

THEME 01

Deconstructing the Vegan Diet

VEGANISM

FUTURE OF FOOD

CHANGING CONSUMER

The recent rise of people adopting a vegan lifestyle – abstaining from consuming animal products – seems to have all the characteristics of a transient hype. But looking at the sources of veganism and its appeal, we see that it is actually underpinned by structural changes in our consumer culture. As such, we should understand veganism and vegan lifestyles as an exponent of some of the structural transformations of our time.

Our observations

- Animal rights advocate Donald Watson [coined](#) the term “vegan” and “vegan diet” in 1944, after he learned about the “unquestionable cruelty associated with the production of dairy produce”. His handful of followers has increased to 3.5 million in the [U.K.](#) alone, almost 7% of its population, which grew 700% in the past two years alone. Likewise, the number of vegans rose by 600% in the [U.S.](#) in the past three years, while a record 8.7% of the population of [Australia](#) now consider themselves vegan.
- Mostly [young](#), [highly educated](#), and [liberal voters](#) in [urban areas](#) in developed countries become vegans. This adoption of a vegan lifestyle is often ironically considered a strategic part of their identity management (i.e. vegan dishes often contain exotic and unique ingredients hence tend to be highly “Instagrammable”, and it differentiates one from the other meat-consuming social strata). However, the country with (arguably) the most vegans is India, with around 30% of its 1.3 billion population having at least a strict [vegetarian diet](#) (and the percentage is rising) and having the world’s lowest [meat consumption](#) per person. Indian veganism has deep historical roots, with plant-based diets tracing back to the early Indus Valley Civilization (3300-1300 BC). The [Brokpa tribe](#) of Ladakh, in northwestern India, has lived on a plant-based diet for more than 5,000 years.
- Emerging markets experience rapid economic growth (almost [double](#) the growth for developed economies) and are [urbanizing](#) rapidly. Shifting from a rural to an urban lifestyle and from low- to middle-income class increases demand for diets high in sugar, fat and animal-based food, a process known as the “[nutrition transition](#)”. As a result, [global meat demand](#) has been growing much faster in recent years, especially in countries with emerging urban middle class consumers, such as [China](#), [Kenya](#) or [Kazakhstan](#).
- Diets high in meat have almost three times as much [carbon dioxide emissions](#) per day compared to vegan diets. Should the whole world become vegan by 2050, [greenhouse emissions](#) would then be 70% lower than if people maintain their current food consumption. Beef is especially bad for the environment and resource-intensive, with a “[protein opportunity cost](#)” of 96% compared to plant-based proteins. As 80% of the world’s farmland is dedicated to rearing animals, worldwide conversion to veganism would [shrink](#) the amount of farmland needed by 3.1 billion hectares: the size of Africa.
- Because meat is energy rich, eating more meat than necessary given one’s protein needs means taking in many calories that will be stored as fat. Hence eating plant-based diets leads to lower levels of [obesity](#), lower [mortality rates](#), and reduced risk of a host of [chronic diseases](#).

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Connecting the dots

Developed countries experience a rising number of the number of people adhering to a “vegan diet”, which consists of plant-based foods and drinks with no animal products being used in the production process (e.g. no meat, eggs, dairy, [bones](#), [blood](#)). However, far from being a fickle fashion trend, veganism is underpinned by structural transformations in consumer values and social consciousness. Indeed, understanding veganism can help us understand our *Zeitgeist*.

