



## **When eating cake becomes activism**

An anthropological study on the vegan movement in Berlin  
explaining the relation between food and social change and the  
role of the sharing of food in this relation

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*“A good vegan cupcake has the power to transform everything for the better. It's almost like a political statement with icing.”*

- Jasmin Singer, animal rights activist



## Preface

After spending three months in, what felt to me like, vegan heaven, it hit me hard to be grocery shopping back in my home town of Utrecht. I found myself once again spending ages reading product labels and searching the rows of foods for ingredients I could eat. During my three months of fieldwork, I had really come to love Berlin, and I felt a bit heartbroken as my train departed from *Hauptbahnhof*. To keep positive, I tried to remind myself of something one of my informants, Yuri, had told me: if living vegan in Berlin is relatively easy, it means there is still work to be done in other cities.

After 10 years of being a vegetarian, I decided to go vegan about a year ago. So far, I am very happy with my decision and I have become passionate about veganism and its benefits. So when the time came to decide on a master's thesis, I didn't have to think long. I want to use this opportunity to contribute to the knowledge about veganism and the development and shaping of such lifestyle movements. Furthermore, I look at it as a good opportunity to deepen my own knowledge, and also bring veganism more to the attention of others.

I want to thank some people without whom this thesis would not have come about the way it has. First of all my family and friends for supporting me through the intense process of researching and writing. They have been deeply patient with me during this time and they shared my good and bad moments. Next, I want to thank my supervisor Lotje, who managed to keep me motivated, critical, and inspired throughout the process, and was always there to listen and give advice when I needed someone to talk to. I also want to thank Yvon, who took over excellently from Lotje later on in the process and gave me new insights and ideas to approach my data and my subject with. I thank Johnny for helping me with my grammar and giving me tips on how to improve my writing. I want to thank my informants, who have been so helpful and kind to share a bit of their lives with me. They were the incentive that inspired and motivated me to successfully complete this thesis. Finally, I want to thank you, the reader, for taking the time to read the results of my research.





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## 1. Introduction

In March 2016 *VeggieWorld*, Europe's biggest fair for goods and services for a vegan lifestyle, came to Utrecht for the first time.<sup>1</sup> About 5000 interested people showed up to stroll by the numerous stands providing information and selling food and products such as meat substitutes, supplements, clothing, beauty products, and more. Many of the 60 stands sold out their inventory after the first day of the two-day event. Last year's *Vegan Challenge*, a 30-days challenge where people try to eat vegan for a month, had a record amount of 2700 participants.<sup>2</sup> Veganism is growing in popularity. Not just in the Netherlands, but in many countries all over the world. Veganism, both as a term and concept, is increasingly noticeable in the media and public consciousness (Pendergrast 2015). This research is inspired by this growing popularity of veganism and the question why food and social change relate to each other. I went to 'the vegan capital of Europe', Berlin, to investigate this relation and the role that the sharing of food plays in this for vegans.

### 1.1 Research theme and context

According to Mintz and Du Bois (2002) there is a growing interest amongst ethnographers in the effects of broad societal changes on eating patterns. Counihan and Van Esterik (2013) state that the field of food studies has grown exponentially during the last years. One of the reasons for this growing scientific interest is the politicization of food and the expansion of social movements linked to food. Counihan and Van Esterik (2013, 2) argue that as food shifts from "being local and known, to being global and unknown it has been transformed into a potential symbol of fear and anxiety as well as of morality." Due to the increasing globalization of food production people often feel that they are losing control over the ways their food is produced. At the same time, people are increasingly aware of the links between consumption and production. Therefore, food is becoming a means to express discontent or display values.

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<sup>1</sup> "Over VeggieWorld Utrecht," VeggieWorld, accessed July 3, 2016, <http://veggieworld.de/nl/over-veggieworld>.

<sup>2</sup> "Gaat het nieuwe vlees het oude vlees verslaan?" NOS, accessed July 3, 2016, <http://nos.nl/op3/artikel/2090859-gaat-het-nieuwe-vlees-het-oude-vlees-verslaan.html>.

Another reason why food is of such interest to anthropologists is that it encompasses many different dimensions of human life. Counihan and Van Esterik (2013, 2) state that it links “body and soul, self and other, the personal and the political, the material and the symbolic.” That is why studying food and eating can reveal insights into people’s lives, cultures, relations, practices and ideas.

A feature in which the expressing of discontent, displaying of values and food all meet is veganism. Over the last few years there has been a growing interest in veganism, both as a research topic and as a lifestyle (Pendergrast 2015). Still, confusion over the term ‘veganism’ exists in the media and within the animal advocacy movement (Pendergrast 2015). It can refer to a *diet* free of animal products, or more so it can refer to a *lifestyle* that rejects all animal products for human use. This research focuses on veganism as a lifestyle, also described as ethical veganism, because I am interested in the motivations, ethical positions and ideologies of people who define themselves as vegan. A vegan lifestyle involves the “individual commitment to not only avoid eating animal products, but also to not participate in other instances of animal exploitation, such as the use of non-human animals for entertainment and clothing” (Pendergrast 2015, 107-108). So, vegans try to avoid contributing to any practice that could cause harm to animals in every aspect of their life.

The main motivations for becoming vegan are categorized by scholars as motivations that are ideological/ethical in nature, motivations of health, and motivations of concern for the environment (McDonald 2000; Fox & Ward 2007; Pendergrast 2015). Both McDonald (2000) and Pendergrast (2015) argue that people who adopt a vegan *lifestyle* differ in ethical position from people who only adopt a vegan *diet*. According to Pendergrast (2015) people who adopt a vegan lifestyle often support an animal rights ideology that contests the idea of animals being here for humans to use and slaughter. Stepaniak (1998, 21) even argues that “it is inaccurate for people to define themselves as [vegan] simply because they have adopted the vegan mode of eating.”

