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Adrift in the mainstream

Challenges facing the UK vegetarian movement

The UK
vegetarian
movement

79

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Abstract *Assesses how the mainstream availability and acceptability of vegetarian food has impacted on the organised vegetarian movement in the UK. Presents data collected during an ethnographic case study to show the dilemmas facing the leading UK vegetarian organisation during the mid-1990s. In order to understand these dilemmas distinguishes between vegetarian food and the ideology of vegetarianism, using existing evidence about variability in diets, motives and organisational politics. When reflecting on the implications of the case study suggests that mainstream acceptance is a double-edged sword that facilitates the adoption of the diet but threatens the moral foundations of the ideology.*

In the UK the vegetarian diet has permeated the social mainstream. The common sight of vegetarian “options” at restaurants, “sections” in supermarket freezers and “labels” on food packaging suggests that vegetarians are well catered for. This would appear to signal a success for The Vegetarian Society of the UK, an organisation that has for over 150 years advised vegetarians on their dietary regime and ideological perspective. However, the increasing availability and apparent social acceptance of the diet have in fact posed challenges to the UK’s foremost vegetarian organisation. Here, I recount some of these difficulties, as staff, volunteers and officials expressed them during an ethnographic study of the organisation (Smart, 1998). I use these accounts from within The Vegetarian Society (herein after, the Society) to reflect on the implications for the organised vegetarian movement of the diet becoming commercialised and normalised. I begin by reviewing the existing research in this field in order to draw a necessary distinction between vegetarian diets and the ideology of vegetarianism, and describe the spectrum of political action within which vegetarianism exists.

Vegetarian diets and the politics of vegetarianism

As Beardsworth and Keil (1993) argue, pluralist social attitudes and niche marketing have facilitated the incorporation of the diet into conventional food systems. As noted, this is reflected in the ubiquitous vegetarian niche market in



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retail food outlets. The dramatic increase in the number of UK vegetarians over the last half-century is also evidence of a shift toward acceptability. Vegetarians currently constitute approximately 5 per cent of the UK population. Research in the US suggests that there is a perception among vegetarians that vegetarianism is increasingly accepted as socially "mainstream" (Jabs *et al.*, 1998a). However, accounts of mainstream acceptance often conflate the accessibility of the vegetarian diet with the acceptability of the ideology of vegetarianism. Although the niche market for vegetarian food has made the diet an accessible consumer choice, the purported mainstream acceptance of the ideology is far from clear[1].

Emphasising the distinction between the diet and ideology will help to explain important variability in diets, motives and organisational politics. A vegetarian diet basically involves an abstention from using animals as a source of food, although there are a number of more exact definitions (see Table I).

Given this range of labels it is unsurprising that there are misunderstandings about what vegetarians do and do not eat (Richardson *et al.*, 1994). However, in essence such confusion stems from the mistaken idea that dietary categories are universal and that people's diets are static. In fact, Beardsworth and Keil (1992) describe how an ongoing and dynamic "vegetarian career" usually develops gradually; while some people may go on to give up all animal produce, others "lapse" back into eating meat (Beardsworth and Keil, 1991a). Furthermore, Jabs *et al.* (2000) explain that people sometimes negotiate their definitions of vegetarian food in social settings. In short, as an imposed or self description, "vegetarian" can mean different things to different people at different times.

In the UK many vegetarians justify their diet by reference to an ideology. The term vegetarianism, coined in the 1840s, refers to an ideology that argues that eating meat is wrong (Spencer, 1993; Twigg, 1983; Wynne-Tyson, 1975).

