

# Vegetarians: Uninvited, Uncomfortable or Special Guests at the Table of the Alternative Food Economy?

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## Abstract

This article explores whether vegetarianism is congruent with the alternative food economy. Although it has been largely neglected by scholars concerned with agro-food system alternatives, there are good reasons to undertake an exploration of vegetarianism in this context, not least because of the ethical relationships that it seeks to create within the food system. Drawing on recent work by Hilary Tovey in which she applies Eyerman and Jamison's cognitive approach to social movements, the article conceptualises vegetarianism as a social movement with the potential to effect change within the food system and, ultimately (perhaps), bring about rural development benefits. The article identifies and discusses a number of tensions and contradictions within the cognitive praxis of the vegetarian movement, and between the movement's cognitive praxis and external institutions, raising questions about the congruence between vegetarianism and the alternative food economy. It also makes some suggestions about the ways in which the vegetarian movement might reclaim a place at the table of the alternative food economy and in the process make a contribution to rural development. By way of conclusion, the article identifies a number of areas for possible future empirical research, as well as suggesting that the extension of an invitation to vegetarians to sit at the table of the alternative food economy has provided an interesting opportunity to reflect upon the menu on offer.

## Introduction

Over the last decade, in rural sociology and cognate disciplines, considerable interest has developed in what have been variously labelled as 'alternative food strategies' (Kirwan 2003), 'alternative food initiatives' (Allen *et al.* 2003), 'alternative food supply chains' (Renting *et al.* 2003), 'alternative consumption practices' (Bryant and Goodman 2004), 'alternative food networks' (Whatmore *et al.* 2003) and the 'alternative food economy'<sup>1</sup> (Morris 2002). These labels are used to describe a number of diverse initiatives and developments that have recently risen to prominence in the agro-food system. Examples include organic and other forms of ecological agriculture,

direct marketing such as farm shops, farmers' markets and box schemes and fairly traded goods and produce which comes from locally unique and distinctive places of production. The appellation, 'alternative' points to the oppositional character of these phenomena, which have often been developed in an attempt to counteract and offer sustainable solutions to some of the environmental, social and economic problems that have come to be associated with the mainstream or conventional agro-food system. More specifically, alternative food networks embody relations between their constituent actors that are somehow different from the conventional industrial food supply chain model. These differences may be environmental, social or economic, but what they have in common is an intention to make more explicit the connectedness between the production of food and its eventual consumption. They have been defined by Renting *et al.* (2003, p. 394) as being 'newly emerging networks of producers, consumers, and other actors that embody alternatives to the more standardised industrial mode of food supply'.

Whereas in a North American context interest in alternative food networks has tended to focus on their political ability 'to wrest control from corporate agribusinesses and create a domestic, sustainable and egalitarian food system' (Goodman 2003, p. 2), in Europe the focus has been more towards the ability of these initiatives to benefit the rural economy and contribute towards endogenous development. Thus, Marsden *et al.* (2002) describe them as being part of 'economies of scope' or 'synergy', in contrast to the dominant post-war 'economies of scale'; similarly, Goodman (2004) talks of alternative food networks as creating 'new spaces of possibility' for rural development. Through re-embedding the production and consumption of food in specific places and relationships and facilitating adding and retaining value at a local level, they are recognised as being able to 'create positive "defences" for rural regions against the prevailing trends of globalisation and further industrialisation of markets' (Marsden *et al.* 1999, p. 295). Within a European context, therefore, the alternative food economy is seen as a critical element of emerging rural development patterns and perhaps even of a rural development paradigm (Marsden *et al.* 2000; Renting *et al.* 2003). As this snapshot suggests, much of the discussion surrounding alternative food has been of a positive and optimistic nature. Nevertheless, Goodman (2004, p. 13) has recently voiced concern about the missing guests at the table of the alternative food economy. For him, these are the consumers who are unable to buy into alternative food networks through their limited purchasing power and/or lack of cultural capital. While this is undoubtedly a significant issue, it is possible to identify other types of potential guests who appear to have been neglected in the discussion of the alternative food economy to date. One notable example is people who exercise particular dietary choices and preferences, and specifically those who practice a vegetarian diet. In this article we explore whether vegetarians deserve a place at the table of the alternative food economy, through an examination of the tensions and contradictions in the cognitive praxis (after Eyerman and Jamison 1991) of the vegetarian movement. In essence, we are concerned to elucidate the congruence between vegetarianism and the alternative food system. A secondary objective is to consider, albeit in a preliminary and speculative manner, whether this invitation is justified on the basis of any rural development potentialities that might be associated with people choosing a vegetarian diet.

It is, of course, the case that vegetarianism has been the focus of some scholarly enquiry (e.g. Twigg 1983; Adams 1990; Beardsworth and Keil 1992; Spencer 1993; Eder 1996; Maurer 2002; Smart 2004), but not, on the whole, among those interested in the operation of the agro-food system and the reconfiguration of this system along more sustainable lines through the development of alternative production–consumption relationships, with all that this might imply for rural development (a couple of notable exceptions are McManus 1999, and Miele 2001). A number of reasons for this neglect can be posited. Firstly, vegetarianism is a dietary practice of ancient origin, albeit one that has expanded in popularity in recent years. In contrast, most of the phenomena currently conceptualised as ‘alternative’ are relatively new to the agro-food scene, at least in terms of their public and policy interest. Secondly, much of the social science scholarship on vegetarianism to date has been undertaken by sociologists, historians and anthropologists of food, rather than those scholars concerned with agriculture and the food system, and it is the latter who have been significant in theorising the emergence of, and investigating empirically, agro-food system alternatives. This illustrates the divide between the work of rural sociologists – who focus on agricultural organisation and production – and sociologists of food – who focus on diet, culture and consumption (Tovey 1997). Although recent years have witnessed the emergence of attempts by agro-food scholars to bridge this divide (e.g. Lockie and Collie 1999; Lockie and Kitto 2000; Goodman 2002; Goodman and Dupuis 2002), there remains considerable scope for further work. Thirdly, vegetarianism is arguably a predominantly consumer-oriented movement, albeit one that is built upon a set of concerns about production and production practices, which may reduce its immediate relevance to those scholars interested in bridging the consumption–production divide, specifically where this interest has a rural focus.