To gain an understanding of where the growing interest in veganism is coming from it is useful to take into account the context in which it gained more attention, namely; the increasingly globalized production and consumption of food, including animal

products. Over the past decades increasing globalization has had a remarkable effect on the livestock industry. According to Zessin (2006) it is the liberalization of international markets that encourages globalization of the livestock sector. This liberalization levels the playing field for all trading partners and makes it easier for goods, capital, knowledge, ideas and people to travel across the globe. The consequence is a dynamic structural shift in the agricultural industry, characterized by increased market orientation and integration, larger scales, geographical concentration and intensification (Zessin 2006).

This excessive growth and globalization of the livestock industry has considerable effects on animal well-being, human health, and the environment. Counihan and Van Esterik (2013, 7) argue that “neoliberal practices such as deregulation and just-in-time production make our global food system even more vulnerable to abuse.” While this is meant figuratively here, when discussing the intensification in the livestock industry this can actually also be interpreted quite literally. The up scaling and intensification in the livestock industry is characterized by confinement, exploitation, and mistreatment of farm animals. Questions have also been raised over the effect eating meat has on human health, because of the administration of large amounts of antibiotics and hormones to animals in order to prevent diseases and accelerate growth. Furthermore, through excessive water usage, clearing of rain forests to grow crops for feeding cattle, and large amounts of methane emitted by cattle, animal agriculture is putting a dangerous strain on the environment.

According to Fraser (2008) during the last half century in which this expansion of the livestock industry is taking place, some cultural changes are experienced in the industrialized countries, which involve increased attention to animals and concern over their quality of life. Through activist and media attention people have become more aware of the living conditions and animal treatment in the meat industry. Also, more research has been performed on the effects of animal agriculture on human health and the environment, often revealing disturbing results. Pendergrast (2015, 107) states that the “growing awareness of the environmental consequences of consuming animal products, in addition to mainstream recognition of animal rights and health benefits, has played a significant role in the rising interest in veganism.” For many people the growing awareness leads to a growing discontent with the current practices in the livestock industry and with the industry as a whole. Therefore, veganism as a way to reject this industry is becoming increasingly popular.

The increasing politicization of food, and considering food as something through which agency can be enacted, relates to the notion of *sustainable citizenship*. Micheletti and Stolle (2012, 90) state that sustainable citizenship involves the expectation that individuals give serious consideration to how their present beliefs, practices and lifestyles may have a negative effect on the “well-being of other humans, nature, and animals today and in the future.” It is about making global sustainable development part of daily life decisions. Since food practices are an important part of daily life they are also an important means of enacting sustainable citizenship. Micheletti and Stolle (2012, 90) argue that private shopping choices reflect the “politics of the product” and can stand for “broader values and choices characterizing how people craft their societal identities.”

Taking up a vegan lifestyle might be considered as an ultimate act of sustainable citizenship. Vegans often have put traditional foodways under critical scrutiny after which they made the deliberate decision to change their eating habits and lifestyle (cf. Beardsworth and Keil 1992). Veganism has gained so much popularity that some scholars now refer to it as a ‘social movement’ (Cherry 2006). According to Cherry (2006, 156) “vegans represent a new form of social movement that is not based on legislation or identity politics, but instead is based on everyday practices in one’s lifestyle.” Vegans have incorporated their values into their everyday practices, so their political interests are intertwined with their lifestyle.

## Research aim and relevance

Since food has become increasingly political over the last few years, it is interesting to investigate why food and social change relate to each other. In this thesis I aim to explain how food and social change are related for vegans in Berlin. Furthermore, I examine the role of the sharing of food in this relation and how the vegan movement in Berlin takes shape. I chose Berlin as a research site, because, as paragraph 1.2 states, over the past years veganism has become so widespread in the city that I would be able to get good and easy access there to interesting and insightful data on this subject.

In this thesis I argue that vegans create meaning through their everyday lifestyle practices, because they serve as a means to perform a certain activism. I will

illustrate this by explaining what happens on the level of the vegan individual, the vegan community, and the vegan movement. People become vegan because they want to live in accordance with their ideals, meaning that they change their lifestyle, especially their food practices. By seeing other people undertaking the same kind of action (whether in real life or on the Web) vegans experience a sense of community. In this thesis I specifically highlight the role of the sharing of food in this, because it plays a significant and interesting role for vegans, namely the double role of a community building tool, as well as a political manifestation expressed through eating a certain kind of food (Le Grand 2010, 67). Because vegans' lifestyle choices and practices become politically laden their lifestyle becomes a kind of activism. Vegans aim to create social change through individual lifestyle change. They understand their individual action as having an impact beyond their personal lives, believing in both the power of their individual action and the power of non-coordinated collective action (Haenfler et al. 2012, 6).

This research creates more insight into how people use food as a medium to try to instigate social change. It contributes to discovering the ways in which people incorporate practices that can be considered political into their daily lives. Thereby, it contributes to the knowledge on political lifestyles. Furthermore, this research adds to the knowledge on vegans' lifestyle and veganism as a movement. More generally, it adds to the scientific literature on social movements that are centered on alternative lifestyles. Lastly, it contributes to the knowledge on social movements that are centered on food and the role of the sharing of food within these movements. Ethnographic research is especially suited to investigate these kinds of subjects, because it combines theoretical findings from scientific literature to data collected through participation and observation. By determining where the theory differs from or corresponds with the findings in practice, this research contributes to expanding the scientific knowledge available thus far.

By providing more information on veganism, this thesis has relevance for society, because veganism is often put forward as one of the solutions to many of the current global issues (e.g. climate change, leading diseases, world hunger) we are facing. On a smaller scale, I hope that by choosing this research topic I bring veganism more to the attention of the people around me and to the readers of this thesis. My hope is that this thesis might make them reflect on their practices as sustainable citizens.

