

COMMENTARY

Claiming veganism and vegan geographies

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Abstract

A decade ago, veganism was a fringe radical movement. It was also largely absent from the geographical discipline, despite a rich history of vegan scholarship being present in disciplines such as Sociology and Psychology. However, veganism has recently seen a surge in popularity, with more people than ever before becoming vegan for a mixture of animal welfare, environmental, and health-based reasons. With this mainstreaming, veganism has become contentious and fiercely defended. As veganism has become a growing social and political force, geographers have started to take notice of this previously fringe movement, which is gaining economic, ecological, and cultural power as investment flows into ‘plant-based’ products and new markets are emerging. In this commentary, we look at how veganism has recently been taken up in Geography via several distinct trends that all stake a claim in defining an emerging geographical sub-discipline, vegan geographies. We note the importance of scholarly pluralism and attention to establishing geographical sub-disciplines more broadly.

KEYWORDS

disciplinary knowledge, research agendas, veganism

1 | INTRODUCTION

Veganism seems to be everywhere.¹ This surge in interest in changing diets and lifestyles can be tracked through the investment and launching of non-animal-based products, with the annual growth in these products in the food sector being between 21% and 58% between 2015 and 2018.² The ‘plant-based’ market is big business, but it is not solely fuelled by vegans, with increasing numbers of people taking up flexible diets on environmental and health-based grounds.

Amid this surge, it is not surprising that geographers have become interested in veganism as a growing social, political, and economic force. Veganism has recently been brought into conversations on agriculture (Pendergrast, 2016), ecology (Best, 2014), economy (Sexton et al., 2022), and climate discourse (Sanford & Lorimer, 2022) as readily as it is into cultural and social geographies (McGregor et al., 2023). Previously, veganism had been taken up in anarchist geographies and social movement studies, with a rich history in Sociology (Cherry, 2021; Taylor & Sutton, 2018; Wrenn, 2015). But, as veganism mainstreams, ‘vegan geographies’ are becoming a site for innovation and agenda-setting that does not engage veganism’s rich and complex histories (see Oliver, 2021a), and the wealth of scholarship that already exists. As Probyn-Rapsey et al. (2019) have argued, gender has already shaped animal studies and, as Wright (2020) has argued, vegan studies owe much to ecofeminism, shaped by the legacy of rich feminist lineages – lineages that are at risk of being erased (Oliver, 2021a).

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This commentary looks at how the rise of vegan geographies and the making of a new 'field' can involve radical scholarship becoming decentred, mirroring social, cultural, and political mainstreaming of a singular vision of veganism, when in fact it encompasses a vast range of ideologies, practices, and motivations. This paper draws on work on the politics of citation (Mott & Cockayne, 2017) and the power dynamics of knowledge to critically comment on what the desire to claim a new sub-discipline reveals about academic Geography's ongoing impulses of 'firsting' (Liboiron, 2021a).

2 | CLAIMING VEGANISM'S CONTEMPORARY SURGE

'Veganism' has existed as an organised movement and lifestyle since the 1940s, when Donald Watson and Dorothy Morgan coined the term in Leicester, before founding The Vegan Society the same year (Stewart & Cole, 2020). Although now familiar to many, veganism's definition can be slippery and contentious (Oliver, 2021b, p. 3). Dutkiewicz and Dickstein (2021) advocate a practice-based definition, while elsewhere White (2018) argues that the radical intention of veganism should be emphasised. Giraud (2021) has pointed out that veganism has seen shifting definitions incorporating the growing accessibility of veganism, but that The Vegan Society's definition hosts tensions, but also casts veganism as more than a diet.³ Veganism therefore does not hold a singular definition or practice, but rather might be better thought of as multiple 'veganisms' (Giraud, 2021).