Lacto-ovo vegetarian	No meat (including fish, seafood and slaughterhouse by-products). May consume dairy produce and eggs
Lacto-vegetarian	No meat (including fish, seafood and slaughterhouse by-products) or eggs. May consume dairy produce
Ovo-vegetarian	No meat (including fish, seafood and slaughterhouse by-products) or dairy. May consume eggs
Demi-vegetarian or semi-vegetarian	Usually avoids meat, particularly red meat, but may consume fish and seafood
Vegan	No animal derived produce
The Society's "V" symbol	Lacto-ovo vegetarian with qualifications about animal testing, GM food and free-range eggs

Table I.
Definitions of
vegetarian dietary
practice

Vegetarianism was founded on a moral objection against using animals for food and reasoned justifications about the diet's benefits to health and efficiency in food production. However, there is evidence to suggest that some individuals appear to have only a partial attachment to the ideology, or justify their diet for altogether different reasons.

As with the diet itself, the justifications given for its adoption often changes over time (Beardsworth and Keil, 1991b). In UK surveys, the reasons most commonly expressed for adopting a vegetarian diet are animal welfare, health, environmental degradation, global food inequalities, taste and value for money (Draper *et al.*, 1990; Silverstone, 1993; Neale *et al.*, 1993; Richardson *et al.*, 1993; Richardson *et al.*, 1994). As indicated by the last item on this list, eating a vegetarian diet may result from poverty or lack of resources. In addition, the adoption of a vegetarian diet can sometimes be a matter of religious doctrine.

Most of these justifications tally with the ideology of vegetarianism described above. The moral imperative against killing for food is represented by arguments about animal rights or welfare, and arguably religious beliefs (although in the latter, the extent to which the diet is "chosen" for ideological reasons is debatable). The inefficiency of meat-based agriculture finds a contemporary expression in concerns about environmental degradation and global food inequalities. The purported benefit of the diet to health also continues to be a prominent motive. In fact, health has become a leading concern and is reported as a more common motivation for a vegetarian diet as people age (MacNair, 1998).

In contrast, taste and cost are not ideologically inspired reasons (although as the least prominent reasons for adopting the diet their importance should not be overstated). More significantly, recent US research frequently divides reasons based on "ethics" from those related to "health" (Rozin *et al.*, 1997; Jabs *et al.*, 1998b). Crucially, if a person adopts a vegetarian diet *exclusively* for its alleged health benefits, such a choice is divorced from the moral foundations of vegetarianism. In a darker turn, itself reflective of the diet's social acceptability, there is a debate about vegetarianism being proffered as an excuse for declining food by people suffering from eating disorders (Gilbody *et al.*, 1999; Martins *et al.*, 1999; Sullivan and Damani, 2000).

As these examples show, people who describe themselves as vegetarian do not necessarily have an attachment to the moral foundations of the ideology. The extent of a contemporary rift between the health and moral/ethical aspects of the ideology and its influences on the adoption of the diet is not clear from existing research. Despite spiritual or moral considerations being the central justifications for eating a vegetarian diet (Beardsworth and Keil, 1991b, 1992; MacNair, 1998), it is not possible to generalise that everyone who eats vegetarian food does so for moral or spiritual reasons. As such, it is open to question whether or not the characterisation of vegetarians as "heretics" in the history of "Western" society (Spencer, 1993) is still applicable today.

Such variability in practices and motives are also reflected in the vegetarian movement's long organisational history. It has been argued that vegetarians have heightened awareness of divergent social values, have "alternativist" orientations and often express beliefs about political reform (Fiddes, 1991; Hamilton, 1993; Dwyer, 1991; Twigg, 1983). However, it must be recognised that the ideology of vegetarianism exists within a spectrum of political visions for "ethical consumption" and cruelty-free food. Furthermore, a number of organisations promote these ideals and their aims are not necessarily completely complementary.

For the last century and a half, vegetarianism has been promoted by organisations that have a range of agendas for social reform that relate to food, health and morality. The organised vegetarian movement in nineteenth century Britain had religious influences that tallied meat avoidance with self-denial, a duty of care toward animals and a "natural" diet (Antrobus, 1997; Linzey, 1987; Spencer, 1993). Its secular counterpart, "ethical vegetarianism" was promoted by a variety of reform groups that championed either health or humanism as the answer to a perceived decline in social morality (Spencer, 1993). In the twentieth century, vegetarianism continued to link into other social movements that question modernity (Spencer, 1993), such as self-sufficiency, environmentalism, alternative medicine and sustainable agriculture. As such, vegetarianism is an ideology that is interconnected with a wider set of issues about social morality and what has become termed "ethical food choice" (Lindeman and Vaananen, 2000).