There are, however, good reasons why an exploration of the relationship between vegetarianism and the alternative food economy is a relevant, interesting and fruitful exercise. Characterised as representing a rejection or inversion of the ‘conventional hierarchy of foods’ (Beardsworth and Keil 1992, p. 258), vegetarianism emphasises animal rights and welfare, and a variety of environmental, societal and health benefits over meat-based dietary norms. In its efforts to create more ethical relationships within the food system, vegetarianism therefore appears to reflect, even embody, much of the contemporary interest among policymakers, rural development practitioners and agro-food scholars in alternative food initiatives. Indeed, in their analysis of Californian alternative food initiatives Allen *et al.* (2003) point to the publication, in the 1960s, of vegetarian advocacy books such as *Diet for a small planet* as being part of the broader movement for social justice and environmental regulation that stimulated the emergence of alternative food initiatives as we know them today. Meanwhile, the oppositional and alternative nature of vegetarianism (as opposed to mainstream dietary patterns) is a recurrent theme throughout the history of this ancient consumption practice, dating back to its earliest recorded proponents, most notably Pythagoras in the sixth century BC (Spencer 1993). The leitmotif of the vegetarian creed was originally one of strong-minded individuals looking askance at the morals of mainstream society. More recently, vegetarianism has occupied (and perhaps continues to do so) a position in the popular imagination as an alternative practice, not only on the grounds of it rejecting the consumption of meat (i.e., the dietary norm), and thereby

challenging the dominant food ideology of western culture, but also through its association with alternative cultures, such as hippy culture. Finally, it is estimated that up to 7 per cent of the UK population practices a vegetarian diet in some form or another (Ashley *et al.* 2004) and as Dietz *et al.* (1995) have stated, a major shift towards vegetarianism could have profound implications for rural areas and the organisation of agriculture in particular.

In order to undertake our analysis, vegetarianism is understood as a social movement with the potential to effect change within the food system and, ultimately (perhaps), bring about rural development benefits. In adopting this approach, we draw on Hilary Tovey's (2002) recent examination of the alternative agriculture movement in Ireland and its rural development potential. Her use of Eyerman and Jamison's (1991) cognitive approach to social movements enables contradictions and tensions to be revealed within social movements, and between social movements and other institutions, as well as enabling an understanding of how the knowledge that defines these movements is the result of an ongoing and dynamic process. This is seen as particularly pertinent to the vegetarian case, and to the assessment of the place of vegetarianism within the alternative food economy. However, the focus of our analysis is not social movements *per se*; rather, a social movement framework provides a vehicle for, or means of making sense of vegetarianism in relation to the wider food system and the alternative food system in particular. In the remainder of the article we briefly outline the key characteristics of the cognitive approach to social movements as adapted by Tovey, before applying the framework to the vegetarian movement. We then move on to reveal how contradictions and tensions in the cognitive praxis of vegetarianism (together with tensions between vegetarianism and other, largely private-sector institutions) may be making it an uninvited, or at best uncomfortable, guest at the table of the alternative food economy. In conclusion, we suggest ways in which the vegetarian movement might reclaim a place at the table of the alternative food economy and in the process make a contribution to rural development. We do this through a discussion of the extant academic literature on vegetarianism and the agro-food system, together with an analysis of a variety of secondary sources including websites and promotional materials. While the analysis draws on research from the UK, the US and Europe, where vegetarianism is very much a product of individual choice as opposed to being socially or religiously prescribed, such as in India (Twigg 1983), ultimately interest is oriented towards the UK and European situation where research on alternative food networks has been particularly concerned with rural development.

### **Social movements, the food system and rural development**

Social movements can be seen as challenging the *status quo* in some way. They are about more than simply individuals exercising personal choice, even though they may emerge from individual action. Over time, if individual action is to become a social movement it must necessarily become political, promoting lifestyle change and subsequently engendering a broader cultural change within society. How this happens is central to the role that particular movements have to play in influencing the dominant culture. It is also the case that social movements do not exist in isolation and

inevitably there will be a degree of overlap between different movements. Indeed, Maurer (2002) suggests that there is potential overlap between the environmental movement and the vegetarian movement, and in the context of this article our intention is to explore the degree of overlap and synergy between vegetarianism and the alternative food economy.

Although largely neglected by rural sociologists, social movements perspectives 'can yield some insights into the dilemmas and contradictions embedded in projects for sustainable development' (Tovey 2002, p. 2). In the context of alternative agriculture movements, which are the focus of Tovey's analysis, these have tended to be seen as movements for technical change, that is, change in the forces and means of production and consumption to make them less damaging to nature. However, Tovey asks whether in fact they should be understood as movements for rural regeneration and the recreation of community within rural spaces. Potentially of course, social movements can be about both of these concerns which, in Habermasian terms, respectively articulate 'instrumental-strategic' or 'communicative' forms of reason as the basis for social and society-nature relationships. In reviewing the extensive literature on social movements, Tovey seeks to identify a framework that uncovers the extent to which social movements like organic farming, and other movements for sustainable development, confront and struggle with a duality of aims and values that constantly place problematic choices before the actors concerned. This duality refers to the political/instrumental orientation of social movements, on the one hand, and cultural orientations on the other. The former may be understood in more formal organisational terms (polity/economy), and the latter as the development of more informal networks of actors (civil society). Some scholars have regarded this as an either/or focus, while others such as Cohen (1996) have argued that both may be a feature of any one social movement, although one or the other may be more significant at particular times.

Tovey combines some of the insights from 'cultural' approaches to social movements (notably Cohen 1996) with Eyerman and Jamison's (1991) 'social movements as cognitive praxis'. This is an approach, as the label suggests, which focuses on the cognitive dimension, conceptualising social movements as collective knowledge innovators or producers of knowledge; an aspect neglected by both the political and identity-oriented analyses of social movements. Eyerman and Jamison attribute much of their thinking to Habermas and, in particular, to his conception of 'knowledge constituting interests', enabling them to identify three distinct dimensions of cognitive praxis. The first dimension, the *cosmological*, refers to the basic assumptions and beliefs of a social movement which come to be taken for granted by movement participants. The *technological* dimension concerns the specific topics of protest and, in particular, the techniques and artefacts against which movement actors are protesting, together with the (alternative) techniques they are proposing or trying to develop in order to realise movement goals. The third dimension is *organisational* and describes the manner in which knowledge should be produced and disseminated, or as a means of 'organising social relations to put technological innovations into practice' (Tovey 2002, p. 5). In Eyerman and Jamison's case study of the environmental movement, the organisational dimension referred to the calls by environmentalists for the de-professionalising of expertise and more democratic forms of knowledge

production. Meanwhile, in Tovey's analysis of the organic agriculture movement in Ireland, she argues that movement actors are interested in non-technical as well as technical forms of innovation, particularly as these manifest themselves around alternative social relationships with on-farm employees and/or with consumers. This organisational dimension of the alternative agriculture movement is the key to bringing about the rural community development that is Tovey's principal interest.