Since its inception as an organised movement, veganism has been concerned with the spiritual and ecological benefits of abstaining from animal consumption. Offering further evidence of veganism's history as 'more than a diet' to its British pioneers, the founders of The Vegan Society in the mid-twentieth century were interested in soil depletion, national self-sufficiency, and human health, as well as the morality and ethics of eating and using animals. A later turn toward vegan environmentalism occurred simultaneously with the rise of environmental movements in the 1970s. An emphasis on human health has long been in the background of veganism but has become integral in the recent mainstreaming of 'plant-based eating' (Greenebaum, 2012). This has led to increasing corporate interest, theorised by Sexton et al. (2022) as 'Big Veganism'.

While organised veganism has a British history, the abstention from animal products has existed across the world in various forms prior to this. Moral abstinence from eating and using animals has been part of religious and spiritual practices. One of the most pertinent examples of this is found in Jainism, with scripture dating ethical abstinence from meat and animal products to approximately 450 CE (Miller & Dickstein, 2021). Similarly, Hinduism and Buddhism have long established foodways based on vegetarianism (Kumar, 2021). Harper (2009) draws on these religious practices to argue that an intersectional vegan ethic can be found in a shared key virtue of *ahimsa* (or non-harm) in the Dhārmic religions. Historically, human diets responded in part to food source availability (Ungar & Teaford, 2002). The legacy of these food cultures can be found in the continued convenience of meat consumption today (Hansen & Wethal, 2023), but evidence of abstention from animal foods can also be found in cultural histories (e.g., Avieli & Markowitz, 2018).

While motivations for veganism today are often focused on health or the planet, some forms of ethical veganism today are entangled with other social and political causes, as epitomised in the work of vegan-feminists such as Carol J Adams (1990) and Black vegans such as Aph and Syl Ko (2017) and Breeze Harper (2009). Recently, intersectional veganism has been furthered by Sunaura Taylor (2017) to attend to the mutual constitution of animal and disability liberation, and by queer activist and scholar Zane McNeill (2020) to reveal speciesism as entangled with cisheteropatriarchal structures. Contemporary veganism is not, however, unique in its concern with human and non-human causes as entangled. Rather, it follows a long history of activists marrying together the social and the ecological (see, for example, Adams & Gruen's, 2014 *Ecofeminism* anthology).

Despite rich histories of veganism, it is only very recently that veganism has moved from fringe to mainstream. The landscape of veganism has changed quickly, with growing cultural interest and huge market potential. While the relative *visibility* of veganism might seem to be accompanied by a surge in vegans, the numbers remain small: in Britain, around 1.16% of the population self-identify as vegan.⁴ Nonetheless, veganism has become big business (Sexton et al., 2022) and the growing market for plant-based products has capitalised on this surge. The corporatisation of veganism, as well as the professionalisation of activism (Wrenn, 2019), has seen some long-standing activists argue that there is a battle in progress for the 'heart' of veganism.⁵ Vegan commercialisation coincides with a growing urgency for the environment, all of which has coalesced in a complicated situation for veganism(s).

Alongside the increased visibility of veganism in society, academic interest in veganism has also grown, entering geographical discourses where it has previously been largely absent (for geographers engaging with veganism, see Hodge et al., 2022). In Geography, conference sessions have brought together scholars working on vegan geographies,

as discussed momentarily, while the first books and edited collections have recently been published (Hodge et al., 2022; Oliver, 2021a). Predating this slightly, journal articles and book chapters have slowly been emerging on vegan geographies (for example, Oliver, 2021b; Sexton et al., 2022; White, 2021). In the next section of this paper, we consider how the establishment of vegan geographies echoes the tensions seen in the social mainstreaming of veganism.

3 | VEGAN GEOGRAPHIES: WHERE NOW?

