



Vegetarianism

Movement or **Moment?**

DONNA MAURER

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*In memory of Bobbi Jo and Willow,
my dear companions for almost
fourteen years*

Preface

Background

In the late 1980s, when I was studying for my master's degree at East Tennessee State University, I became interested in the sociological aspects of food and eating, in general, and vegetarianism, in particular. There were few vegetarians in north-east Tennessee back then, and during the six years that I lived in Johnson City, I think I met most of them. Teaching hatha yoga and working off and on at the local health food store, I had occasion to talk with a variety of people who were looking to adopt more balanced, healthful, and energetic lifestyles.

To the people of Johnson City—a small, close-knit community marked by political conservatism and religious fundamentalism, where social gatherings often centered on meat eating—such New Age phenomena as yoga, health foods, and vegetarianism were quite threatening, and tofu (which few people had actually tried) was a four-letter word. The people I talked with informally—at yoga classes and in the health food store—often asked me questions about vegetarian nutrition (which I was not qualified to answer); vegetarian cooking (which I could offer some advice on); and how to get along with their meat-eating families, friends, and co-workers (which I could sympathize about but offer no real answers to).

By the time I moved to Tennessee, I had spent several years as a semivegetarian, eating some fish, and then an ovo-lacto-vegetarian, consuming no meat or seafood but eating some eggs and dairy products. It was not until my stay in Johnson City, however, that I began to think about the social process of becoming a vegetarian. As is true for most vegetar-

ians, my dietary and lifestyle changes had occurred over a long time, with several influences affecting my choices. As an undergraduate at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, I had explored everything that I perceived to be radical. And during this period, about three years had passed between the time I stopped eating red meat and the time I first called myself a vegetarian. My roommates and I belonged to the local food co-op in New Bedford, and for the first time, I started to think about the origins of some of what I was eating. As a life-long animal lover, I began to find the meat on my plate disgusting. And like many new vegetarian wanna-bes, I compensated for my rejection of meat by eating more eggs and dairy products—never stopping to consider how these foods were produced.

My life experiences in Massachusetts and Tennessee led me to see vegetarianism as a socially influenced personal choice—a lifestyle. I became interested in studying the process of *how* people become vegetarians, and in the late 1980s, I decided to take on this topic as a research project. Searching the social science and humanities literature for what others had written about vegetarians, I found surprisingly little. Most of the literature consisted of history journal articles on nineteenth-century vegetarian figures and vegetarian communes such as Octagon City and Fruitlands. However, I also found historian James Whorton's *Crusaders for Fitness*; Janet Barkas's *The Vegetable Passion*; and Anne Murcott's edited collection *The Sociology of Food and Eating*, which includes British sociologist Julia Twigg's "Vegetarianism and the Meanings of Meat."¹ As I continued my research, I discovered that other sociologists, in both the United States and the United Kingdom, were studying the process of becoming a vegetarian. And I learned that nutritional scientists and dietitians—several of whom were researching characteristics common among vegetarians—had conducted more research on the social aspects of vegetarianism than had the social scientists.²

In my early project, I outlined a typology of “processual elements” toward becoming a vegetarian that were found among the twenty-three vegetarians I interviewed. Although I focused on the experiences of these individuals, I gradually learned that there was more to vegetarianism than food, recipes, and a few significant books such as Frances Moore Lappé’s *Diet for a Small Planet* and Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation*.³ I began to subscribe to *Vegetarian Times* (a mass-marketed magazine), *Vegetarian Journal* (first published by the Baltimore Vegetarians, which later became the Vegetarian Resource Group [VRG]), and *FARM Report* (published by the Farm Animal Reform Movement [FARM]). Through *Vegetarian Journal* and *FARM Report*, I learned about the activities of vegetarian groups throughout the country and such national celebrations as the Great American Meat-Out (a national day of meatless eating). I found out that a vegetarian group in Knoxville had created a media stir when its members managed to persuade then governor Lamar Alexander to proclaim October 1 World Vegetarian Day. Following a flood of letters and phone calls from the meat industry, however, Alexander agreed to proclaim a World Beef Day and a World Poultry Day as well.

I began to realize that the vegetarian movement was much more than a group of people changing their eating habits. Masked by what seemed to be a dietary choice and lifestyle was an organizational structure and ideology that looked very much like a social movement: “a collectivity acting with some continuity to promote or resist a change in the society or a group of which it is a part.”⁴ My rethinking of vegetarianism led to the research project on which this book is based.

