

Can Choice Feminism Advance Vegan Politics?

C. Lou Hamilton, *Veganism Sex and Politics: Tales of Danger and Pleasure*.

HammerOn Press, 2019. 288 pp.

Hamilton's (2019) *Veganism, Sex and Politics* offers an approachable feminist spin on modern veganism in the West while tackling the difficult conundrums and compromises sometimes associated with vegan-living in a non-vegan world. The book is aimed at non-vegans who may be skeptical of the white bourgeoisie veganism which is stereotypically depicted in the media, but it also speaks to seasoned vegans who may lack familiarity with critical feminist perspectives as they relate to relationships with food, consumption, and Nonhuman Animals. To that end, environmental debates, the limits of organic and "humane" production, white-centrism in vegan activism, and the reluctant reliance on speciesism in disabled and queer communities are analyzed in Hamilton's blend of autobiographical musings and theoretical explorations.

At times, however, this critique pays only lip service to leading theory without substantially engaging it. For instance, while Hamilton rehashes the discourse on "dreaded comparisons," repeating the arguments already well-articulated by Socha (2013), Harper (2010), and Hall (2010) with regard to resisting the highly problematic tradition in the vegan movement of comparing the institutionalized violence against animals to that which is also imposed on Africans under slavery and Jews under Nazi persecution, Hamilton stops short of extending this critique to the systematic exploitation of women. Hamilton only briefly refers to the work of Adams (2000) with an unsubstantiated suggestion that her "anti-pornography feminism" obscures women's agency and satisfaction with sex work.

Thus "choice feminism" (the reduction of collective struggle into a buffet of consumer and lifestyle options from which each individual may pick and choose) is introduced to reframe widespread violence against women as either a) blown out of proportion by Adams and her ilk or b) inaccurate given that women "choose" to work in prostitution and pornography. Adams's theory, furthermore, is described as a disrespectful and clumsy attempt at intersectionality given that women supposedly participate freely in and benefit from Western sexual politics unlike Nonhuman Animals in their respective spaces

of oppression. Such a provocative claim would require greater engagement with Adams's work as well as some scientific evidence, as, firstly, the *majority* of women (and girls) enter sex work out of economic duress or active pimping and, secondly, sex slavery remains a leading form of bondage globally (Jeffreys, 2009). Sex work and sex slavery, for that matter, are the most dangerous fields of "employment" with exceedingly high levels of threat, injury, and death.

Celebrating the agency of a small percentage of persons who enter and remain in the sex industry of their own free will obscures culturally normative misogyny (as well as heterosexism and cis-sexism, as LGBT minorities are disproportionately represented in this industry). With regard to vegan politics, choice feminism's campaign to legalize and normalize prostitution makes for an awkward analogy for other animals. How Hamilton can suggest that institutionalised speciesism should not (or could not) be regulated and reformed to liberate nonhumans while also failing to extend that same logic to women and girls is puzzling and unconvincing. Both sexism and speciesism rely on the pleasurable consumption of feminized and oppressed bodies by the patriarchal dominant class.

Hamilton's pro-prostitution position likely stems from their commitment to queer politics which, while arguably problematic when used to protect and legitimize male entitlement to feminized bodies, do hold relevance in challenging hetero-patriarchal society's stigmatization of feminine and queer sexuality and its desire to control bodies deemed "other." To that end, Hamilton provides an interesting analysis of "fur" and "leather" in the LGBT community. Both products are shaped by class, gender, and colonial relations, making their disruption difficult, but Hamilton suggests a re-envisioning through vegan alternatives which pay homage to nonhuman identities and difference.

Although Hamilton seeks life-affirming species-inclusive alternatives in these cases, their presentation of disability politics is decidedly human-first. In the feminist tradition of challenging androcentric scientific authority, Hamilton encourages those living with disability and illness to become their own experts and engage in speciesism at their own level of comfort. True, science as an institutional source of considerable oppression for marginalized groups and agency over one's own body and well-being is critical, but Hamilton's prescription risks fanning scientific distrust to the point of recklessness (particularly in light of the success of the anti-vaccination movement). Further, by encouraging individuals to become their own medical expert and self-experiment with the consumption of other animals, veganism seems to dissipate into a post-modern soup of individual subjectivity and increasing uselessness as a form of political resistance. Given the normative attitudes of cynicism and apathy in the Western vegan movement toward science, Hamilton's position, while

geared toward affirming the individual experience with disability, may be a precarious one.

Hamilton evidently adopts the myth promulgated by professionalized Nonhuman Animal rights organizations that vegans somehow ascribe to an unrealistic level of purity. This strawperson argument, however, lacks validity. In the age of competitive nonprofitization in the social movement arena, the pure vegan stereotype is engaged to legitimize the compromised approaches to animal advocacy (namely, reforming speciesist industries or promoting reductarianism). These soft tactics are effective for fundraising but run counter to veganism's political aims of total liberation, thus necessitating some semantical negotiations and vegan stigmatization (Wrenn, 2019a). Few, if any, vegans expect faultlessness, and, indeed, The Vegan Society has always, from its founding, emphasized practicality over perfection (Wrenn, 2019b). In the case of disability and illness, no one would reasonably expect patients to become martyrs and forgo treatments developed through vivisection or medications containing trace amounts of animal products.

As such, Hamilton's repeated beleaguering of veganism has the cumulative effect of decentering Nonhuman Animals, particularly in their effort to validate each person's individual desire, comfort, choice, and ultimately human privilege of determining what counts as "practical." To this point, it would be useful if Hamilton had extended their analysis beyond feminist theory and applied social movement theory to introduce much-needed evidence-based social science on movement identity politics and effective mobilization. At the very least, more clearly acknowledging how their own take on veganism is far from the widely-embraced or authoritative position would have brought greater credibility and consistency to *Veganism, Sex and Politics*. Vegan feminism is more of a matter of personal opinion, individual spin, and choice. The celebration of difference, agency, and pleasure-seeking must be matched with a commitment to solidarity, collective struggle, and some degree of sacrifice. Unfortunately, Hamilton's anthropocentric narrative hesitates on how to effectively negotiate human diversity politics with the interests of other animals.

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