Abstention to Consumption: The Development of American Vegetarianism, 1817-1917

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Abstract
The history of vegetarianism in the United States has long been shrouded in myth, assumption and obfuscation. Vegetarianism as a vital ideological and political movement has often been presented—even by its proponents—as a product of twentieth century modernism, reflecting a rise in ethical consumer awareness. The historical record of the nineteenth century, however, tells a very different story. The notion that dietary choices could be connected with larger social and political goals was formulated during, and changed dramatically in the nineteenth century. This dissertation charts the rise and evolution of vegetarianism in the United States from 1817 until 1917.

This project will present the first complete analysis of vegetarian activities in the United States during this time period. Through analysis of health and reform journals, personal papers, vegetarian society administrative papers, newspaper accounts and popular culture references, it is possible to chart distinct changes in the ways that vegetarians reacted to rapid socio-political change. Dividing the vegetarian movement in the United States into two distinct time periods gives insight into the changing nature of reform, gender roles, health care, consumerism and individualism. During this time period vegetarianism shifted from a method aimed at conquering social ills and injustice, to a path for personal strength and success in a newly individualistic, consumption-driven economy.

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Many proponents of vegetarianism say that eating meat harms health, wastes resources, causes deforestation, and creates pollution. They often argue that killing animals for food is cruel and unethical since non-animal food sources are plentiful. Many opponents of a vegetarian diet say that meat consumption is healthful and humane, and that producing vegetables causes many of the same environmental problems as producing meat. They also argue that humans have been eating and enjoying meat for 2.3 million years. [65]. In the 1970s US public interest in vegetarianism grew, fueled by books such as Frances Moore Lappe's Diet for a Small Planet and Peter Singer's Animal Liberation. In 1974, the North American Vegetarian Society was founded as was the magazine Vegetarian Times. Vegetarianism. For millennia, abstaining from animal flesh has been an aspect of a variety of religions. However, the word "vegetarianism"—to describe a self-conscious diet of grains, vegetables, fruits, nuts, and seeds, with or without eggs and dairy products—is only 150 years old. American exposure to vegetarianism has often occurred through vegetarian restaurants run by religiously associated groups such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Yogi Bhajau’s Healthy-Happy-Holy (3HO) organization, Buddhist societies, Seventh-day Adventists, and other Christians (one restaurant was simply called Genesis 1:29), as well as "Buddha's Delight," a staple in Chinese restaurants. The word vegetarian is probably an English or American invention of the late 1830s [7]. It was most likely coined by combining ‘vegetable’ with the suffix ‘arian’. Some 19th century vegetarians claimed it had been derived from the Latin word ‘vegetus’ (meaning vigorous or lively) [8]. However, this was typically a contrived response to critics who noted their consumption of animals’ secretions, and not merely vegetables. However, many such individuals have simultaneously defended the consumption of hens’ eggs and ruminants’ milk. An exception was Bronson Alcott and the Fruitlands community, where they reluctantly began making a cow and ox work in their fields after having difficulty relying solely on human labor [49]. Some vegetarians took an interest in such developments.