

## CONTRIBUTOR BIO

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ABBY AHLGRIM graduated from Cal Poly's Political Science program in December of 2018 with a focus on Critical Food Studies and a double minor in Environmental Studies and Gender, Race, Culture, Science and Technology Studies. During her years as an undergraduate, she was President of the Real Food Collaborative, a Cal Poly student community dedicated to advocating real, local, seasonal, ethically and sustainably sourced food for students in the Cal Poly community. Abby enjoys her dedication to a vegan diet and lifestyle and is a strong advocate for veganism as a social movement. Post-graduation, Abby is planning to be traveling in South America, visiting friends and exploring the beautiful world we live in.

*By Barry Peelen*

## **A Vegan Exploration of Social Movement Theory**

*Abby Ahlgrim*

### **Abstract**

This paper was written as a final project for POLS 419 Social Movements and Political Protests with Dr. Jean Williams in the Spring of 2018. This paper aims to explore veganism within the context of social movement theory, examine the ideological boundary found at the intersection of private action and movement participation, and look at the relationship between personal and collective identity and change. First, through defining Suzanne Stagenborg's Theories of Social Movements and Collective Action, this paper establishes veganism within the context of existent social movement theories such as collective behavior, resource mobilization, political process, synthetic approach, and new social movement theories. It then goes on to explore veganism within the frameworks of a lifestyle movement, the relationship between private action and movement participation, and the importance and implication of personal and social change. This paper then concludes with a synthesis of movement theories.

### **Introduction**

Although veganism is often conceptualized as simply a trending lifestyle movement, many people would argue that it may be a part of a much larger social movement focused on the value alignment of consumer choice within social, political, and environmental infrastructures. With aspects of both a seemingly individualistic cultural movement and more overt politically-oriented collective action focused movements, veganism is challenging to contextualize within existent theoretical frameworks. As the Vegan Society website explains, "veganism is a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of,

and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose.”<sup>1</sup> Although veganism is applicable and relevant to a variety of consumer and lifestyle choices, it is perhaps most commonly and consistently conceptualized within the context of food.

While many people approach veganism with the goal of eradicating animal exploitation, other agendas may be grounded within desires for improved personal health, or a sense of obligation to explore and mitigate the environmentally negative impacts of consumer choices. Although some vegans do so for personal reasons, many approach veganism as a tactic in divesting consumer dollars by economically voting for a future food culture that ethically aligns with personal and collective value structures. Some vegans extend their participation and advocacy within the vegan community to include more politically-oriented direct action through protesting and marching, while others may consider their dollar vote and individual consumer choice as a form of activism in itself.

But is veganism really a social movement? There are certainly aspects of the vegan movement that function within the frameworks of traditional social movement theory. However, there are also components of the movement that might be better understood as an individualistic lifestyle movement. Veganism is often critiqued as being elitist—founded and upheld by narratives of superiority and exploitative structures such that it often functions within constraints of time and access disguised by perceived understandings of “choice.” Thus, the movement can be understood within a larger ideological framework of social movement theory. In this paper, I will explore veganism within the context of social movement theory, examine the ideological boundary found at the intersection of private action and movement participation, and look at the relationship between personal and collective identity and change.

### **Social Movement Theories**

Social movements have functioned as cultural, political, and economic change agents for decades, and it is through the scholarly development of social movement theory that we have come to more closely understand, define, and analyze such movements. In her book, *Social Movements*, Staggenborg examines collective behavior, resource mobilization, political process, synthetic approach, and new social movement theories as a way

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1 The Vegan Society, “Definition of Veganism,” (June 3, 2018).

of understanding and defining the parameters and functioning of social movements. These analytical frameworks can then be applied to a variety of different historical and contemporary movements within society.

Staggenborg explains collective behavior theory such that social movements exist outside of institutional structures and arise out of a cultural or structural breakdown or strain of some kind.<sup>2</sup> Such breakdowns lead to mobilization through the unification of participants based on shared collective experiences and beliefs. Such a framework emphasizes that movement participation is seen as an element of social behavior arising out of a shared experience within the breakdown. If applied to the vegan movement we might understand veganism as resulting from numerous incidences, or changing realities, related to dramatic ethical and environmental disparities. Such structural or social breakdowns might be understood as the precarious state and trajectory of climate change on this planet, the looming ecological implications of continued animal agriculture practices, and the immensely exploitative ramifications of factory farming on the lives of both non-human animals and certain social groups of disproportionately affected humans.<sup>3</sup>

Collective behavior theory would explain that veganism has perhaps arisen as a response to such disasters and resulted in the unification of participants through collective identity and behavioral decisions. Although many vegans choose veganism as a healthy and desirable privileged lifestyle choice, there are many who have found solidarity in the vegan identity through the sobering realization that consumer choices can have detrimental effects on larger social and environmental systems and structures. Perhaps many vegans find their identity through the intersection of several factors. However, if understood within this collective behavior theoretical framework we can look to the unified identity and collective behavior of vegans as a response to the severe environmental, ethical, and personal implications of animal consumption.