If considered in isolation, a distinguishing tenet of vegetarianism is its morally inspired attempt to promote "cruelty-free" food by eschewing meat. However, this core principle is not without challenge. There is a spectrum of ideas about what constitutes "cruelty-free" food that ranges from a demand for compassionate treatment of animals prior to slaughter, to eating only raw fruit. An important "schism" from the vegetarian position within this spectrum came from the vegan perspective. Vegetarianism stands accused of failing to take an ideal to its logical conclusion, because it sanctions the use of animal by-products such as dairy produce, eggs and leather. In 1944 this schism resulted in the formation of The Vegan Society, an organisation which rejects the use of all animal derived produce (Leneman, 1999).

The Vegetarian Society was the first organisation in the UK expressly for vegetarians (Twigg, 1982; Antrobus, 1997). Established in Salford, near Manchester in 1847, its magazine, *The Vegetarian Messenger*, first appeared in 1849 (The Vegetarian Society, n.d.a). A London "branch" of the organisation soon broke away and operated as a separate "national" organisation, but by 1958 a merger of their publications prepared the way for a re-union. In 1969 The London Vegetarian Society and The Vegetarian Society amalgamated as The Vegetarian Society of the United Kingdom Limited, with its headquarters in Altrincham, Cheshire (The Vegetarian Society, n.d.a). As both a limited

company and a registered charity the Society promotes the diet and ideology to the general public and serves the interests of its members. These aims are pursued through campaigning and education, collating information and research, running a cookery school, co-ordinating a network of local groups and licensing its widely mimicked "V symbol" to food manufacturers for use on their products. This icon is not only a crucial source of income but also stamp of approval for "suitable" vegetarian food and a tool to raise the awareness of the food industry and general public.

To recap on the existing research in this field, first it is well established that vegetarianism exists within a wider spectrum of overlapping but potentially conflicting organisational viewpoints. Second, there is evidence to suggest that the diet is not necessarily adopted in tandem with the complete ideology of vegetarianism, although further research is required on the extent of this separation and its development over time. Third, vegetarian diets appear to have become an available and acceptable food choice, at very least in terms of consumer oriented niche markets. However, there has been no assessment of how these issues have impacted on the organised vegetarian movement in the UK. These will be explored by examining evidence gathered from within the Society.

Methodology

The evidence in this paper is just a part of the data gathered in an ethnographic case study of the Society (Smart, 1998). An "ethnography" is a methodological orientation for gathering in-depth, usually qualitative, evidence in a given social setting. The Society encompassed individual members, local voluntary groups, full-time staff and an elected "Council". The data was largely gathered during three field visits to the Society's headquarters, each between 2-3 weeks in duration, over the course of six months during 1995. During the fieldwork, time was spent talking to and observing staff on a day-to-day basis. In addition to this participant observation, questionnaires were distributed to Council members, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with staff members and activists in local voluntary groups and documents were collected for analysis.

Empirical materials were collated and organised into thematic categories. These are reported in three sections: difficulties in matching the flexibility of individual choice; the changing role and identity of the organisation and the Society's approach to campaign materials. In the data that follows, direct quotations are individuals' opinions and observations, not statements of official policy.

The flexibility of individual choice

Flexible individual choice is part of the social dynamic that has facilitated the mainstream acceptance of a vegetarian diet. However, it was also at the root of certain organisational dilemmas about the definition of "suitable" food,

interactions with other groups, overlaps with other issues of ethical consumerism and the dynamic nature of “vegetarian careers”.