In 2017, in Boston, USA, at the annual conference of the American Association of Geographers, a new grouping of geographers came together for the first time. These scholars met as a response to the relative absence of veganism in Geography, despite its growth in Sociology, History, Philosophy, and Critical Animal Studies. The organisers intended the session to attend to 'the centrality and contested nature of place in the actions and discourse of animal rights activists' and veganism as 'an inherently spatial praxis' (White et al., 2017, p. 1). Five years later, an edited collection was published (Hodge et al., 2022), accompanied by another meeting of vegan geographers, this time at the Royal Geographical Society's Annual Conference (White et al., 2022). The meeting reflected on vegan geographies, as well as social science and public scholarship on veganism more broadly (Giraud, 2021; Hodge et al., 2022) to ask two things: why vegan geographies now, and what are the key challenges and opportunities of vegan geographies? This served as a space to take stock and reflect on whether vegan geographers need to 'reassert the radical promise of veganism and critical vegan geographies' (White et al., 2022, n.p.).

In this vision, vegan scholarship is inescapably linked to activism and advocacy beyond the academy. However, Springer (2022) argues that this has led to Geography's dismissal of veganism as (the wrong kind of) scholar-activism by highlighting the oppression of animals that challenges even the most critical of geographies. For example, in Kneafsey et al.'s (2021) collection on the *Geographies of Food*, veganism is mentioned nine times across 300 pages, almost always as synonymous with vegetarianism. Despite veganism being one of the fastest-growing food movements across the world – not just in Europe and North America – it is yet to receive full consideration in food geographies.⁶ Similarly, as White (2021) has pointed out, veganism is an uncomfortable elephant in the animal geographies room, supported not least by an absence of engagement with veganism outside of White's chapter in *A Research Agenda for Animal Geographies* (and, briefly, that of Emel and Nirmal, 2021).

Stewart and Cole (2020) recently reflected on their careers as vegan sociologists, where being vegan and studying veganism throws up constant challenges because it is seen as a 'political agenda' rather than a serious line of scholarly enquiry. Reactions dismissing academic research as 'merely activism' echo the dismissals of the 'merely feminist' and 'merely cultural' (Amoore, 2020) and are common for researchers studying veganism as vegans. For example, Trauger's recent paper on the so-called 'vegan industrial complex' accuses vegans of assuming an identity in relation to food that 'do[es] little beyond seeking out foods that fit the (grocery) bill' (Trauger, 2022, p. 641), despite extremely limited engagement with texts in vegan Sociology or Geography, and little engagement with veganism and vegans. This allies with what Dhont and Stoeber (2020, p. 27) have identified as anti-vegan motives around 'why some people become angry and even aggressive in the face of the increasing popularity of veg*nism'.

Prior to its recent popularity, veganism struggled to find a home in Geography, and has not always been welcomed in other sub-disciplines. This might be understood as part of an under-theorisation of vegan geographies and a misunderstanding of veganism (Hodge et al., 2022). However, the rich potentials of veganism as a geographical subject and theory are increasingly being recognised. Veganism is now emerging as an ethic, a politics, a practice, as theoretical, conceptual, and material, and with the possibility to develop in many directions, overlapping with a wide range of other fields. This emergence of plural vegan geographies echoes that of plural veganisms, and comes with similar tensions. In Geography, there has been little fruitful engagement with veganism's expansive possibilities, in part due to a perception of it as a political agenda, notably encapsulated by the UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman's distaste for veganism as a political position of the 'Guardian-reading, tofu-eating, wokerati'.⁷

Having been placed, misplaced, and displaced from various areas of Geography, vegan geographies have become relatively well established in anarchist geographies. For example, the edited collection *Vegan Geographies* focuses explicitly on how the synergies between vegan and anarchist geographies can be 'woven more fully into the tapestries of interspecies struggle and solidarity' (Hodge et al., 2022, p. 39). Previous works, such as *Anarchism and Animal Liberation* (Nocella et al., 2015) have also made the case for total liberation across human and non-human worlds, and their relevance to geographical scholarship. As veganism has mainstreamed, its social, political, and cultural boundaries have shifted and vegan scholarship is no longer necessarily aligned with liberatory aims. As geographers begin to think about

veganism beyond the radical margins, it is timely to reflect on veganism's histories to explore how centring scholarship on veganism as novel or new fails to acknowledge rich genealogies of vegan thought. In the next section, we turn to work on the politics of citation and draw this into vegan geographies.