Resource mobilization theory, developed in the 1970s, emphasizes elite support and the necessity of outside resources, organizations, and opportunities in achieving collective action. This theory looks to understand what social network structures allow for the success of social movements

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2 Suzanne Staggenborg, "Chapter 2: Theories of Social Movements and Collective Action, Social Movements," Ed. 2nd. New York Oxford University Press, (2015).

3 Carrie Packwood Freeman, "Framing Animal Rights in the "Go Veg" Campaigns of U.S. Animal Rights Organizations." *Society & Animal*, (2015).

and seeks to emphasize adaptive and normative behaviors as influential in unifying group actions. If applying this resource mobilization theory within the context of the vegan movement, we might look to explore the ways in which individual choices are made possible based on existing social structures of oppression and privilege that place limitations and/or liberations on certain social groups.<sup>4</sup> For example, not only are vegan products more abundant in higher class socio-geographic urban areas and limited in rural lower class regions or food deserts, but vegan product advertisements are targeted at affluent communities and continue to rely on customers from higher status social groups.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, there is an important racialized context to experiences within cultures of consumption and health foods such that affluent white communities leverage resources and influence towards advancing a vegan movement that has primarily functioned to cyclically benefit those within its own community. Although participants may be composed of different identities and backgrounds, resource mobilization theory enforces the idea that access, opportunity, and affluence are important if not imperative factors in the success of such a movement. Not only does this resources mobilization theory begin to explain how personal choice might be made possible, there are also other ways in which specific organizations and other relevant outside resources contribute to the opportunities made possible for participation in the veganism movement. These opportunities, of course, include access to vegan-inclusive products and infrastructures, but also include opportunities to mobilize participants in collective direct action work and activism used to enforce vegan agendas and demand cultural, political, and economic change.

Building on this idea of resource mobilization theory, Staggenborg introduces another similar approach known as political process theory. Political process theory highlights the interaction between social movement actors and the state by examining the role of political opportunities in the mobilization and outcomes of social movements.<sup>6</sup> Although this theory may

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4 C Devine, et. al., "Food choices in three ethnic groups: Interactions of ideals, identities, and roles," *Journal of Nutrition Education* (1999), 31(2):86-93.

5 A Alkon & J Agyeman, "Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability," MIT Press (2011).

6 Suzanne Staggenborg, "Chapter 2: Theories of Social Movements and Collective Action".

*Social Movements*, Ed. 2nd. New York Oxford University Press.

not be as clearly aligned with aspects of veganism specifically associated with the lifestyle, there are certainly education campaigns and political legislative avenues leveraged as tactics in pursuing vegan political agendas. Some examples of political process theory within veganism include the achievement of certain animal rights laws, legal parameters around environmental contamination and degradation mitigations, as well as certain consumer product regulations and package declaration requirements.

Another parallel theory detailed by Staggenborg is the synthetic approach theory, which views social movements as political entities aimed at creating social change.<sup>7</sup> This lens provides an interesting opportunity to look at the framing of the vegan movement as not only a way to participate in economical methods for a sustainable and ethical future food culture, but also as a way to individually and collectively participate in changing the cultural meaning of consumption. This theory resembles and reinforces this idea of veganism as a cultural movement; although vegan agendas and tactics are somewhat diverse, there is an understanding that participation functions as a powerful means of uniting people working towards changing and redefining social and cultural contexts to consumption.

One of the contemporary theories detailed within Staggenborg's work is the new social movement theory explained as emerging out of a "post-industrial" or 'advanced capitalist' society" of intersectional movements.<sup>8</sup> This theory claims that although movements may vary in structure, type of constitution, and ideology, they are all united by a concern for cultural and political issues and are reliant on structures of participation rather than centralized organizations.<sup>9</sup> This new social movement theory emphasizes a focus on a broad range of values related to the quality of life, appealing to and encouraging diverse participation while working to construct collective identities through the unification of shared experiences.

Although this theory is easily applied to many of the more politically focused participatory action movements of the past fifty years, there are also clear ways that it can be applied to veganism. Just as this theory claims, the vegan movement varies in structure, constitution, and ideology, but participants remain united by concerns with cultural and political issues relevant to the consumption and use of animal products. Additionally, the

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7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

veganism movement is dependent on new methods of participation, rather than the power of centralized organizations. Although there are a number of theories with which to understand veganism, the new social movement theory certainly reflects veganism as a social movement relevant to larger collection action and social change.

### **Private Action and Movement Participation**

Veganism as a social movement is multidimensional and involves a variety of participation tactics. However, most vegans are unified by similar and overlapping agendas. While some vegans participate solely through their individual actions, others may engage through more public and provocative methods. For instance, some vegans simply shift and redefine individual daily consumer habits, utilizing veganism as a personal divestment tactic from controversial and problematic consumer cultures. Others extend their personal participation to include small-scale education initiatives, joining or collaborating with vegan organizations to collaborate with both like-minded and differently positioned people. However, many vegans have more radical, politically-oriented agendas and choose to participate through direct action activism that includes the active participation in and organizing of protests, marches, and campaigns.<sup>10</sup> Such direct-action tactics might also extend to include governmental and legislative approaches towards changing consumer industry limitations and liberations. There are clear distinctions between private action and movement participation. While the former maybe conceptualized as an individual lifestyle change, there are ways in which private or personal action is imperative to social movement tactics, and to the value alignment of participants in general.