Social movements coalesce individual interest into organisational concerns and their identity is dynamic. Critical to this identity is a movement's cognitive praxis that is actively articulated and discussed. Eyerman and Jamison argue that a movement can only be called a social movement if its three knowledge interests are combined into an active, integrative force that results in a living cognitive praxis among activists. It is this cognitive praxis that defines the social movement, rather than any organisational structures it may have. What is of interest in this framework, for our analysis of vegetarianism and the alternative food economy, is that social movements face problems in trying to maintain the integration of all three dimensions of knowledge over time. This is not to suggest that their cognitive praxis should be seen as reified in any sense, but that other social actors or institutions, from the state or private sector, will bring strong pressures to bear on movements, trying to single out those elements of the cognitive praxis that most interest them, leading to the disintegration of the whole. Typically, these are innovations in technical knowledge. Other institutions take certain elements of the cognitive praxis and incorporate them within their own knowledge sets, discarding the rest:

It is thus inevitable that social movements are impermanent and transient sources of what may be permanent and far-reaching political and cultural change. Social movements define themselves in the process of creating, articulating and formulating new knowledge, but once this knowledge has been accepted and formalised, whether within the scientific world or the established political culture, then it has left the space of the movement behind. (Tovey 2002, p. 5)

The development and innovation that Tovey brings to Eyerman and Jamison's framework is a questioning of the assumption that tension and confrontation only occurs between the social movement and outside institutions, but not within the movement itself. Thus, Tovey emphasises instead how the relationships between the three dimensions of knowledge may be/become incoherent or contradictory within a single given movement, and that there may be a constant tension between the cognitive praxis which actors develop around one dimension and the praxes manifest in the other two. This is not to suggest that change is necessarily detrimental to a social movement; indeed, cognitive praxis actively involves 'the social shaping of knowledge' (Eyerman and Jamison 1991, p. 47); simply that it may result in certain contradictions at certain times, which may or may not be resolvable within the context of the social movement concerned. In applying this to the organic agriculture movement, Tovey (2002, p. 8) reveals significant tensions between the desire of movement participants to innovate technologically and their desire to innovate socially/organisationally. The latter is important because 'this is the way in which civil society can check the proliferation of instrumental rationality associated with the technology'. It is the technological dimension of the organic movement which is most under threat of

'capture' by institutions outside the movement (as work by Buck *et al.* 1997, and Guthman 1998 have revealed), but this is also the aspect of cognitive praxis that many movement participants tend to emphasise, recognising that in so doing they may produce dilemmas for the movement. However

... the cosmological commitments of Irish organic producers are what prevent their passion for technique from undermining their concern with interpersonal interaction, community and the development of new forms of rural social organisation. (Tovey 2002, p. 8).

Hence, the ability of this social movement to make a positive contribution to rural development.

While the alternative agriculture movement, as analysed by Tovey, and vegetarianism are acknowledged to be somewhat different types of social movement (emerging as they do from within different parts of the food system), a cognitive approach to their analysis is relevant to our concerns for the following reasons. Firstly, the framework as adapted by Tovey concerns the relationship between social movements and the sustainable development of the food system and rural areas in particular. Likewise, we are interested in exploring the relationship between vegetarianism and its potential for shaping a more sustainable agro-food system and rural development. Secondly, the framework pays particular attention to the contradictions and tensions that social movements have to negotiate, both those that are internal to themselves and external forces and institutions. This, we believe, provides a useful means of making sense of the ambiguities and tensions that we observe in the context of vegetarianism, and how these impact on its agro-food system sustainability and rural development potential. In the next section we outline the cognitive praxis of vegetarianism before moving on to discuss the contradictions in the movement and between the movement and external institutions.

### The cognitive praxis of vegetarianism

Vegetarianism involves the exclusion of certain food products from the diet. These are, most notably, flesh foods – meat, poultry, game, fish and sea food – but also, for other vegetarians, dairy products and eggs, or the by-products of slaughtering such as gelatin and animal fat. Concomitantly, vegetarian diets entail the relatively greater use (compared with a conventional omnivorous diet) of other food products such as seeds, fruits, pulses, nuts and grains. Underpinning the daily practice of vegetarianism (whatever the individual motivations of those involved)

exists a structured set of organisations, ideas and related phenomena: a movement that includes local and national organisations, 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. (Maurer 2002, p. 2)

Likewise, Twigg (1983) characterises vegetarianism as a rare example, in the west, of an 'explicit food ideology', as distinct from the 'more pervasive yet implicit ideology of meat culture'. Key to Twigg's analysis is the notion that vegetarianism requires a step 'outside the culturally prescribed forms of eating' (Twigg 1983, p. 19), representing an

oppositional or alternative mode of eating, and indeed way of relating to the world. Both of these authors are making the point that vegetarianism is a social rather than an individual phenomenon, and in Maurer's case, a social movement.<sup>2</sup>

In cognitive terms, the vegetarian movement (as it has evolved since the mid-nineteenth century) represents a collective effort to produce knowledge which will enable and subsequently persuade people to make the transition to a vegetarian diet. The three dimensions of knowledge (or cognitive praxis) of vegetarianism as a social movement can be identified as follows (after Tovey [2002] and Eyerman and Jamison [1991]). At the core of the cosmological dimension of vegetarianism's cognitive praxis is a set of moral beliefs and values relating to the use of animals by humans. Thus, a number of philosophical and spiritual arguments are deployed which oppose the killing of animals for food as both cruel and unnecessary (e.g. Singer 1983; Regan 1984; Shafer-Landau 1994; Alward 2000; Benatar 2001; Zuzworksky 2001). In the vegan case, it is argued that animals should not be kept for food, or other human uses, at all. Surrounding this core belief and value in the rights and welfare of animals is a belief in 'natural' or 'whole' foods and the healthiness and vitality of the diet, as well as a broader concern for the well-being of the environment. Vegetarianism can be said to embrace the concepts of 'nature' and 'natural', because it values 'rawness', in comparison with a meat culture which emphasises cooking (Twigg 1983). Lévi-Strauss argued that the process of cooking effectively mediates between raw food (seen to represent nature), and cooked food (seen to represent culture), even if this is an unconscious dichotomy at an individual level (Ashley *et al.* 2004). While acknowledging that organisations which promote whole/health/natural foods do not necessarily espouse vegetarianism, Maurer (2002) suggests that the health-food movement is a closely related social movement which has contributed to an increase in the health-related aspect of vegetarian diets and an increasing sensitivity about eating meat. Moreover, vegetarians, she observes, frequently shop at natural food stores. In other words, there are complementarities between the cognitive praxes of these two social movements.