4 | CLAIMING AN AGENDA

In an essay by Max Liboiron (2021a) on 'firsting' in research, they show how the impulse to be the first to discover, write about, and claim a particular idea or knowledge is a form of erasure and violence. Geography is founded on discovery (see Driver, 2001) and being the 'first', and there has been a plethora of nuanced and important work on decolonialisation and anti-colonial practice in Geography (e.g., Jazeel, 2017; Johnson et al., 2007; Noxolo, 2017) and beyond (e.g., Todd, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2021). Critical geographies contest power under a discourse of Human Geography being progressive (Crush, 1991), when academic Geography remains riddled with unequal, problematic, and even violent dynamics, seeing geographers increasingly turn to critique the very same structures that they are upholding.

Within an academic culture that materially rewards scholars who define concepts and fields with both financial (through promotion) and cultural (through networks and invitations) capital, there are significant benefits for scholars to publishing in fields perceived as new. The work of agenda-setting has become essential to today's marketised academic landscape (Nokkala & Bacevic, 2014), with those who set agendas producing knowledge frames and legitimising the goals of a field, aligning with metrics used to assess academics and research (Nokkala & Bacevic, 2014).⁸ Research agenda-setting can aim to encapsulate a field and, when written generously, can guide readers to a rich plethora of work (e.g., Lawrence, 2022; Liboiron, 2021b).⁹ However, despite the possibility for agenda-setting to be generous, it also relies on curation and omission, and oftentimes these omissions produce erasures of lesser known or non-academic research, usually work by junior scholars or those in less prestigious positions. Agenda-setting papers can therefore simultaneously advocate further research while shaping the future of the field and the kinds of work that are included in this future (see, for example, Morris et al., 2021).

The power to set agendas is not neutral and when an emerging field is being established, academics higher in the hierarchy are provided with a disproportionate opportunity to shape it. This disproportionately negatively affects early career, women, and Global Majority scholars (Fraiman, 2012). The pressure on academic work to be agenda-setting can (both intentionally and unintentionally) reproduce hierarchies of knowledge and power with implications for the shaping of knowledge frames, in this case of vegan geographies. Agenda-setting work in vegan geographies, for example, might centre a future focus of the field (and therefore its canon) on the ethics of eating (Sexton et al., 2022); health and sustainability of diets (Trauger, 2022); or only as in relation with agri-food (e.g., Beacham & Evans, 2022). This embedding of veganism in food sits uncomfortably within Giraud's (2021) emphasis of veganism being more than a diet, and of the multiplicity of veganism(s).

The politics of knowledge production are not a new debate, with Mott and Cockayne (2017, p. 954) showing how citation can be used as 'a problematic technology that contributes to the reproduction of the white heteromascularity of geographical thought and scholarship, despite advances toward more inclusivity in the discipline'. The case of defining vegan geographies might be understood as an example of these same, unintentional or pressurised, tendencies in knowledge production to prioritise the impactful work of agenda-setting. Agenda-setting can showcase a range of work, but equally, it can reproduce academic hierarchies, which could silo academic work on veganism, for example, into problematic Eurocentric narratives that do not recognise the global histories and contributions to veganism(s), as noted earlier in this commentary. Furthermore, there are rich and engaged contributions to the canon of vegan philosophy and social thought from beyond academia that are heavily cited and recognised in, for example, anarchist geographies that might become notably absent from a vegan geographical canon.