One of the key concepts in this thesis is *commensality*, defined by Kerner and Chou (2015, 1) as the “eating and drinking together in a common physical or social setting.” The sharing of food goes together with collective activities, such as engaging in conversations and exchanging information. Commensality is an important concept in this thesis, because it serves as both a community building tool for vegans and a means to express their political ideas. Another key concept is *lifestyle activism*, which is the deployment of lifestyle for activist purposes (Portwood-Stacer 2013, 5). Lifestyle choices become political choices when they are part of a larger strategy aimed at accomplishing a certain change in society. In this case vegans’ lifestyle choices aim to reduce the use of animal products, thereby reducing animal suffering. The third important concept of this thesis is *lifestyle movement*, which, according to Haenfler et al. (2012, 2), consciously and actively promotes a lifestyle, or way of life, as the primary means to foster social change. Vegans aim to instigate social change through individual lifestyle change.

## 1.2 Research location and methodology

Last year, *Bild* magazine wrote an article saying Berlin is the vegan capital of Europe.<sup>3</sup> The article estimated that approximately 95.000 vegans are living in Berlin, which is more than in any other European city. According to the *Vegetarierbund Deutschland* (VEBU, the German association for vegetarians and vegans), Berlin has about 40 all vegan restaurants and cafés.<sup>4</sup> One of my informants said that even the “Schnitzel restaurants” start serving vegan options now.<sup>5</sup> Since 2011, there is a vegan supermarket chain, which has three locations already.<sup>6</sup> Veganism has become so big in Berlin that, as journalist Jenny Hoff (2011) writes in her article, the ‘vegan scene’ there is almost impossible to avoid. Yet, Berlin is not just a “vegan heaven” because it has vegan restaurants, but because “the city is booming with activism as well” (Hoff 2011). There are several animal rights organizations and associations active in the city that organize actions and demos monthly. Besides activist meetings, there are plenty

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<sup>3</sup> “Berlin ist die vegane Hauptstadt Europas,” *Bild*, accessed June 6, 2016, <http://www.bild.de/regional/berlin/vegan/berlin-ist-die-vegane-hauptstadt-europas-39426672.bild.html>.

<sup>4</sup> “Vegane Restaurants,” VEBU, accessed June 6, 2016, <https://vebu.de/essen-genuss/vegane-restaurants/?ort=Berlijn%2C%20Duitsland&lat=52.52000659999999&lng=13.404953999999975&radius=10&veglevel=4>.

<sup>5</sup> Conversation with Misha during work at the café February 25, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> “Unternehmen,” *Veganz*, accessed June 7, 2016, <https://veganz.de/de/unternehmen/>.



of other events that people with an interest in veganism can attend. I even found out, when looking for a room to rent, that the biggest German housing website has an option to filter search results with the criterion *vegetarian/vegan*. So, from my own experience, I can say that it is possible in Berlin to live almost entirely in a vegan bubble. For three months I lived with vegans, worked with vegans, went to vegan shops and restaurants, and hung out with vegans at meet-ups and events.

Regarding the vegan population in Berlin, my experience is that it is largely made up of relatively young people. However, I cannot say this with certainty, because I met new informants mostly through my existing contacts, which were also relatively young. My group of informants consists of about 30 vegans, ranging from 19 to 45 years old. The number of years that they have been vegan differs strongly (from a couple of months to 20 years). They came from different ethnic, social, educational, and professional backgrounds. Most of them live in *WG's* (*Wohngemeinschaft*, a shared apartment), which is common in Berlin, or with their partner. One thing that often struck me was how young many of my informants looked for their age, and that they were rarely overweight. The amount of time and conversations I spent with informants differs. The ones I got to know best were my roommates with whom I shared an apartment and the owners of the vegan café I worked at.

During my three months of fieldwork in Berlin I mainly engaged in *participant observation*. On a scale from non-participation to complete participation I engaged in complete participation, because I was a member of my research population: a vegan in Berlin. The positive side of this was that being a vegan myself almost immediately created *rappport* with other vegans. Often vegans can, if they are questioned by someone who is not vegan, start using ideological statements and recruitment language in order to try to convince the other to agree with them (see Cherry et al. 2010). My identity as a vegan circumvented this and made it easier for informants to identify with me and talk freely.

A potential pitfall of being an *insider* is that it might cause difficulty recognizing patterns of practice, because the behavior is so familiar and is taken for granted. Another pitfall is becoming enmeshed in the population under study and therefore losing focus on that study, becoming a non-observing participant (Bonner and Tolhurst 2002). I encountered both these pitfalls and I tried to avoid them by

remaining critical of my role as a researcher. During the research process I continually tried to step back and ask questions about my position and my data. I kept a *personal journal*, which helped me maintain a distance between my personal emotions and my field. I could write down my feelings, which helped me to process them, leaving me clear to reflect on my position in the field. The *monthly reports* helped me evaluate my role as a researcher and my research findings as well.

It was not difficult to find entrances and make connections with the vegan population in Berlin. Through a German housing website I found a room in an apartment with four vegan roommates. I could start my research in the comfort of my living space and I got to know my roommates on a very personal level. In addition, I found a small job at a vegan café in my neighborhood. On average I worked two shifts a week. During work I would chat with colleagues and customers and observe and help with the preparing of food. The first four weeks of my fieldwork I followed a German language course to improve my German, which I found to come quite in handy at my job, because not everyone spoke English there. Furthermore, because I wanted to observe people sharing food I tried to visit many public events organized by and for vegans. One important event was the vegan *Stammtisch*, a biweekly-organized meet-up at a restaurant where people can join freely and enjoy vegan food together. On Facebook it is promoted as *the* event to meet new (vegan) people. In addition to this, I visited other events such as: a *potluck*, where everyone brings some food to share; a *bake sale*, where vegan cakes are being distributed for voluntary donations; a vegan tour, which is a guided tour through Berlin where you stop at different cafés and restaurants to try food; a *Küfa*, where a vegan meal is provided by an anarchist group for a small donation; a vegan lifestyle market, which was a large event held once in every season with lots of stands selling vegan food and products; and a meeting of one of the regional groups of the *VEBU*. These kinds of events were good opportunities for me to observe groups of people eating together and having conversations together. They provided valuable information on themes such as topics of conversations, social relationships, the food being eaten, symbols and rituals, and more.