With respect to the technological dimension of vegetarianism's cognitive praxis, it is possible to identify a set of concerns underpinning this particular knowledge-constituting interest. Vegetarianism's specific topic of protest is meat eating, and its espoused alternative is for a plant-based diet and agriculture: entirely plant based in the case of veganism, and largely so in the case of lacto-/ovo-/demi-vegetarianism. We interpret this as an argument which is for the most part technological and scientific and it is a position advanced by vegetarian organisations not only because of what it implies for animal rights and welfare, but also because of the implications for human welfare, the environment and human health. Each of these latter three aspects of the philosophy of vegetarianism is worth a brief elaboration at this point, in that although they can be identified as part of its cosmological praxis, they are perhaps less widely appreciated than the animal rights and welfare concerns of the movement; and yet speak directly to the growing sustainability concerns within the agro-food system.

Concerning human welfare in a global sense, vegetarianism asserts a morally superior position to meat eating because feeding grain to animals is less efficient than feeding it directly to humans: 'Grain-fattened animals take more energy and protein from their feed than they return in the form of food for humans' (Compassion in

World Farming Trust 2004, p. 22). Adopting a vegetarian diet, therefore, is seen as an important step towards alleviating some of the problems of the world food shortage and starvation that are likely to be exacerbated by the predicted livestock revolution in the developing world, in which meat consumption is projected to rise by 3 per cent per annum until 2020 (Compassion in World Farming Trust 2004, p. 22).<sup>3</sup> More specific ecological arguments are also used to justify the adoption of a plant-based diet, although these tend to 'get less than [their] fair share of publicity', according to the President of the Australian Vegetarian Society, in his address to the 33rd World Vegetarian Congress (Fraser, 1999). The ecological argument for vegetarianism encompasses a number of environmental concerns about livestock farming, including the production of greenhouse gases,<sup>4</sup> losses of tropical rainforest to cattle ranching, the collapse of global fisheries, water pollution from intensive livestock holdings and the inefficient use of land and water resources. Taking the last two of these issues for illustration, it is argued that a vegetarian diet is a more efficient user of both land and water (e.g. Goodland 1997; Leitzmann 2003; Pimentel and Pimentel 2003). For example, research in the US has shown that 0.5 ha of land is required for a meat-based diet, compared with 0.4 ha for a vegetarian-based diet (Pimentel and Pimentel 2003).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in terms of water usage, there is a growing concern that water scarcity will become at least as important a constraint on future food production as a lack of available land. The argument advanced for vegetarianism in this context is that 'by moving down the food chain, Americans could get twice as much nutritional benefit out of each litre of water consumed in food production' (Sandra Postel, quoted in Compassion in World Farming Trust 2004, p. 25).

Human health concerns also emerge as an important reason why a plant-based diet should be pursued. These concerns are often couched in terms of 'meat is bad for you', although the benefits of vegetable staples are also emphasised. Indeed, various recent scientific studies have suggested that a vegetarian diet is associated with, although not necessarily causally related to, a reduced risk of certain diseases. For example, a 12-year study of 6,000 vegetarians and 5,000 meat eaters published in 1994 showed that vegetarians have 30 per cent less heart disease and a reduced risk of various types of cancer by up to 40 per cent (Compassion in World Farming Trust 2004). While the sustainability implications of this aspect of vegetarianism are perhaps less clear than those arising from the human welfare and ecological arguments, it appears that vegetarianism is being advocated as a more socially sustainable form of consumption through the reduced costs of healthcare associated with the widespread adoption of a vegetarian diet.

Finally, an important subset of the opposition within vegetarianism to animal-based agricultures and diets is the protest against the factory farming of livestock, that is, a specific type of technological development in agriculture. In the US, Maurer (2002) points to FARM as an example of a vegetarian organisation that focuses on the reform of the farm animal industry as well as attempting to change consumer preferences. Meanwhile, Viva is an organisation that has been particularly critical of factory farming in the UK (Viva n.d.). It is clear, therefore, that there are a number of strands to the technological dimension of vegetarianism's cognitive praxis, aspects of which may not necessarily be complementary to one another or to other dimensions of the movement's cognitive praxis; something we will return to later.

Turning to the organisational dimension of the vegetarian movement's cognitive praxis, it is helpful to draw on Donna Maurer's (2002) analysis of North American vegetarianism as it provides a full length account of the movement and the manner of its organisation. Maurer argues that the vegetarian movement is more than the formal national and local organisations which promote vegetarianism (membership of which is relatively small compared to animal rights organisations), identifying many groups<sup>6</sup> and individuals that support vegetarian principles and are therefore constitutive of a much broader vegetarian movement than the relatively small number of explicitly vegetarian organisations might suggest. She sees the primary concerns of this broadly conceived vegetarian movement as motivating individuals to become vegetarian, increasing the cultural acceptance of vegetarianism and making vegetarian foods more readily available. In turn, these activities can be characterised as promoting and entailing personal, cultural and political change. Perhaps more significant here than the details of the structure and activities of national and local vegetarian organisations is Maurer's characterisation of how the North American vegetarian movement goes about recruiting participants. This illustrates how knowledge about vegetarianism is produced. Drawing on Weberian ideas, Maurer distinguishes between social movements that call for participants to change for the benefit of a collective good ('ethical' movements) and those that encourage change for the individual's own benefit ('exemplary' movements). Ethical movements are seen as offering prescriptions for moral attitudes, while exemplary movements provide suggestions and general direction. 'In an ethical movement, adherence to prescribed rules is viewed as a duty, a moral obligation; in an exemplary movement this adherence is a more processual, less absolute path' (Maurer 2002, p. 19). Acknowledging that a social movement may include characteristics of both types, or can evolve from one type to the other, Maurer suggests that in the North American context, vegetarian organisations often pursue an exemplary line at first, motivating people to change for their own self benefit (i.e. health reasons), and then, once recruitment is achieved the organisations adopt a more ethical approach; that is, promoting concern for animals, human welfare and the environment.