Changes in socio-technical context of food production (mass production and scientific developments) have inspired alterations in the organisation’s definition of what it regarded as “suitable” vegetarian food (i.e. ingredients that could be authorised for use in products licensed with a V symbol). The Society’s articles of association deem the consumption of dairy produce and eggs “suitable for vegetarians”. However, during the 1980s the Society changed its policy to state that only “free range” eggs were acceptable, based on the assumption that it was a more humane production method[2]. More recently, the organisation withdrew V symbol licenses on products that contained Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). After 1999, there were 187 products that the Society had regarded as “suitable for vegetarians” that were redefined as unsuitable. Such shifts in definition demonstrated how the Society has exercised flexibility in the definition of vegetarian food.

Relationships with other the organisation within the spectrum of “cruelty-free” food also raised dilemmas. Joint ventures with vegan groups reportedly required appeasement over innocuous, but apposite, demands about the kinds of food that would be served. Similar difficulties existed at the other extent of the spectrum:

A classic example would have to be ourselves and the RSPCA [Royal Society for the Protection and Care of Animals], who are involved with the Freedom Foods scheme... selling meat. That puts us almost in direct conflict with them [...] (Campaigns Director).

While both the Society and the RSPCA shared “animal welfare” goals, the latter encourages consumers to consider options for “cruelty-free” food without eschewing meat. Furthermore, an ex-staff member and a past Council member for the Society had each launched their own “rival” campaigning organisations. These “alternative” vegetarian organisations, that distinguished themselves in terms of policy or methods, directly challenged the Society’s authority to represent UK vegetarians.

The overlap between vegetarianism and other issues in the spectrum of ethical consumption presented further problems. One respondent discussed how vegetarianism inter-linked with wider consumer politics:

If you’re a concerned consumer then yes, you opt into products that haven’t been tested on animals, that are probably phosphate free, that are not cruel, you’ll eat vegetarian food and be careful there, you might then move into avoiding certain multi-nationals that exploit babies in the Third World, you might avoid multi-nationals that have arms trading companies in their portfolio (Commercial Director).

The list of issues that related to the concerns of vegetarian consumers included safe, natural or healthy foods, fair or ethical trade, vivisection or other animal advocacy and, environmentalism. While only a tenuous relationship existed between a vegetarian diet and each of these issues, the Society was faced with problems when setting its organisational boundaries because its members and

target audience had broader concerns. During the fieldwork, “day-to-day” debates included the licensing of the V symbol to food producers that served mass markets with both meat and vegetarian products and the fact that the availability of many fruit and vegetables is facilitated by the global capitalist economy and agricultural mass production. The decision to exclude GMOs from its range of “suitable” food demonstrated that the organisation was able to make policies on tangential issues. Such a stand, however, further highlighted the Society’s inconsistent organisational boundaries.

Responding to the flexibility of individual choice raised one further dilemma: how to reconcile the fixed aspiration for “cruelty-free” food and the dynamic vegetarian careers of those who choose to aspire to it. Individual respondents voiced a supportive approach to dealing with the changes in knowledge and commitment, often favouring a pragmatic approach to “getting people on the ladder” (Chair of Council). In contrast, the organisation maintained strict boundaries. The organisation did not acknowledge a vegan diet to be a necessary or logical step toward “cruelty-free” food; to do so would have undermined the Society’s own stance toward eggs and dairy produce. At the other end of the spectrum, gaining full membership to the Society was predicated on adherence to its definition of “suitable” food (including free-range eggs and excluding GMOs). Although “demi-vegetarians” may be taking steps toward a vegetarian diet, they were only able to join the organisation as associate members.

It is known that vegetarians can have flexible motives and practices (Beardsworth and Keil, 1992; Jabs *et al.*, 2000), and may express beliefs about political reform across a spectrum of social issues (Dwyer, 1991; Twigg, 1983; Spencer, 1993). Further, organised vegetarianism in the UK has historically suffered from conflicts over its boundaries (Spencer, 1993; Leneman, 1999). Nevertheless, it was clear that there were multiple points of pressures on the organisation. These surrounded the definition of “suitable” food, the delineation of the boundaries with other groups and issues, and finally in the flexible nature of “vegetarian careers”. In these dilemmas, the organisation experienced problems in matching its definition of a vegetarian diet and ideology to those of individual vegetarians who can exercise “flexible choice” in their practices and concerns.