In an effort to find out everything I could about the organization of vegetarian activities, I subscribed to every publication put out by (and requested additional information from) every group I came across that appeared to be a vegetarian organization or an animal rights organization that in

some way promoted vegetarianism. I narrowed the field of national vegetarian organizations to seven, and I set out to interview not only leaders of these groups but also other long-time vegetarian activists not directly associated with the organizations. To find out about local vegetarian groups, I prepared an open-ended questionnaire, which was answered by ninety-seven active groups, many of whom also sent me complimentary copies of their newsletters. In addition, I participated in local vegetarian group activities in Connecticut and New York. And between 1995 and 1999, I attended several regional and national conferences—mostly to observe but also occasionally to speak about my work in order to gain feedback. (See Appendix A for a more detailed description of my research methodology.)

During my research, I moved from an ovo-lacto-vegetarian diet to a vegan diet and lifestyle (consuming and wearing no animals or animal by-products). I had tried to become a vegan several times over the years, but I had given in each time, either to hunger when I was traveling or to the use of my warm woolen coats during the winter. Before I began my research, I decided to make an effort once again to become a vegan. In part, I was motivated by my own convictions, but I also wanted to experience the daily trials and tribulations that vegans typically encounter. As a result, I stopped eating eggs and dairy products and became more attentive to “hidden” animal ingredients such as whey and casein. I gave away my wool and silk clothing; I replaced my leather shoes with footwear made of materials such as plastic, cloth, rubber, and PVC (polyvinyl chloride); and I began to contemplate whether bees suffer in the honey cultivation process.

I did not succeed completely, so when I was faced with the inevitable question from my interviewees, “Are you a vegan?” I would reply that I was “98 percent.” At that time, I still consumed some products that contained animal-derived ingredients—such as the “nondairy” creamer that I put in my cof-

fee—and I did not want to risk being viewed as insincere or disingenuous. (I have since learned to take my coffee black or with soy milk or rice milk.) Usually people responded by saying that it is impossible to be *truly* vegan—that, in the course of daily life, one cannot avoid consuming or using products that contain some animal-derived ingredients. Almost any magazine or newspaper, for example, contains photographs produced with the animal-derived ingredient gelatin.

Like many social scientists who study issues close to their hearts, I chose to research the vegetarian movement because I care about its key issues; I am a sympathizer—and to some extent, a participant. And like other sympathizing sociologists, I necessarily find myself revealing in this book some of what I perceive as the movement's negative or unproductive aspects. At times I feel uncomfortable presenting criticisms, even though my interpretations have evolved out of close observation and careful reflexive thought. Still, my sympathy with the movement only strengthens my commitment to presenting a study that is useful to the movement's leaders and participants. In addition, as a sociologist, I want my work not only to contribute to an understanding of how social movements function but also, finally, to make sure that vegetarianism is placed on the map of social movements.

Plan of the Book

To understand the vegetarian movement, we need some background: Why and how do people become vegetarians? Is vegetarianism becoming more popular? Is it a fad or a trend? What are its historical roots in North America? Do health professionals view vegetarian diets as healthful or unhealthful? To give a sense of vegetarianism's place in contemporary society, Chapters 1 and 2 explore these and other questions. Although people become vegetarians for a variety of reasons, in the United States and Canada, most vegetarians are motivated by

a desire for self-improvement—a desire to be healthier and more energetic.⁵ Rooted in this motivation, the North American vegetarian movement boasts historical figures such as Sylvester Graham, William Andrus Alcott, Ellen G. White, and John Harvey Kellogg, who have promoted vegetarian diets as the panacea for ills that result from an increasingly industrialized and chaotic world. Today most vegetarian organizations continue to focus on promoting the health aspects of vegetarianism, an approach that taps into popular concerns. For a variety of reasons that are explored in the early chapters of this book, however, this focus has made it difficult to generate the resources necessary for conducting large-scale campaigns or for directly confronting the meat industry.

Chapter 3 begins our look at the structure and organization of the vegetarian movement. In addition to considering the many different types of vegetarian organizations that contribute to movement activities (both throughout the United States and Canada and within local communities), this chapter considers the role of other interests—particularly the animal rights, health food, and environmental movements—in supporting vegetarian principles. Chapter 3 also looks at whether the meat industry, in its role as a countermovement, helps or hinders the efforts of the vegetarian cause.

Chapter 4 examines the idea that the vegetarian ideology plays a crucial role in how movement members choose and implement strategies for change and discusses the ways that different organizations articulate the vegetarian ideology. This chapter presents the different tenets of vegetarianism—compassion for animals, concern for the environment, and the healthful aspects of a vegetarian diet—and (as an introduction to some of the key internal issues that the vegetarian movement currently faces) considers recent challenges to the definition of the term “vegetarian.”