Viewing the vegetarian movement through the lens of cognitive praxis, it is possible to argue that vegetarians are worthy guests, perhaps even deserving of special guest status, at the table of the alternative food economy. This is because the cosmological, technological and organisational dimensions of the vegetarian movement collectively represent an attempt to counteract, and offer sustainable solutions to, some of the environmental, social and economic problems that have come to be associated with the mainstream or conventional agro-food system. Furthermore, they offer a challenge to conventional relations between agro-food production and consumption, particularly as these concern making consumers aware of the implication for the sites of production (in terms of farmed animals and the farmed environment, less so perhaps for the producers themselves) of their purchasing and consumption decisions. Nevertheless, as will be revealed in the following section, there are a number of ambiguities, tensions and contradictions both within the vegetarian movement (i.e. between the three dimensions of knowledge), and between particular dimensions of the movement's cognitive praxis and external forces and institutions which undermine its position as a special guest at the table of the alternative food economy.

### The contradictions and tensions within the cognitive praxis of vegetarianism

Social movements, according to Eyerman and Jamison (1991), face problems in trying to maintain the integration of all three dimensions of knowledge over time, as other social actors or institutions (particularly state or corporate groups) focus on the particular elements of a movement's cognitive praxis that most interest them and incorporate them within their own knowledge sets. In the case of the vegetarian movement, as in other social movements, it is possible to identify a number of ways in which the technological dimension of the movement's cognitive praxis has either been appropriated by external forces and institutions, or show how significant contradictions appear to be emerging between aspects of vegetarianism's technical knowledge and the arguments advanced by external bodies (including other social movements).

Perhaps the most obvious way in which this is occurring is in the human health argument for eating less meat and more plant-based alternatives. This dimension of vegetarian movement knowledge has proved particularly attractive to food processors and retailers in the conventional and industrialised food system:

In recent years, the vegetarian food industry has flourished. Concern about fat intake, the desire to consume more natural, less processed foods, and interest in the potential health benefits of soy foods all contribute to this trend. (Maurer, 2002, p. 132)

Scares about the safety of meat (particularly in a UK context following the bovine spongiform encephalopathy [BSE] scandal) can also be added to this list. As a result, UK companies producing Quorn<sup>7</sup> and other similar products such as Quinova<sup>8</sup> boast that the UK market for vegetarian and meat-free foods is growing and is now estimated to be worth between £500 and £600 million per annum.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, in the US, the manufacture and retail of 'vegetarian friendly' foods such as vegetarian burgers and sausages is becoming increasingly lucrative, with Maurer reporting sales of these products rising by 13 per cent between 1996 and 1997. Alongside this trend, food processors increasingly label a wide range of manufactured goods as 'suitable for vegetarians', once again playing to the health concerns of the movement; that is, if it is vegetarian it must be somehow more natural and better for you. Vegetarian organisations, such as the UK's Vegetarian Society, have played an active role in this process by endorsing numerous (typically highly processed) food products that appear on the shelves of the major supermarkets.

These developments, which entail the incorporation of aspects of vegetarianism's cognitive praxis within the mainstream, industrialised agro-food system could not be further from a non-industrialised, locally based and natural alternative food system. Indeed, this is supported by Smart's (2004) study of the UK Vegetarian Society which he suggests is now 'adrift in the mainstream' (2004, p. 1), even though its strategy (of persuading the food processors and retailers to label foods as suitable for vegetarians or by endorsing particular products) has successfully recruited many more people to vegetarianism.<sup>10</sup>

The commercialisation of vegetarian foods, which suggests that the food industry has co-opted vegetarianism as a menu choice, can have both positive and negative consequences

for the vegetarian movement. It presents a strong opportunity for the vegetarian movement to capitalize on a cultural environment in which vegetarian menu choices are acceptable. But it may also serve to further dilute the vegetarian collective identity. (Maurer 2002, p. 133)

While private interests have clearly been significant in the capture of vegetarianism's technological knowledge, Maurer also identifies how the 'mainstreaming of vegetarianism has been facilitated by the endorsement of the diet by health professionals' (pp. 45–46) in the public sector, particularly in the case of the US by government regulations that favour non-meat protein sources. This pressure on the cognitive praxis of the vegetarian movement is largely the result of external bodies seeking to benefit from relating to (and arguably appropriating) certain elements of its underlying philosophy.

Alongside this incorporation by private and public institutions of aspects of the vegetarian movement's technological praxis, contradictions can be identified between the environmental knowledge produced by the movement and the environmental arguments deployed by other institutions. One of these concerns the role of livestock in the creation of sustainable farming systems. According to some recent commentaries, extensive systems of livestock production may ultimately be more sustainable than purely plant-based agricultures<sup>11</sup> (e.g. Schiere *et al.* 2002). This suggests that meat and animal, rather than plant-based, foods may be more at home in the alternative food economy. Indeed, the Food Ethics Council (2001), for example, has recently rejected vegetarianism as the basis of a more ethical and sustainable approach to food production systems.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, while the evidence presented above suggests that a reduction in farm animals would produce environmental benefits, such an approach is also likely to generate environmental disbenefits, for example, where animal husbandry and pasturing practices are key to the maintenance, enhancement or recreation of valuable habitats and landscape features such as biodiverse grasslands. This is evident within the context of European agri-environmental policy. Take, for example, UK environmentally sensitive areas which, in spite of their diversity in terms of landscape characteristics and habitats, all seek to maintain extensive livestock grazing and the conversion of arable to grassland.

The link is also made clear in work on high natural value farming systems (Hellegers and Godeschalk 1998), upland farming (Bignall and McCracken 1993), low intensity farming systems (Beaufroy *et al.* 1994) and sensitive environmental area management (Evans 2000). In short

when livestock are raised according to the tenets of good husbandry ... they hugely increase the overall economy of farming. Agriculture that includes the appropriate number of animals judiciously deployed is *more* efficient, not less, than all-plant agriculture (Tudge, quoted in Porritt 2004, p. 5).