From crusaders to consumers

Other dilemmas evident at the Society related to questions about the organisation’s purpose, identity and relationship to its “audience”. As one respondent expressed it, there was now uncertainty about the identity and the role of the organisation:

[...] we really don’t know who we are [...] It was founded in the mid-nineteenth century, by a band of people who had very strong feelings about animal welfare and actually wanted to be apart from the mainstream of society. My feeling is that 150 years down the line, we are part

of the mainstream of society and what we should be doing is making waves outwards rather than drawing people inwards (Public Relations Officer).

From her perspective, the Society's previous "exclusivity" was now incongruent with the mainstream acceptance of a vegetarian diet.

Older respondents with long-standing involvement in the Society recall how in the 1950s and early 1960s the organisation functioned as a "club", providing like minds and mutual support for socially excluded vegetarians. By the mid-1990s, however, the organisation was faced with a different situation. While the numbers of vegetarians in the UK have increased dramatically, the Society's paying membership has not risen proportionately. As one staff member expressed it:

[...] most people [vegetarians] aren't a member of our club. They're just out there, doing their own thing without us (Campaigner, Publications).

Direct involvement by the members in the running of the Society had radically declined since the days when almost half of the 478 members attended the dinner that followed its first annual general meeting in 1848. This reduction in the member's involvement in the organisation was also mirrored in the decline of the Society's "local group network".

The re-alignment of the organisation to be "outward-looking" and populist was justified by senior figures at the Society as being both necessary and beneficial. Some wished for greater social engagement simply because "we're not reaching enough people yet" (Chief Executive), while others argued that vegetarian food should be accessible throughout society to prevent vegetarians from suffering from future social exclusion. In such justifications, vegetarians were often conceived of as consumers:

It would be almost criminal to provoke a change in the consumer but then not facilitate that change for them. So you want them to become vegetarian, but you want to make that change [...] easier for them. And part of that is bringing the food industry with you (Campaigns Director).

Developing relationships with the food industry was, this respondent suggested, an opportunity to serve the needs of vegetarians as consumers.

There was, however, awareness within the organisation about the possibility of compromise when undertaking dealings with the food industry. There was some concern that the Society's "Food and Drink Guild" initiative, to license the V symbol to food outlets (as opposed to products), may cede control over monitoring ingredients to parties outside of the organisation. Critics of this scheme argued that this could compromise the Society's responsibility to ensure that a V symbol could always be trusted. Other dilemmas surrounded the income raised from some food manufacturers and retailers, either from V symbol licenses or through sponsorship for campaign materials. Senior staff recognised that there were "ethical difficulties in

working with some of these companies” (Commercial Director). As one respondent explained:

I think you lose a lot of face. You do have some sort of moral responsibility to your members and to your image (Campaigner, Fundraising).

Engaging with organisations that profit from selling meat, such as supermarkets or most food manufacturers, had the potential “sell out” the moral principles of some people within the organisation.

Vegetarians may have been history’s “heretics” (Spencer, 1993), but contemporary niche markets and socio-cultural pluralism have brought them into the consumerist mainstream (Beardsworth and Keil, 1993). This shift had implications for the Society. It appeared that the era of the vegetarian “club” had passed, with fewer converts joining the Society and declining membership involvement in the organisation. As a consequence, the organisation’s purpose and identity had become less clear. Should it serve the needs of all vegetarian consumers or respect the sensibilities of its active members? These constituencies were not mutually exclusive, but their needs and demands did not necessary coincide. The Society’s “outward looking” turn may have been necessary and beneficial, but the means by which this was achieved – increased engagement with the food industry – had the potential to “sell out” the moral basis of the diet.