The main focus during my research was on having *informal conversations*, because the topic of my research lent itself best for everyday dialogue. By *being there* and *hanging out*, for example at my apartment, at events, or at work, I was best able to have these conversations with people. During the conversations I could make sure

that I asked informants about themes on my topic list that I specifically wanted to know their experience of or view on. For as far as I could (at some public events it was not always achievable) I would make sure that I was working with people's *informed consent*. I would make my role as a researcher known, although I did not give informants too much information about the exact topic. Mostly I said that I was doing research on "vegans in Berlin" or that I was investigating "how vegans live in Berlin." I have assured informants confidentiality and anonymity and all names have been changed.

Another method that I used was *visual* and *sensory ethnography*. Food formed an important part of my research and I tried to document this as extensively as possible through taking photos of food and writing about food (ingredients, preparation, smells, textures, colors, etcetera). This created an extra dimension to my data. I could see vegans' ideas and beliefs reflected in the food they prepared. Furthermore, I wrote *vignettes* to create a complete and vivid image of the settings that vegans live, shop, hang out, and eat in. Social media, more specifically *Facebook*, was also important to my research. Firstly, because it was the medium through which I could find information about the events that I wanted to go to and where I could easily come into contact with informants. Secondly, I found that vegan Facebook-groups also formed important platforms where vegans exchanged ideas, information, and recipes and arranged meet-ups. Finally, I used *semi-structured* interviews, 5 in total, to be able to go deeper into certain topics I still wanted to know more about and gain a better understanding of.

Once the different data had been collected, it was written out, codified, and analyzed. Through the use of different anthropological methods I was able to investigate my research subject from different angles and create data triangulation.

### 1.3 Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of different chapters. Together they explain the conclusion of this thesis that vegans' lifestyle practices become meaningful, because they serve as a form of activism. To get a good understanding of the way in which this meaning is created and to show how food and social change relate to each other in this case the chapters develop from individual motivations for becoming vegan to the level of veganism as a movement. Chapter 2 illustrates that people have different stories of

how and why they became vegan, but what they have in common is that they strive to live in line with their ideals. Chapter 3 explains that even though becoming vegan is something individual, vegans experience a sense of community when they see other people undertaking the same kind of action. This chapter specifically demonstrates the role of the sharing of food, which is captured in the concept of commensality, for creating a sense of community. Chapter 4 makes the link from a vegan lifestyle to activism in order to explain how vegans try to stimulate social change. It is clarified how living a vegan lifestyle can be considered a form of lifestyle activism, and that veganism can be considered a lifestyle movement. In the concluding chapter, several insights will be brought together to show that vegans' lifestyle practices create meaning for vegans, because they serve as a form of activism. Furthermore, I will deepen the relation between food and social change after which I will reflect on my research.

## 2. In an ideal world

*Recipe for vegan egg salad<sup>7</sup>*

*Ingredients:*

*Chickpeas*

*Pasta (penne or tagliatelle works best)*

*Vegan mayonnaise*

*Turmeric*

*Kala Namak (black salt, gives it an egg-like taste)*

*Small onion*

*Chives*

*Pepper*

*Instructions:*

*Cook the pasta until very soft. Drain and cool with cold water. Finely chop up the onion. Mix the chickpeas with the turmeric in a blender until you have a smooth paste. Blend the pasta into tiny pieces, similar to the egg white in regular egg salad. Mix the pasta and the onion with the chickpea paste. Mix in the mayonnaise and then season with the black salt, pepper, and chives.*

I got this recipe from Misha, one of the owners of the vegan café I worked at during my fieldwork. Now, why would anyone want to make egg salad without eggs? To some readers it might sound like a nonsensical idea and the recipe might not seem appealing. Other readers – I am pointing at the vegan ones – might come up with plenty of reasons. The reason most often mentioned is that, within the egg industry, it is a common practice that day-old male chicks are either ground up alive, gassed, drowned, or suffocated, because they are considered worthless. To many people this is a shocking fact. To some, it is shocking enough to stop buying and consuming eggs. A recipe like the one above might excite them, because it means they can show people that you can still enjoy the taste of eggs, without contributing to the egg industry and its harmful practices.

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<sup>7</sup> Informal conversation with Misha during work at the café  
March 11, 2016.

To understand the relationship between food and social change and how the vegan movement in Berlin takes shape I want to start with clarifying why people become vegan in the first place. Soifer (2003, 1713), who writes about prejudice against vegans, states that vegans “are driven by kindness and compassion for life when making their choice about their beliefs and way of life.” They envision a world in which we “live with, as opposed to depending upon, the other species of the planet” (Soifer 2003, 1710). Becoming vegan often starts with experiencing strong feelings of discontent with the common treatment of animals within animal agriculture. Vegans have their individual ideas and ideals about how we should treat animals, or better yet how we should treat the world and all living beings in it. In this chapter I argue that becoming vegan is an effort of individuals to try to live in accordance with their ideals. To them, it is a way of making a change, heading towards a society in which all animals are treated equally. I have often heard informants say they think it is every vegan’s hope to make a change in the world. Vegans aim at creating social change. They are convinced that if everyone would change their lifestyle and stop consuming animal products there would not be a demand for these products and animals would not need to be used and harmed anymore. So, vegans are aware that social change starts with individual change. This chapter explains how vegans discover and develop their ideals and how they strive to live in line with these.