Even Compassion in World Farming Trust (2004), in advance of pointing out that livestock farming in general is both energy and land-use inefficient when compared to growing crops, acknowledges that in areas where animals are fattened predominantly on grazing land that could not easily grow food crops for direct human consumption, or else where they eat primarily crop residues or other waste products, livestock farming can have a part to play. Likewise, the life-cycle impact assessments reviewed by Reijnders and Soret (2003 p. 667s) for vegetarian and meat products

reveals how 'long distance air transport, deep-freezing and some horticultural practices for producing fresh vegetables may lead to environmental burdens for vegetarian foods exceeding those of locally produced organic meat'.

Furthermore, research suggests that the contemporary practice of vegetarianism is actually highly dependent on a *global* agro-food system. Thus, Beardsworth and Keil (1992, pp. 289–290) note that

the conditions in which contemporary vegetarianism can flourish are located not only in a cultural climate of national (menu) pluralism, they also rest on the economic foundations of an affluent, consumer-oriented economy which can draw on a variety of food items, freed by the channels of international trade from the narrow limits of locality, climate and season.

This is supported by Lockie and Collie (1999) in their assertion that the decline in red-meat eating in Australia may be attributed to an increased access to a range of alternatives (both meat and non-meat based), supplied by the globalised agro-food system, rather than increased unease about red meat and its violent origins. Likewise, in an analysis of the rise of veganism in the UK, Leneman (1999) points to the increased availability of ethnic foods from around the world, in which dairy products have never been a key feature, as offering an important means of moving to an all-plant based diet. Situating contemporary vegetarianism within the alternative food economy, which is often intent on relocalising the agro-food system agenda, may therefore represent a significant challenge for its proponents and practitioners, and points to a growing contradiction *within* the cognitive praxis of vegetarianism. It is to these internal tensions that the discussion now turns.

Tovey (2002) argues that the relations between the three dimensions of knowledge may be incoherent or contradictory within a single given movement, and that there may be a constant tension between the cognitive praxis which actors develop around one dimension and the praxes manifest in the other two. To this, we add that there is also potential for tension (or at least incoherence) within any one of the dimensions of cognitive praxis, which also present challenges to movement practitioners and to the ability of the movement to effect social change (in this case, effecting change within the agro-food system to create a more sustainable system and to provide rural development benefits). Tensions and contradictions are particularly apparent within the cosmological dimension of the vegetarian movement's cognitive praxis.

At the heart of the vegetarian cosmology is a moral concern about the consumption of meat. This core concern disguises, however, the considerable diversity in the practices and motivations of vegetarians, which in turn raises questions about the 'moral elegance' attributed to the practice of vegetarianism by some (Porritt 2004). Beardsworth and Keil (1992), for example, have identified six general types of vegetarianism. These are suggested as being on a spectrum of animal product use ranging from least restrictive, where some meat is still consumed, to most restrictive, where only vegetable-derived products are consumed, that is, veganism. It is clear that in its most popular – lacto-ovo and lacto-forms (Beardsworth and Keil 1992), vegetarianism remains highly dependent on animal husbandry. In other words, it requires the keeping of animals for dairy and egg production, not to mention their killing at the end of their productive lives and, in the case of dairying, the selling off (often into veal production) of male calves (Penman 1996). This in itself does not represent a

contradiction, except that dairy and egg production systems are often highly intensive and there are serious animal welfare and environmental concerns associated with them (Evans 2000). Moreover, some vegetarians, while refusing to consume meat and other flesh foods, continue to wear animal products in the form of leather and wool and in doing so, 'occupy a somewhat precarious moral position' (Beardsworth and Keil 1992, p. 283). The impracticality of excluding all animal-derived items is acknowledged by some vegetarians, but for others the moral ambiguity implicit in the consumption of animal products is a position they 'deliberately avoid subjecting to too careful scrutiny' (Beardsworth and Keil 1992, p. 283).

Even a shift to a vegan diet, based on an all-plant based agriculture, has been shown to present ethical dilemmas, as recently illustrated by Davis (2003). His analysis begins with the argument that we should seek to feed ourselves through production systems that produce the 'least harm', a position that usually leads to the conclusion that a plant-based diet is necessary. Nevertheless, he goes on to demonstrate that a diet based on large herbivores might in fact involve fewer animal deaths overall than an all-plant based diet, whereby numerous animals that live in and around agricultural fields (e.g. voles and rabbits) are killed during the multiple field activities that are required in the production of most crops (ploughing, harrowing and planting, as well as harvesting). While his calculations have been disputed (Matheny 2003), they do raise questions about the coherence of the vegetarian movement's cognitive praxis and, in particular, highlight an apparent contradiction between its cosmological dimensions (i.e. its concern about the killing of animals) and technological ones (i.e. the assertion that a plant-based diet is the means of achieving a vegetarian, and environmentally better, future).

Finally, we observe some discordance between the cosmological and organisational dimensions of vegetarianism's cognitive praxis. As outlined earlier, the vegetarian movement has tended to adopt an exemplary, as opposed to an ethical, approach to participant recruitment, emphasising the health benefits of vegetarianism in advance of ethical dimensions. This has tended to encourage the emergence of a group of 'lifestyle vegetarians' (Tester 1999). Although the consequences for the food system of a lifestyle approach may be the same as those brought about by the ethically motivated vegetarian, the sustainability gains may be superficial and short-lived, as lifestyle vegetarianism may not represent a permanent shift in dietary practice, being susceptible, like other lifestyle choices, to the vagaries of fashion. As Maurer observes:

Promoting concern for animals and the environment is essential to the advancement of the vegetarian movement because people motivated to become vegetarian for health reasons are more likely to switch back to animal products when lower fat/lower calorie products become available. The role of committed, strongly motivated advocates must increase significantly if the movement is to confront ... [the meat and dairy interests] ... in any meaningful way. (Maurer 2002 p. 45)

Parallels can be drawn between lifestyle vegetarians and those consumers of organic foods (and other foods from the alternative systems of production) who consume them because they perceive benefits to themselves, either in terms of their own health, or from the improved social status associated with the accumulation of cultural capital (Lockie *et al.* 2002).

