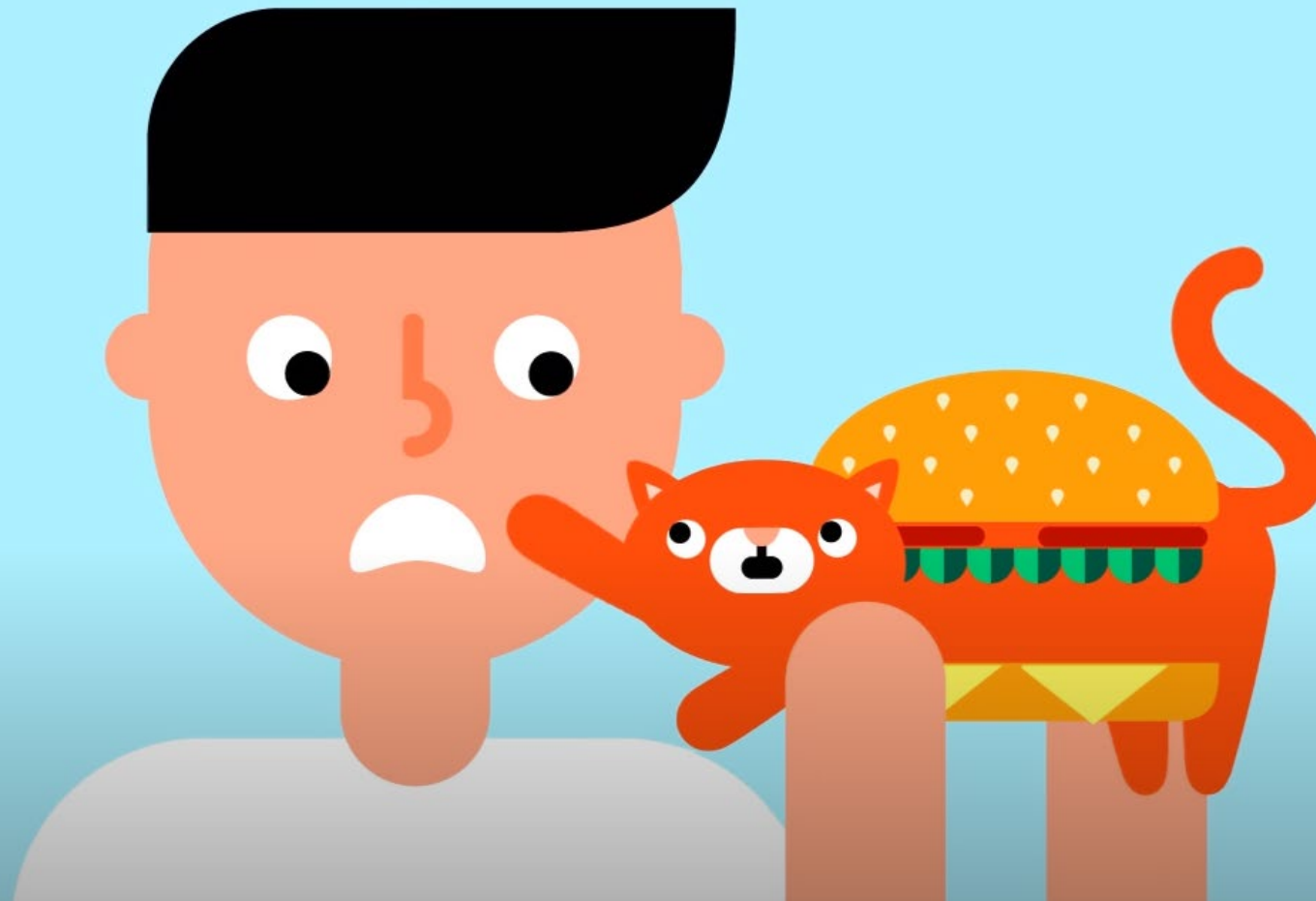
CONTEMPORARY VEGETARIANISM

- 2018 report: one in ten survey respondents in the United Kingdom reported adopting a vegetarian, partly vegetarian, or vegan diet (NatSen 2019, 6).
- Vegetarian Society of the United Kingdom lists its main mission as “to inspire, educate and enable people to be vegetarian” (Vegetarian Society of the United Kingdom 2019, 2).

CONTEMPORARY VEGETARIANISM AND HEALTH



CONTEMPORARY VEGETARIANISM AND OBLIGATIONS TO ANIMALS



CONTEMPORARY VEGETARIANISM AND OBLIGATIONS TO THE ENVIRONMENT



CONCLUSION

- Discussions of citizenship have not faded in contemporary discussions of vegetarianism; rather, they have evolved
- The contemporary version of the Vegetarian Society focuses less on excluding individuals from full citizenship in an idealized world and more on emphasizing that, **as citizens of the current society – vegetarian or not – individuals have obligations to preserve the environment, protect animals, and improve their own health.**

THANK YOU!

- Let's talk!
- Questions? Email me at kkondrlik@wcupa.edu