## 2.1 Becoming vegan

The first questions I would ask my participants were why and how they became vegan. Like Barbara McDonald (2000, 6), a social scientist who did qualitative interviews with more than twenty vegans, I noticed that each individual came to the decision to ‘go vegan’ with a unique personal and cultural history. These histories shaped their original worldviews and had an influence on how they ‘learned to become vegan’, as McDonald (2000, 6) calls it. McDonald (2000, 6) states that participants often claimed to have been “animal people” all their lives. I also noticed this in many of the personal histories I have heard. Some participants had been vegetarian since they were teenagers or even younger. Hanna is an example of this. I met Hanna through one of my roommates. She was 32 years old, grew up in Berlin and had a job as a social worker and educator at a daycare center. She had been a vegetarian since she was 11 years old. Another example was Erik, whom I came into

contact with through Facebook. He was 33 years old and next to some acting jobs he was currently writing a novel. He was only 7 years old when he wanted to stop eating meat.

Most vegans turn vegetarian before they become vegan. The choice to become vegetarian is often triggered by an emotional, eye-opening experience, which sociologists Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil (1992, 266) call a “conversion experience”. Erik said that he had seen a documentary on TV in which animals were slaughtered with a stun gun to the head (he pointed his hand at my head to visualize this).<sup>8</sup> That was such a traumatizing image that he immediately stopped eating meat after that. Nadine was the eldest of three sisters I shared an apartment with. Her boyfriend Oskar also lived with us. She was 32 years old, grew up in the German speaking part of Belgium and worked as a graphic designer. She told me that she had always wanted to be a veterinarian growing up, because she likes cows very much.<sup>9</sup> One day she did an internship at a sheep farm to help delivering the lambs. She was helping an ewe that was pushing, but did not have dilation. She tried to stretch it, but it did not work. She told the farmer that he had to call a vet. The farmer replied: “no, she’ll be fine.” The ewe and her two lambs died eventually. The animal was exhausted and Nadine told me she will never forget the sounds it made. She said the costs of the vet would have probably been higher than the profit the farmer would make from the ewe. Nadine felt traumatized from the experience. That was when she decided to become a vegetarian.

What I noticed from hearing the different personal histories is that vegans have a different way of looking at animals than people who consume animals and animal products. To vegans all animals are equal, so they do not make a distinction between animals that are for eating and animals that are for petting. However, they often grew up within another paradigm of looking at animals, so they had to break free from this themselves. McDonald (2000, 7) states that her participants, who often had a prior love for nature and pets, did not used to see “the connection between their companion animals and food animals”. Misha’s story is an illustrative example. One afternoon when I was helping Misha bake the café’s signature *Schoko-Erdnuss Kuchen* (chocolate-peanutbutter cake), she told me that as she grew up in Poland she

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Erik at the dinner table in his apartment  
April 25, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Informal conversation with Nadine at the dinner table at home  
February 7, 2016.

was always surrounded by animals.<sup>10</sup> Her family kept all kinds of animals, also pigs. Misha would always be very occupied with the animals and she loved it. Every year her family would slaughter one of the pigs. Misha was raised with the idea that it is normal for humans to slaughter a pig for their convenience. She told me that when she was five years old she witnessed such a slaughtering. She said that she just stood there and watched without feeling any emotion. This surprised me a little bit and when she noticed, she pointed out again it was how she was raised. She simply did not know better than that such an action was completely normal. I asked her if she could watch a slaughtering again now and she said, “no, never. If I look into a pig’s eyes, I see my dog.” She pointed at her little dog that was sleeping in one of the café’s vintage chairs, a small painting of a piglet hanging on the wall above her. “It has eyes, ears, a nose. It feels pain and anxiety, it wants to be with its mom too.”

It is also common, especially amongst younger children, that people do not make the connection between the meat that is on their plate and the animals it comes from. Over a cup of fresh mint tea, Hanna told me she wanted to stop eating meat when she was 11 years old, because that was the first time she realized that the stuff on people’s plates comes from actual animals.<sup>11</sup> She never made that link before. But when she did, she could not to eat meat anymore and she could not understand why other people would. She named an example of Christmas dinner at her house when her family would eat a rabbit. The rabbit would be on a dish, whole, so you could still see it was a rabbit. “I could not understand why people would pet it (she makes a gesture of holding a rabbit and petting it over the back) and then the next day they would eat it”.

As the histories of Nadine and Erik illustrate, the choice to become vegetarian can be quite emotional, due to this often negative and upsetting conversion experience. The choice to later become vegan tends to be more rational. Once vegetarians learn more about the practices within not only the meat industry, but also the egg and dairy industry, they can start experiencing a “logical inconsistency of being in favor of animal rights but continuing to eat animal products” (McDonald 2000, 15). For example, I often heard vegans say they had a hard time switching from a vegetarian diet to a vegan diet, because they “liked cheese too much.” Lydia was an

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<sup>10</sup> Informal conversation with Misha during work at the café  
April 13, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Hanna at a café  
March 31, 2016.



example of this. I came into contact with Lydia through Facebook. She was in her late twenties and she came from Dublin. She was doing a PhD on biodiversity conservation in Berlin. When we were preparing dinner together in her apartment, I asked her about her motivation to become vegan. While she was chopping up some vegetables she said she had the idea for a longer time, but had a hard time sticking to it, because she likes cheese so much.<sup>12</sup> “Then I thought: I’m in Berlin now, which is one of the most vegan-friendly places, if I can’t do it here, I’m not going to keep up with it anywhere.” This example shows that Lydia rationally tried to convince herself to try to live vegan. According to Jessica Greenebaum (2012b, 130), a social scientist who conducts research on feminism, inequalities, and animal rights activism, vegetarians are more likely to become vegan when their decisions are based primarily on animal rights. My findings support this, because I found that people for whom their ethical ideals and convictions became more important than the taste of animal products managed to successfully make the change to a vegan lifestyle and stick with it.