### **Personal and Social Change**

Social movements are all grounded within agendas focused on making cultural, political, and economic change. When looking at veganism, we can see that it often functions to advance personal change within a participant's individual life. While some people might assume that the change ends there, others might value veganism as a tangible method or even outcome of larger structural social changes. There is some literature specifically exploring the ways in which lifestyle movements can function as social networks leading to connections that make larger collective action possible. Todd

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<sup>10</sup> Op. cit., fn. 3.

Nicholas Fuist and his research team explore how “seemingly individualistic movements can generate cognitive maps and associational ties necessary for wider mobilization.”<sup>11</sup> It is clear that developing and strengthening social networks can be powerful in the mobilization of people and shifting movements from individual to collective action. Other researchers have come to similar understandings about the relationship between lifestyle and social movements. Researchers Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones discuss three defining aspects of lifestyle movements: they advance important “identity work” in which individuals strive to achieve lifestyles of personal integrity and authenticity, they function through diffuse structures rather than being more centrally organized, and they emphasize that individual choices operate as tactics in larger social change.<sup>12</sup> Veganism can certainly be understood as a lifestyle movement, but that does not necessarily exclude it from being considered a social movement.

Veganism is often focused on the individual or personal relationship to consumption, though the overarching agenda is often centered on larger cultural changes necessary to minimize impact. Vegan communities often grapple with the idea of impact, exploring and mitigating unnecessary harmful and exploitative consumer outcomes. While we can see that it takes collective mobilization to impose tangible structural changes, there is a necessary narrative within the vegan community that focuses on the importance of independent actions. Though many vegan narratives focus on the social and environmental impact of singular consumer decisions, and the assumed power in divesting our privileged choices, there are also cultural narratives around the impact of sharing, infiltrating, and teaching non-vegans in an effort to shift greater collective mindsets. Success within the vegan movement certainly manifests through personal successes in divesting personal choices from normative consumption habits, however, successes are also often measured by the ability to infiltrate ideological frameworks of others and to convince others to make such changes.

Although many of those narratives may be grounded within empirical evidence, a closer examination exposes the use of those narratives as both strategic framing tactics within the movement and reinforcements

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11 Todd Nicholas Fuist, et al., “Lifestyle Movements as Social Networks: The Connections between Everyday Politics and Larger Collective Action in an Indian Feminist Movement,” Sage Journals, *Sociological Perspectives* (2018).

12 Ross Haenfler, et al., “Lifestyle Movements: Exploring the Intersection of Lifestyle and Social Movements,” *Social Movement Studies*. (2015).

of superiority. Some of these narratives include metrics around personal consumption habits, and the profound environmental or ethical impact of opting out of certain food choices. Examples of these narratives include information about water saved by not eating one hamburger, or that by shifting to a vegan diet people can save the rainforest. Though these narratives are perhaps grounded in “scientific research”, we can see the ways in which these kinds of views may lead to self-righteous attitudes within vegan communities. While vegan agendas may seem inclusive, there are certain structures of exclusion beyond just limitations to time and resources needed to acquire and prepare foods outside of normative food consumption habits. The social and cultural boundaries created within narratives of superiority also serve to “other” and exclude people who are unable to participate or conceptualize vegan agendas for a number of reasons. Agency over food choice is an immense privilege, unavailable to most people in the world, and placing obvious limitation on access to the vegan movement, but there are still ways in which narratives serve to frame movement agendas, and advance change.

## **Conclusion**

While many people choose to eat a vegan diet for purposes of personal health and wellbeing, there are many who participate in veganism as a methodology for aligning their lifestyle with their value structures. Many vegans use veganism as at least part of their activism, as they feel an ethical obligation to divest from industries dependent on animal cruelty or to mitigate their reliance on environmentally degrading and exploitative industries.

Although veganism is often understood as a seemingly privileged individualistic lifestyle movement rather than functioning as a more politically-oriented collective action movement, there are ways in which the movement perhaps operates within both frameworks. Veganism is simultaneously a social movement and a lifestyle movement. There are aspects of individual identity, private action, and personal change characterized within the vegan lifestyle movement, that inform and influence collective identities, movement participation, and larger social change. Veganism can also be defined as a cultural movement, as participants seek to change the culture of consumption, through both individual and personal lifestyle choices, and more traditional direct-action social movement tactics. Veganism is a contemporary movement with variant but defined agendas

and multiple tactics. It is a movement of social, cultural and political change localized within both theories of lifestyle and social movement frameworks, and holding intersections of private individual action, collective participation, and social change.