Promoting the rational and acceptable food choice

Reaching an audience of potential vegetarian converts in the social mainstream entailed mobilising specific kinds of promotional strategies. The “health” aspect of vegetarianism was particularly prominent and the Society had begun to favour scientific justifications for adopting the diet over moral or emotive claims. While there was an implicit morality in campaign messages about animal suffering, the environment and the “developing world”, even here rational justifications were preferred to blunt moral dicta. Furthermore, the Society also sought to reinforce the “normality” of a vegetarian diet using positive lifestyle campaigns.

The Society often used scientific evidence to promote the ideology. Campaigns materials on animal suffering and inefficient food production cited statistics from authoritative sources such as the United Nations, the World Health Organisation, the RSPCA and UK government departments. “Campaign reports” deliberately mimicked academic style, with its connotations of independence and authority. “Proven” health benefits took centre stage for the generic National Vegetarian Week campaign. Leading with the headline, “letting the facts speak for themselves”, one campaign poster asserted:

Vegetarians have 30 per cent less risk of heart disease according to the Oxford Vegetarian Study, one of the most detailed surveys ever conducted into health and diet (poster for National Vegetarian Week, 1995).

Similar figures for cancer and premature mortality were also presented, with the aim of arguing for both personal health benefits and the social cost savings for the NHS. The health benefits of the diet were also the focus of a special report directed at health professionals and regular "Research Bulletins".

This emphasis on scientific authority stemmed from a perceived weakness in promotions based solely on appeals to emotion or morals. One respondent suggested that some of the organisation's older promotional materials had been overly reliant on "emotive appeals" (Campaigns Director). Another concluded that opponents could easily dismiss moral argument as being emotive belief, while rational arguments were more persuasive, especially when dealing with the mass media. The more "academic" style used by the Society at times was identified as being distinct from overt campaigning:

That's one of the good things about something like the Research Bulletin, because it is very dry, very academic, [...] it's one sided in the fact that it might leave things out, but what it includes is fair... it's not campaigning ... it's not like a campaigns leaflet or anything (Research Manager).

While still "promotional", scientific knowledge about the diet was viewed as adding substance and credibility to the Society's arguments.

The Society also used positive "lifestyle" campaigning to promote the ease and social acceptability of a vegetarian diet. Campaigning materials promoted the tastiness and freshness of vegetarian cooking and used vegetarian celebrities to promote recipes. The 1995 National Vegetarian Week posters, that were supposedly "letting the facts speak for themselves", used vibrantly coloured pictures of "daring" women, such as a "wing walker" and a "chainsaw juggler", selected to appeal to a target audience of young females. Promotional materials also used sex and humour. A cinema advert promoted "vitality" by using vegetables and sexual innuendo, while a Valentine's Day promotion suggested those lacking libido should visit the greengrocer rather than the sex therapist (The Vegetarian Society, 1999).

Respondents justified the use of lifestyle campaigns for two reasons: to reinforce acceptability and overcome negativity. Despite the diet being catered for in the mainstream, there was thought to be a continued need "to say it's alright to be a vegetarian" (Information Manager). By promoting the ease, safety and normality of vegetarian food the Society aimed to challenge the "hair shirt and lentils" stereotype of bland food and abstemious self-denial. Lifestyle campaigns were also regarded as a way to avoid what some staff perceived to be the "negative" slant of other campaign themes, by focusing on the "positive health benefits" and "sensual benefits of the food" (Public Relations Officer). It was argued that some people do not respond well to campaigning that purely focused on the destruction of life, environment degradation and global food inequality. Consequently, it was considered important to have more positive materials about food alternatives, "without going into a lot of gory details" (Chief Executive).

The use of science as a campaigning tool is well documented in animal advocacy (McAllister Groves, 1995) and the environmental movement (Yearley, 1996). The evidence here also demonstrated a preference for rational over emotional argument and scientific over moral justification. The prominent promotion of the health component of the vegetarian ideology was particularly amenable to such rationalisation. However, rational argument, authoritative sources and scientific findings were not the only way that the Society sought to reach its audience. Lifestyle campaigns were an attempt to “rebrand” the image of a diet that had been morally exclusive, marginal and negatively stereotyped. The Society was attempting to reach mainstream vegetarian consumers by stressing that the diet was healthy, normal, safe, interesting – even sexy.