As I mentioned before, most of the vegans I met named ethical considerations as their primary reason to become vegan. Environmental concerns mattered to most people as well. A lot of vegans paid attention to living a more environmentally friendly lifestyle. Still, concern for the environment did not form an initial trigger to take up a vegan lifestyle. I have met some vegans who went vegan because of health reasons. Kaja was one of my colleagues at the café. She was 36 years old (although I would have never guessed from her appearance) and besides this job she worked in a vegan cocktail bar. Kaja told me she became vegan overnight from being a meat eater, because she was “tired of feeling so unhealthy.”<sup>13</sup> Another example is Misha’s husband Artur. Artur just turned 40 and, like Misha, he came from Poland. He had a business as a guitar maker. Artur went vegan because he was suffering from several health problems, among others high cholesterol (which decreased significantly afterward he became vegan). Many of the health-motivated vegans that I spoke with also at one point educated themselves about the ethical side of veganism. What I found remarkable was that for many, ethical considerations eventually seemed to have become more important than health reasons. I got to know both Kaja and Artur as

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Lydia at the kitchen table of her apartment April 26, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Informal conversation with Kaja during work at the café February 25, 2016.

very ethically convinced vegans. Kaja even became so serious about it that she told me once that she would probably stay vegan even if it meant that it would have effects on her health in the long term. “For me, there is no way back at this point.”<sup>14</sup>

## 2.2 Consistency

One of Harold Herzog’s (1993) main findings is one of my main findings as well. Herzog (1993, 117), who performed research on the psychology of animal rights activism, states that almost all of his participants strived to achieve consistency between their ideals and their actions. Xavier Cohen (2013, 62) states in an ethical essay on how vegans should live that causing no harm to animals in any way at all is practically impossible, because “it would require consistent veganism to be a particularly ascetic kind of prehistoric or Robinson Crusoe-type lifestyle, which would clearly be far too demanding.” Since animal ingredients are being processed into a wide range of products (both edible and non-edible), nowadays it has become almost impossible to avoid them completely. For example, most people know that sweets often contain gelatine coming from pigs and cows. However, something that a many people do not know for example, whereas most vegans do, is that bread can contain protein from pig hair, which is used to soften the dough.<sup>15</sup> Or that animal gelatine is often used for the filtering of beer, wine, and juices. Or that shampoos and conditioners may contain animal fats to give them a pearl-like appearance. For most vegans part of becoming vegan is finding out how many of their beloved products contain animal ingredients. They experience that avoiding animal products requires substantial work and research. But besides avoiding animal products, being vegan also includes the involvement of ethics when making (often daily) decisions. I once had a conversation with Nadine about domestic cats,<sup>16</sup> because I told her that I was

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<sup>14</sup> Informal conversation with Kaja during work at the café April 19, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> “Bullets, bread and beer, tambourines and toothpaste... and the 180 other things you can do with a PIG,” Dailymail UK, accessed June 7, 2016, <http://Nina.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1217794/From-bullets-bread-beer-tambourines-toothpaste--plus-180-things-pig.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Regarding pets: many vegans I met owned pets (mostly cats and dogs), which is a subject I am often asked about by non-vegans. Buying a pet from a breeder is not seen as in line with the vegan ethic of not breeding animals for human entertainment. Therefore, these pets were often rescued or adopted from shelters with the idea to give them a better life than they would have had otherwise if they stayed on the street or at the shelter. Within the vegan community there is a lot of discussion regarding what to feed pet animals. I discussed this with informants too. The ones that owned dogs gave them vegan dog food, for it was believed that dogs can thrive on a plant-based diet as well. For cats it was believed to be more difficult and precarious. Some people fed their cats vegan cat food. My roommates gave their cats organic cat food containing meat, although they admitted not feeling happy about this.

considering adopting one and she and my roommates had two (one was rescued from the street, the other one adopted from a shelter).<sup>17</sup> I grew up with cats and I explained that my mom used to say it is best for cats if they can go outside. My roommates' cats always stayed in the apartment and sometimes I felt bad for them. Every now and then they were shortly allowed to go on the balcony. Nadine said that if you let cats go outside freely they will kill birds and other small animals, often without eating them, because they get enough food at home. So, the question was: is it better to keep cats inside or to let them go outside? This conversation made me realize once more that being vegan means constantly deliberating situations regarding what is the most ethically responsible thing to do – with the answer rarely being clear-cut.

Even though Herzog's (1993, 117) participants all strove for consistency between their ideals and actions, there were differences in how the search for consistency was manifested. Some of his participants took their strive for consistency so far that they ended up on "a moral slippery slope that ultimately led them to think about the ethics of killing fleas and the morality of eating tomatoes rather than carrots" (Herzog 1993, 117). In other words; how far does one go when it comes to being consistent? I found that some vegans took consistency more seriously than others. Some were "extremists even by animal rights standards", whereas others maintained a more moderate perspective, taking the attitude that you try your best within the limits of what one can do in the pursuit of a cruelty-free life (Herzog 1993, 117). Elizabeth Cherry (2010), a vegan ethnographer who also did qualitative interviews with vegans, concludes that almost every participant mentioned certain non-vegan items that they allowed themselves to use/eat, all while considering themselves vegan. I noticed that my informants did this as well. Almost everyone had their own "weak spot" – certain practices or products that they were a little less strict on. My roommate Sophie is an example. She was 22 years old and the middle sister of the three. She studied a biology master's program. She lived the typical Berlin student life with lots of shopping and partying with friends. Even though she was a very passionate vegan, she was not always as consistent regarding clothing. She tried to buy as little products with animal fabrics, but on some occasions if she really liked something she would look past it. I met more girls for whom the desire to look fashionable could sometimes be hard to reconcile with their desire to live a vegan

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<sup>17</sup> Informal conversation with Nadine in the living room  
March 30, 2016.

lifestyle. Another example comes from Hanna. She used honey in her tea when I interviewed her. Honey is a product on which there is discussion among vegans about whether it is considered vegan or not. Lydia told me that she thought she was consistent 95 per cent of the time, but in some social situations she would eat something with cheese or milk in it.<sup>18</sup> Never with meat however, that was out of line for her. According to sociologists Robert Granfield and Thomas Koenig (1992, 327), when dealing with situations like this, people form an accommodation strategy that “allows them to neutralize the contradictions inherent in their decisions.” Even though having to form accommodation strategies might not be considered consistent, they help people deal with situations they still find difficult or products they have a hard time difficult quitting.