Although, like other social movements, the vegetarian movement uses various strategies for promoting cultural and

social change, perhaps to a greater degree than some, it focuses on encouraging change among individuals. Chapter 5, which considers the strategies of the vegetarian movement in depth, highlights the fact that these strategies are based on leaders' assumptions about how personal, cultural, and social changes occur.

Chapter 6 focuses on an important strategic dilemma of the vegetarian movement: how to develop a collective identity among participants without alienating potential new recruits. Here we examine how the movement's efforts to reach a broad audience by focusing on health issues affect the ability of participants to achieve a collective identity.

The role of vegetarian organizations has included not only providing support for those who choose a vegetarian lifestyle but also working to increase the availability of vegetarian foods in grocery stores, restaurants, hospitals, schools, and workplaces. Clearly, by any measure, vegetarian specialty items such as veggie dogs, veggie burgers, soy milk, and tofu have become increasingly accessible, and growing numbers of people—including nonvegetarians—have been trying and even demanding them. The sale of vegetarian foods has steadily increased since the late 1980s, with the market for these items ballooning from \$138 million in 1989 to an estimated \$662 million in 1999,⁶ providing new money-making opportunities for food producers, distributors, and restaurateurs. In its exploration of this new market, Chapter 7 examines the potential effects on both the growth of the vegetarian movement and the public's acceptance of vegetarian diets.

The final chapter of this book assesses the current status of and the future possibilities for the vegetarian movement: Is the movement doomed to marginality? Will we see an increase in the number of vegetarians, or will we see merely an increase in the number of people who occasionally enjoy meatless meals? And what exactly would constitute success for the vegetarian movement? In addition, this chapter looks at how the

analysis herein is applicable to other social movements: What can we learn from examining the vegetarian movement? What can we ascertain about other social movements—such as the animal rights and environmental movements—that promote lifestyle change in an effort to produce cultural change? Are some strategies likely to be more successful than others? Chapter 8 brings the book to a close by considering the impact that the vegetarian movement has had on society and the relevance of this study to understanding similar causes.

In light of the fact that the North American vegetarian movement has persisted for nearly two centuries, it is surprising that it has escaped sociological analysis until now. In part, this can be explained by the fact that—on the surface—the movement seems more like an aggregate of people who are changing their eating habits than an organized effort for change. The following chapters take us beneath these surface appearances and open the way for an exploration of the movement and its cultural impact.

Acknowledgments

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Contents

	Preface	ix
	Acknowledgments	xvii
1	What Is Vegetarianism? And Who Are the Vegetarians?	1
2	Vegetarian Diets and the Health Professions: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Issues	22
3	Charting the Contemporary Vegetarian Movement in the Social Movement Field	47
4	Vegetarianism: Expressions of Ideology in Vegetarian Organizations	70
5	The Beliefs and Strategies of Vegetarian Movement Leaders	89
6	Organizational Strategy in Action: Promoting a Vegetarian Collective Identity	117
7	The Food Industry's Role in Promoting and Gaining Acceptance for Vegetarian Diets	131

8	What Is the Future of the Vegetarian Movement?	141
	Appendix A: Methodology	151
	Appendix B: Vegetarian Websites	153
	Notes	155
	Select Bibliography	183
	Index	187

For many people, however, being a vegetarian means more than following a set of dietary proscriptions—it is a way of life. Although there are those who eliminate meat from their diets for economic reasons, these individuals typically return to meat eating as they gain the financial means to do so.¹ For these “hardship vegetarians,” meatless eating is neither a desirable nor a completely free choice. People who become vegetarians by choice, however, typically use diet as a form of self-expression and creativity.² Vegetarians, for example, frequently explore new foods, shop at food co-ops and natural food stores, and peruse vegetarian cookbooks and magazines for new recipes. They often discuss their food choices with family, and friends, and, to varying degrees, they incorporate vegetarianism into their self-concepts.

Is the vegetarian movement, then, simply an aggregate of people practicing the same lifestyle? After all, vegetarians do not appear to be particularly politically active or publicly outspoken, most do not belong to any movement or organization, and national campaigns promoting vegetarianism are rare. Still, behind the appearance of arbitrary adherence to a common lifestyle exists a structured set of organizations, ideas, and related phenomena: a movement that includes local and national organizations, a body of movement literature, a set of relatively coherent arguments, and a wide range of products and services. A vegetarian ideology—vegetarianism—provides both a critique of meat eating and the vision of a vegetarian world. The vast majority of vegetarians draw from this ideology to express their personal motivations for adopting this lifestyle.³

Vegetarian organizations, despite their lack of public visibility, are the backbone of the vegetarian way of life: Here agendas are set, vocabulary and other symbols are defined, and information and networking services are made available. These organizations create and distribute literature about the meaning of vegetarianism and hold meetings and conferences