The rise of veganism is creating a new space for vegan geographies, moving it firmly out of fringe epistemologies and social practices into the mainstream. With this growth, vegan geographies show how academic Geography still has the capacity to entrench hierarchies of power and to fetishise firsting (Liboiron, 2021a). In the claiming of vegan geographies, debates over the temporalities of academia, power, and networks, and the state of geographical knowledge are playing out that have much broader significance. For vegan geographies, this ultimately might lead to a narrowing of scholarship to prioritise particular veganisms identified as agenda-setting, while others remain 'merely activism' (Amoore, 2020). In the conclusion, we look at the broader implications of this, making the case for holding open vegan geographies.

5 | CONCLUSION: FOR NOT CLAIMING VEGAN GEOGRAPHIES

Vegan geographies might seem superfluous to conversations on disciplinary knowledge and research agendas in academic Geography, but the mainstreaming of veganism has seen a rush to define and shape a new field. In so doing, the pre-existing roots of veganism and vegan geographies are potentially being marginalised. The rise of vegan geographies, and resultant claiming of them, also risks the erasure of veganism and vegan studies' histories. The purpose of this commentary is to offer a critical reflection on the production of knowledge in vegan geographies, including our own, to: (1) understand how the rise of a sub-discipline is produced in relation to wider social interests; (2) exemplify how 'firsting' shapes research priorities; and (3) offer a provocation for reflection on knowledge production. The concerns raised in this commentary are therefore not rooted in a policing of vegan geographies. Instead, we believe that as vegan geographies flourish and diffuse, we should actively consider the formation of vegan geographical knowledge, how it is being developed, and with(out) whom.

We therefore argue against claiming vegan geographies for any particular agenda, contending that this un-affiliation could be a strength, paving the way for new collaborations and reflexivity in (at least) three ways. First, vegan geographies can speak to politics, economics, activism, environmentalism, and so on, which could offer a rich opportunity for collaborative priorities in establishing across fields and concepts, something Geography and geographers have already advocated (Gray et al., 2020; Turnbull and Van Patter, 2022). This could include practices that seek more horizontal recognition, as recently demonstrated by Bawaka Country (2015), Yandaarra with Country (2022), and The Creatures Collective (Hernández et al., 2022). Second, Geography's rich heritage of inter-, post-, and extra-disciplinary work should be foregrounded, rather than creating exclusions in knowledge, learning from slow scholarship to curate an open and expansive field that engages with, for example, Sociology, History, and Philosophy. Finally, vegan geographies as a collective, collaborative endeavour should be able to reflect, critique, and progress by acknowledging these hierarchies and working to resist them, while maintaining a presence beyond disciplinary boundaries. This requires geographers to make use of interest in veganism to occupy mainstream spaces of Geography, as well as maintaining conversations in alternative and radical venues. This commentary thus serves as a provocation and invitation to rally against claiming vegan geographies (or other emergent fields) and, in turn, for a more reflexive and collaborative academic knowledge practice.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Although its visibility is not matched with the take-up in veganism that might be expected.

² See <https://www.vegansociety.com/news/media/statistics/worldwide#:~:text=Average%20annual%20growth%20in%20global,of%20Plant%20Dbased%20September%202020>.

³ It calls it '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' see: <https://www.vegansociety.com/go-vegan/definition-veganism>

⁴ See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1263270/survey-reasons-for-being-vegan-in-europe/>

⁵ For example, see activist Roger Yates' 2020 talk at the International Association of Vegan Sociologists conference, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIgc5WvaoiQ&ab_channel=VeganSociology

⁶ See <https://www.vegansociety.com/news/media/statistics/worldwide>

⁷ As quoted in *The Guardian*, 18 October 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/video/2022/oct/18/suella-braverman-blames-guardian-reading-tofu-eating-wokerati-for-disruptive-protests-video>

⁸ We note that the disjointedness of agendas of leadership versus political agendas being unwelcome in geography is relevant here.

⁹ This is often encouraged by journals' formatting guidelines, which allow for extensive bibliographies.

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