A statement that I have often heard vegans say is that going vegan was one of the best decisions they ever made. This has to do with ethnographer Phillip Vannini’s (2006, 237) idea of authenticity: “when individuals feel congruent with their values, goals, emotions, and meanings, they experience a positive emotion.” The fact that vegans are living in accordance with their ideals and do not cause harm to animals on a daily basis brings them happiness and satisfaction. However, being vegan can also be stressful and depressing. According to Herzog (1993, 115) this is because vegans can suffer under the “heavy moral burden” they often place on themselves. When Lydia and I finished dinner and were enjoying some chocolate soy ice cream she still found in the back of her freezer, I asked her whether being vegan can also be depressing sometimes.<sup>19</sup> I asked her this, because during the interview I had noticed that she had extensive knowledge on the current situation of many environmental issues and the conditions within intensive animal farming, and it seemed to cause her stress. She replied immediately with ‘yes’ and explained that the Germans have a good word for it: *Weltschmerz*, which German literature professor Roy Cowen (1967, 349) defines as “a limited form of nihilism,” that “arises from the feeling or insight that ideal values – either moral or ontological – can no longer be correlated with the physical world.” Sometimes Lydia felt like the situation in the world had gotten too far out of control and like she was the only one in her surroundings who seemed to care.

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Lydia at the kitchen table of her apartment  
April 26, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Lydia at the kitchen table of her apartment  
April 26, 2016.

This chapter has shown that becoming vegan is an individual choice and people have their personal stories of how they became vegan, why they became vegan and how they fill in their vegan lifestyle. Transitioning to a vegan lifestyle is still a drastic change from the normative practice and ideology in society. It involves a different way of looking at animals and making ethical considerations part of daily decisions. The commonality through all the individual stories I heard in Berlin is that every vegan strives to live in line with his/her ideals. Because of perceived negative developments in society and a belief that things should be different, they set out to change themselves and, with that hopefully, society. Since vegans aim for an effect bigger than their own individual action, it is important to investigate if and how they relate to each other on a more collective level. This will be clarified in the next chapter.



### 3: Imagining a community

*I joined a vegan tour through Friedrichshain today.<sup>20</sup> A girl named Lara organized it. She had been a vegetarian since she was a kid, and she went vegan 6 years ago. She likes to discover new places and restaurants and she likes to tell stories, so she decided to combine these things and organize vegan tours in Berlin. The idea is that she takes people to 3 or 4 places (vegan or vegan friendly) in a certain neighborhood of Berlin where they can try and share different kinds of vegan food. While walking through the*



*neighborhood she also tells stories about culture, history, and (street)art. Anyone*

Figure 1. Cakes at vegan patisserie. Photo by author.

*is welcome to join, not only vegans, everyone who is interested in veganism. The tour is donation-based. We met up near station Ostkreuz. 9 people showed up. 5 of us were vegan, the others were interested in veganism, often already eating vegan a lot. We did a round to tell why we were in Berlin. Some already lived in Berlin for years, others just arrived, and others were here on holidays. It was an internationally mixed group. The tour was in English.*

*One of the places we went to was Ohlala at Mainzer Straße, which is a vegan patisserie. I had already read a lot about the place on blogs and Facebook and it was on my must-visit list. This place is not about healthy or organic food, unlike many vegan places in Berlin, they sell real sugary, buttery, creamy sweets and treats. The display with cakes and pastries looked mouthwatering. Everyone had a hard time deciding. I decided to share four different cakes with three other people. Everyone was really excited about the cakes. They looked beautiful. Someone said that they could easily fool a non-vegan. Each cake tasted delicious. We had a pastry with*

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<sup>20</sup> Fieldnotes March 6, 2016.

*mango-mousse, a peanut-chocolate bar, a piece of blueberry cake, and a 'Trésor' (see figure 1). The Trésor is Ohlala's signature pastry. It consists of a creamy mousse covered in crispy nuts and it has a hard chocolate center filled with caramel sauce that oozes out when you cut it open. The taste reminded me of the 'progresgebakjes' I used to eat at birthdays when I was younger. I didn't imagine eating something like this ever again. It was rich, creamy, and heavy. Divine.*

After having discussed veganism on an individual level, I want to discuss it on a collective level in this chapter, namely the community. In this chapter I argue that although veganism is considered a lifestyle and in that sense something individual, vegans feel part of a bigger community as well. Activities such as the sharing of food, the sharing of conversations and information (whether in real life or on the Web), the visiting of events and meetings, and going to shops and restaurants that represent their values bring vegans in contact with each other and makes them aware that they are not alone on this mission. Seeing and hearing other people undertaking the same kind of action creates a sense of community. I discuss the role of the sharing of food, theoretically termed *commensality*, in particular in this chapter, because it plays a significant and interesting role in the relation between food and social change that I try to clarify in this thesis. Namely, the double role of a community building tool and a political manifestation expressed through the eating of a certain kind of food (Le Grand 2010, 67).

### 3.1 Vegan identity

In order to explain the central argument of this chapter – the importance of the sharing of food – I want to start with discussing how vegans' identities are created and shaped. Identity is a relational phenomenon. Zdzisław Mach (1993, 3), a social anthropologist who specializes in identity issues, states that “[a]n individual establishes his identity through series of meaningful actions in relations with other people.... At the individual level identity is an answer to the question “who am I in relation to other people?”” Greenebaum (2012b, 142) defines identity by stating “[i]f identity is a public declaration of the self that is constructed through interaction with others, identities are then situational, relational, and part of a constant process of



negotiation.” Both scholars emphasize that identity is relational; it is created and shaped in relations with other people.