Taken together, these factors suggest that vegetarianism occupies an uneasy, paradoxical and contradictory position in relation to the emergence of oppositional and alternative food networks that seek to improve the sustainability of the agro-food system and to benefit rural development through the relocalisation and/or valorisation of their local food production assets. What this implies for our understanding and explanation of contemporary vegetarianism, and for the future direction and role of empirical research, is explored in the final section of this article.

### **(Re)situating vegetarianism in the alternative food economy**

In this article we have explored, through the use of a social movement framework, the place and relevance of vegetarianism in the alternative food economy. Understanding social movements as cognitive praxes implies that ongoing debate and the creation of knowledge is central to the development of these movements, and that although change might be accommodated within the existing movement's identity, this is by no means inevitable. As we have highlighted in the previous section, it is clear that the modern-day vegetarian movement's cognitive praxis exhibits a number of contradictions, tensions and incoherency both within the movement, and between it and other institutions. In turn, these tensions may prove significant in determining the ability of vegetarianism to claim a place at the table of the alternative food economy and, in particular, whether it has anything to contribute towards rural development. In this final section we consider how the cognitive praxis of vegetarianism might accommodate those aspects of the alternative food economy that are currently a cause of tension within the movement. In addition, we begin to raise some questions about what the apparent dilemmas associated with vegetarianism might mean for current debates around rural development and its links with agro-food alternatives.

In envisaging the vegetarian movement's position in relation to the alternative food economy, it is worth considering Maurer's (2002, p. 45) reflection that 'many vegetarian organisations find themselves in a difficult position of wanting to promote the ethical reasons for adopting veganism without alienating their health-motivated ovo-lacto-vegetarians'. In other words, there is a balance to be drawn between philosophical absolutism and the practicalities of increasing adherents to a diet that utilises less meat, or as Tovey (2002, p. 4) puts it, a 'constant need to manage and balance instrumental and cultural goals'. Social movements develop from individual actions which then coalesce into 'packages of ideas' that form the cognitive praxis of the movement concerned (Eyerman and Jamison 1991). Nevertheless, 'packages of ideas' do not exist in a vacuum and are constantly exposed to a wide range of individual, institutional and other social movement inputs. In discussing the emergence of the environmental movement in western Europe from the 1970s, Eyerman and Jamison (1991) point to the importance of other previous and contemporary movements to the formation of its cognitive praxis, most notably the women's movement and the peace movement. In much the same way as Maurer (2002) talks of other movements' ideas impacting on vegetarianism in the 1960s (such as the hippy and health-food movements), we argue that the ongoing shaping of the package of ideas that define vegetarianism as cognitive praxis is influenced by other organisations in modern-day

society, whether they be social movements for change, the growth of globalised networks of food supply, or the development of the alternative food economy. As Tovey (2002) argues, in the context of the organic movement in Ireland, this may then lead to incoherent or contradictory relations between the three dimensions of knowledge – cosmological, technological and organisational.

It is clear from the arguments put forward in this article that vegetarianism is being jostled cosmologically, technologically and organisationally, not least because much of the alternative knowledge in the current food supply chain is concerned to make more explicit the connection between the production and consumption of food, and to create initiatives which valorise local food assets for rural developmental purposes. However, vegetarian food is increasingly globally and amorphously sourced and processed. In addition, meat and animal-derived products (such as cheese) from particular grazing regimes or artisan-production practices are being suggested as offering the best environmental and rural development potential in certain instances. This is creating tensions between the vegetarian cosmology of abstaining from meat eating and its technological concern for the environment. Demi-vegetarians are already in a somewhat 'morally inelegant' position in this respect, but so, too, are those who use other animal products. It is possible, however, that these latter groups may be influenced to choose products that can be identified with particular production practices or places of production. Similarly, in the technological dimension, concern for the use of global resources in a diet based on meat would seem to conflict with an increasingly global sourcing of vegetarian foods. Again, a greater cognisance of food provenance might help to overcome this tension. Finally, in organisational terms there is clearly a tension between increasing the cultural acceptance of vegetarianism and making its produce more widely available (which includes not scaring off potential converts), and ensuring that over time these converts will be encouraged to engage with its underlying philosophy. Perhaps in the future this could include a specific encouragement for adherents to question more closely the origins of the vegetarian food they purchase.

It may be that the cognitive praxis of vegetarianism engages with, and is able to accommodate, these emerging ideas, some of which may help to connect it more closely and less ambiguously to the alternative food economy. However, on the other hand, it may be that the movement is due for another schism, the last one (in the UK) having occurred in 1944, when tensions surrounding the inclusion of lacto-/ovo-/demi-vegetarians in the movement's cognitive praxis, and indeed the acceptance of using animal products at all (such as shoes and clothing), proved to be too much of a knowledge shift for some, and the vegan movement broke away to create a separate, although related, social movement (Spencer 1993). Cosmologically, vegans perceived the inclusion of meat and animal products in the diet as too much of a shift in the underlying value of compassion for all living beings; technologically, it involved a dilution of the benefits a vegetarian diet could bring in terms of human health, the environment and animal exploitation and organisationally, it confused the message that the movement was trying to propagate. A new form, or further offshoot, of vegetarianism could, therefore, emerge from the current situation; one which still values a reduction in the quantity of animal products eaten, but one which also gives a relatively higher priority to issues of food provenance. If so, there is a strong

argument for this form of vegetarianism (and its adherents) to be seated at the table of the alternative food economy and to be recognised as a potentially significant contributor to rural development.

In order to establish this, empirical research is required which 'ground truths' the arguments made in this article. The focus of this research may be individual vegetarians and how they understand their praxis: do they themselves identify the kinds of tensions and contradictions highlighted in this article? In particular, investigation is needed of how they view their practices in relation to debates about more sustainable agricultures and forms of rural development through, for example, expressed concern about the provenance of their food: or, whether they are eating at a quite different, but for them just as satisfying, table.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, how are these issues balanced against the seemingly more mundane, but no less significant issues of price, convenience and accessibility? As Weatherell *et al.* (2003, p. 241) assert:

... although fair levels of awareness and concern for wider food-related issues may exist within the population ... in practice many will only act upon these concerns if the offerings meet their normal, food-intrinsic and practical needs.