Conclusion

Beardsworth and Keil (1993, p. 223) have suggested that a commercially generated, “less morally charged form of vegetarianism” could erode the role of organisations like the Society. In this paper I have documented how the mainstream availability of vegetarian food impacted on the Society during the mid-1990s. I have shown how the availability and acceptability of vegetarian food appears to have exacerbated the organisational dilemmas associated with existing variations in vegetarian diets, motives and ethical food politics.

In conclusion, the Society:

- struggled to match its definition of the diet and range of ideological concerns to those of individual vegetarians;
- was shifting its organisational purpose and identity, leaning away from ideological “purity” and toward supporting the widespread commercial availability of the diet; and
- designed promotional strategies to entice the widest audience by “normalising” the diet as a rational, rather than a moral, choice.

As such, the Society faced three associated dilemmas. First, how to represent the flexible diets and concerns of individual vegetarians while maintaining its organisational boundaries? Second, how to manage its relationship with the food industry without “selling out” its ideological foundations? Third, how to maintain the moral foundations of the ideology while promoting a vegetarian diet as healthy and normal? Since this “snapshot” of events in the mid-1990s the structure, policy and outlook of the organisation has remained similar, while the vegetarian food niche market has become further entrenched. The future role of the leading UK vegetarian organisation rests on how it resolves these deep-rooted, but increasingly pressing, dilemmas.

It is possible to reflect on the findings of this case study to inform a broader characterisation of the UK vegetarian movement. Mainstream acceptability and availability have proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand cultural pluralism and niche markets exacerbate peoples’ freedom to “select”

and alter their diet, thereby facilitating the spread of vegetarian diets. On the other hand adopting a diet as a "normal", perhaps purely health-inspired, consumer choice would seem to demand less commitment to a specific regimen or ideological framework. The evidence presented here suggests that pluralism, commercialisation and "normalisation" of the diet may indeed threaten the moral foundations of vegetarianism.

This characterisation, however, requires further empirical investigation, particularly up-to-date evidence on the numbers of people making "morality-free" vegetarian food choices, a longitudinal analysis of changing motives and practices and a contemporary study of the Society and other vegetarian organisations in the UK and elsewhere. Further work could also draw cross-national comparisons in the historical and contemporary development of other "ethical food" campaigns, such as the organic movement and "Fair Trade". This would help to determine if the dilemmas faced by the Society of the UK in the 1990s were isolated and context-bound, or part of a wider pattern in which mainstream acceptance and commercial availability threaten the moral foundations of ideologically inspired dietary practice.

Notes

1. The empirical evidence of "acceptability" is far from clear. With respect to growth of the numbers of vegetarians, it is difficult to verify the figures or establish accurate trends over time. It is known that only 100,000 vegetarian ration books were allocated during the Second World War (The Vegetarian Society, n.d.b). However, systematic surveys only began in 1984 and accurate figures are difficult to establish because of overlapping dietary definitions and inconsistent individual practice. Furthermore, despite apparent "social acceptability" many people face real difficulties when adopting a vegetarian diet, particularly within their family relationships (Jabs *et al.*, 1998a). However, to fully engage in the debate about acceptability would involve exploring the meaning of "mainstream acceptance" within cultural pluralism, and it thus considered beyond the scope of this paper.
2. This was a moot point: "free range", "barn" and "battery" egg production are all produced "intensively" and each method had benefits and drawbacks in terms of welfare. Further, the implementation of "free range" is rarely as humane as the term might imply and animal slaughter is implicit in any mass production as male chicks are exterminated en-masse as a waste product of the breeding process. This policy was not entirely consistent with the fact that dairy produce remained "suitable for vegetarians", despite similar arguments about animal welfare, i.e. that only female cows are required for the milk industry (males were by-products, sold for slaughter) and that the standards of animal welfare can be very low.

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