Middle class consumers in developed countries generally have three concerns that prompt them to go vegan: their personal health, the environment and animal welfare. First, a vegan lifestyle brings many health benefits, yielding reduced healthcare costs and increased productivity. However, vegan diets also tap into a renewed interest in the physical aspects of our existence: as we are spending an increased amount of time online and in virtual biotopes – such as videogames, Netflix series, and the screens of our smartphone or computer – we are having an increasingly mediated and intellectual relation to the things and world around us. In order to stay “in touch” and gain a “real connection” with reality, bodily and physical experiences are becoming more popular, such as [digital detoxes](#), going into the physical world (e.g. [hiking](#), going into nature), engaging in [physical exercise](#), as well as healthy eating and drinking. Furthermore, we have written before that our [post-material consumption](#) societies increasingly long for new narratives in which the act of consumption can be embedded and gains additional meaning. Vegan food lends itself perfectly to this kind of “ritualization” or “sacralization” of its consumption, given its emphasis on health benefits, both mental and physical. This is illustrated by the rise of [vegan food festivals](#) or [vegan food collectives](#).

In relation to this, a vegan lifestyle is often inspired by the desire to care for the environment: vegan lifestyles have a significantly lower ecological footprint, and hence are a form of “green consumption”. Given the growth of the population and global wealth, many argue that changing diets is necessary to save the planet. However, veganism as a practice is also deeply rooted in more spiritual and religious practices. In India, the country with the most vegans, veganism dates back more than 5,000 years, being part of Indian lifestyles and civilizations. In ancient India, philosopher Thiruvalluvar already stressed that the “common” vegetarianism of his time wasn’t enough, but that a [moral](#)

[form of vegetarianism](#) should arise that was in correspondence with *ahimsa*: a key concept in Indian religions (i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism) denoting “non-violence” and “respect for all living creatures”. Furthermore, veganism in India is related to more ascetic practices, such as yoga and Ayurveda (ancient India’s medicine system), as plant-based diets (*sattvic*, from the “*sattva*” mode of existence, denoting balance, peace, positivity) are supposed to increase the energies that charge and activate the body (*rajasic*, from *raja*, denoting activity, passion). By contrast, “stimulative” foods (*rajastic*, from *raja*, denoting destruction, chaos), such as alcohol, meat and coffee, disturb bodily balance and harmony between mind and soul. Likewise, increased interest in veganism is therefore part of the general interest in (not only Indian) spiritual practices such as yoga, meditation, alternative medicine, and even the [growing awareness of our mental health](#). Given these mental and even spiritual connotations, veganism may even become part of a new secular religion based on [sustainability](#). Lastly, a vegan lifestyle contributes to animal welfare. There are many more domesticated animals than humans: data from the [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations](#) shows that there were almost 30 billion animals kept for agricultural purposes in 2016, and that number has risen rapidly. With recent scandals in the [meat industry](#), [slaughter houses](#) and other domains of animal-based food production (e.g. massive [milk stalls](#) or [egg farms](#)), and information barriers slashed down by digital technology, ignorance of the “dark” side of our food productions ceases to be an excuse not to take moral responsibility for. Furthermore, [neurological research](#) has shown that animals experience fear, pain, and suffering (opposing *Descartes’* idea that animals are machines, as they lack a soul). In this spirit, philosopher Peter Singer has long argued for a vegan lifestyle because the food we consume is often produced under morally objectionable circumstances. The vegan lifestyle also integrates his idea of “speciesism”, in which human beings are privileged over other life forms and therefore lack a harmonious and righteous relationship with them. With digital technology bringing our [living world to life](#) and the rise of “[ecological worldviews](#)” that see man as part of nature instead of humans dominating it (as we have written before) the vegan care for animal welfare fits these emerging post-humanist ethics.

Implications

- There is rising consciousness that food cannot be reduced to its physical or purely biological properties, in line with a broader movement of “[anti-reductionist](#)” thinking. In such a world, there will be a [return of hermeneutics](#) that tries to make sense of this world and prescribe how to live a good life, telling us, for example where and how to eat, possibly as “vegan gurus” or consultants.
- The increased awareness on animal welfare and ecological consciousness will, over time, translate into political preferences as well. The Dutch Partij voor de Dieren (Party for the Animals) can be considered a forerunner in this movement, possibly making a move in the upcoming European elections in March 2019.
- Vegan food can well be combined with similar physical and bodily activities, such as vegan holidays, vegan food fights, or vegan erotica.