Alternatively, research might examine the governance of vegetarian food, and in particular whether its standards and labelling addresses its supply origins and 'natural' credentials: together with the vegetarian commodity system and the way in which vegetarian food is being processed, distributed and retailed. All of these research endeavours would help to shed further light on the ongoing cognitive praxis of vegetarianism, its place within the alternative food economy and its potential to contribute to rural development.

However, all these suggestions approach the issue of the relationship between vegetarianism and the alternative food economy essentially from one perspective: that vegetarianism needs to adapt to the alternative food economy (if it wants to be a guest at its table), and not the other way around. It might therefore be interesting to also explore the implications of being unable to accommodate vegetarian consumption trends within sustainable rural development impulses built on an alternative food economy. Perhaps inviting vegetarians to eat at the table of the alternative food economy actually begins to reveal some of the contradictions, not just in vegetarianism, but also in discussions of 'sustainable' and 'alternative' food systems where the emphasis of concern (both in policy and academic debates) tends to lie with, first and foremost, production and producers rather than consumers. Recently, a consensus has begun to emerge in agro-food studies of a need to bring together food-producer and food-consumer perspectives through revised analytical frameworks (e.g. Tovey 1997; Lockie and Kitto 2000; Goodman 2002). However, the analysis of vegetarian praxis within this article suggests that such efforts may actually reveal fundamental cleavages and conflicts in these perspectives which may be very difficult to resolve. This does not mean that these efforts are not worthwhile, rather, that we need to be alert to the possibility that analysing producer and consumer perspectives together will raise new sets of issues which may, in turn, challenge these new analytical frameworks. Similarly, a number of authors have started to unpack the notion that the re-localisation of food systems (an underlying tenet of much of the alternative food economy) necessarily results in more sustainable outcomes, or maximises the rural

development potential of a particular area (e.g. Hinrichs 2003; Winter 2003). Indeed, Ilbery and Maye (2005) argue that in many instances initiatives operating with the alternative food economy (such as specialised regional food products) are in fact better understood as hybrids, in that they rarely operate exclusively as alternative forms. This apparent incongruity may help explain the ambiguities and contradictions between vegetarianism and the alternative food economy. By the same token, it also suggests that analyses (and proponents) of the alternative food economy need to be more aware of how it relates to other actors, initiatives and philosophies in the food supply system. It may be that inviting vegetarians to the table of the alternative food economy has provided a useful opportunity to reflect further upon the nature and values of the alternative food economy menu that is on offer.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> To a large extent these various terminologies are addressing the same issues, albeit within different conceptual contexts, but what they have in common, we suggest, is a concern with alternatives to the norm, or mainstream. As such, when discussing 'alternatives' in relation to the 'mainstream' (food) economy it is appropriate to use the term alternative (food) economy; likewise, in the context of (food) network development, alternative (food) networks and so on.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, until the mid-nineteenth century, when the British Vegetarian Society was formed, vegetarianism was largely practiced by individuals motivated by a variety of philosophical and ideological concerns. At its inception, the Vegetarian Society was an intensely ideological organisation intent on addressing what it saw as the moral deprivation of eating meat, as well as espousing the health benefits of excluding meat from the diet (Spencer 1993).

<sup>3</sup> These arguments also have resonance in, and for, the west. In the US, for example, the current livestock population consumes more than seven times as much grain as is consumed directly by the entire US human population. According to Pimentel and Pimentel (2003) the amount of grain fed to US livestock is sufficient to feed approximately 840 million people existing on a plant-based diet (the current population is 285 million which is predicted to rise to 570 million in the next 70 years).

<sup>4</sup> According to the Compassion in World Farming Trust, who refer to a number of sources, a little under one-quarter of all methane emissions (an important global-warming gas) globally come from livestock. Livestock farming is also a major contributor of other atmospheric pollutants such as ammonia, nitrous oxide and carbon dioxide (which contribute to soil acidification and global warming). It is estimated that 10 per cent of total global greenhouse gases are derived from animal manure.

<sup>5</sup> For an older articulation of this argument, see Keith Mellanby's book, *Can Britain feed itself?* (1973).

<sup>6</sup> For example, parts of the environmental movement, the health food movement and animal rights organisations.

<sup>7</sup> Quorn is described on the manufacturer's website as a 'myco-protein' being derived from a type of fungus, and is sold in a variety of forms, including as a 'mince' which can be made into various dishes using other ingredients, and in pre-prepared foods such as pies and sausages.

<sup>8</sup> Quinova, according to the manufacturer, is a meat-free product derived from the quinoa grain, which is a traditional food source in the Andes. It is described by its manufacturer, Anglesey Natural Foods, as 'gluten free, low in saturated fat, provides a rich source of carbohydrates and minerals and has an ideal balance of amino acids ... Quinova is also Soil

Association Approved, Vegetarian Society Approved, Vegan Society Approved, Gluten Free, GM Free and it qualifies as one of the 5 daily portions of fruit & vegetables’.

- <sup>9</sup> It is interesting also to note that meat substitute products are derived from highly industrialised processing systems (Quorn, for example, is produced in factories in two locations in the UK). While they may be able to be promoted as healthy meat free alternatives, any claims to ‘naturalness’ could not be further from the truth.
- <sup>10</sup> Maurer presents contradictory evidence, suggesting that the overwhelming majority of people (80 per cent, according to one study) who consume meat alternatives are not vegetarians, neither are the many people who eat vegetarian options at restaurants. As such, she concludes, the food industry’s impact on the vegetarian movement has not had a significant impact on the number of vegetarians.
- <sup>11</sup> If universally adopted, this would necessarily entail dietary shifts in the form of significantly reduced meat consumption because extensive livestock systems tend to yield less output.
- <sup>12</sup> A co-evolutionary perspective on the relationship between humans and animals is used to arrive at this position:

Domesticated animals have undergone marked evolutionary changes which, in many cases, makes them totally dependent on human care, having largely lost their adaptation to the wild. Their instincts of dominance and territoriality have become greatly diminished and their physical defence mechanisms atrophied .... So it would be a totally perverse act, resulting from a misguided sense of compassion, to attempt to return such domesticated animals to ‘the wild’, even assuming such territory could be found. They simply could not survive. (Food Ethics Council 2001, p. 6)

- <sup>13</sup> We are grateful to one anonymous referee for suggesting this point.

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