Dave Horton (2003) conducted ethnographic research on environmentalists’ ‘green identities’. He concludes that environmental activists perform their green identities throughout everyday life. He states that by ‘performance of identity’ he does not mean “the occasional and ephemeral staging of an ordinarily hidden identity, but rather the ongoing, repeated and routinized enactment of the green cultural codes promoted by the discourses of contemporary environmentalism, which brings forth a distinctive way of life” (Horton 2003, 64). He argues that material culture, “[p]articular objects, and particular ways of living with the material world, are vital to the production and reproduction of both the everyday lives of environmental activists and environmentalism as a whole” (Horton 2003, 63). Relating to Horton’s (2003) findings, Greenebaum (2012b, 132) states that a vegan identity “needs to be constructed by what one does: specifically, what one does (and does not) eat, consume and purchase.” Like Greenebaum (2012b) and Herzog (2003) I found material culture also to be of significant importance to creating a vegan identity. The next paragraph will illustrate this.

Horton (2003, 67) argues that environmentalists’ green identities are enabled and shaped by three factors: materialities, places, and occasions. The ‘vegan tour’ described above forms a good case to illustrate that this is applicable to vegans’ identities as well. *Materialities* involve the material goods that are present or deliberately absent in vegans’ daily practices. Seemingly trivial purchases, such as ‘milk’, become choices of identity for vegans (cf. Horton 2003). Food is especially important to the performance of vegan identity. The shopping and eating of some foods and the refusal of others powerfully communicates lifestyle (cf. Horton 2003). In the case of the vegan tour, the participants performed their identities by eating vegan cakes. The fact that the cakes were 100 percent plant-based made them fit into a vegan lifestyle. And the fact that they were delicious and indistinguishable from non-vegan cakes (both visually and by taste) visibly excited the participants. They served as a confirmation of vegans’ conviction that being vegan is easy and fun, instead of complicated and restrictive.

*Places* of consumption are part of the act of consumption as well. They are not merely sites where shopping and consuming takes place, they form an integral part of

the shopping and consuming experience. The patisserie in the vegan tour embodied “the values, tastes and practices” of the city’s vegan networks (Horton 2003, 70). There were vegan and animal rights posters, stickers, and slogans on the walls, the doors, and the counter. There was vegan merchandise (t-shirts and bags) hanging on the wall and there was a table with flyers and cards of vegan events, shops and artists. In this shop people can buy their way into vegan identities. Shopping here eliminates the possibility of deviating from a vegan lifestyle (cf. Horton 2003, 70). It is a place where vegans consume without having to think, safe in the knowledge that everything sold fits with the vegan ethic (even when it says ‘meringue’, ‘mousse’, or ‘bavarois’).

The vegan tour functioned as an *occasion* where vegans could act out their identity. Vegan socialities often include food. Because of the centrality of eating and drinking to vegan encounters in locations such as the patisserie, food values are often made explicit and centered in conversations taking place there (Horton 2003, 71). The main topic that was discussed among participants during the tour was indeed (vegan) food and everything related to it. People talked, among others, about the food that was on the table, about cooking, about restaurants, about eating with friends and family, and they gave each other tips and recipes. While sharing cakes and conversations participants formed into “a symbolic community with shared values at its heart” (Horton 2003, 71). I will go deeper into this later in this chapter.

### 3.2 Collective identity

To understand how vegans’ experience of a community arises it is useful to make the step from individual identity to collective identity, because “ [i]n contrast to individual identity (I or me), collective identity (we or us) is a place that is shared with a group of other people” (Simon en Klandermans 2001, 320). According to Ross Haenfler and his co-authors (2012), who are all researchers on social change, the relationship between individual identity and collective identity is important in movements that are based on lifestyle change. According to David Snow (2001), a social scientist that specializes in collective behavior and social movements, collective identity is best defined as a process, instead of a property of social actors. Collective identity should be conceived as a process because it is constructed and negotiated through a repeated activation of the relationships that link individuals (or groups) (Snow 2001, 44). Both Snow (2001) and Haenfler and colleagues (2012)

argue that collective identity is constituted by a shared and interactive sense of “we-ness”. It also serves to mobilize participation, because embedded in the shared sense of “we” is a corresponding sense of “collective agency” (Snow 2001, 3). This sense of collective agency is generated by the shared perceptions and feelings of a common cause, threat, or fate, which generates the shared sense of “we” and motivates people to act together in the name of, or for the sake of, the interests of the collectivity (Snow 2001, 4). However, as Haenfler and colleagues (2012, 8) note, since lifestyle action is “individualized and privatized instead of collective and public,” building strong personal connections between participants is not as likely (or important) for these movements. Instead, “movement adherents participate in an ‘imagined community’ consisted of those they see and hear about taking similar action” (Haenfler et al. 2012, 8). Benedict Anderson (1983, 6), an anthropologist and political scientist who is best known for his study on nationalism, defined the concept of imagined community in relation to the nation-state as follows: “[The nation-state] is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. [...] In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.” In other words, even if an individual does not know all the other individuals that make up the community, he can still imagine them being there. Many of my informants had only a few or even no vegan friends. Still, that did not mean they were not as convinced or passionate about veganism and their vegan lifestyle. While they might almost only experience their own actions and commitment, they understood that many others like them were taking similar actions, resulting in a significant collective result (Maurer 2002).

One medium I found to be particularly important to creating this experience of being part of a community was the Web. While Anderson (1983) described the concept of ‘imagined community’ in relation to the building of nations, it can be applied to the development and maintenance of both physical and virtual communities (Fox 2004, 51-52). The rise of the Internet and the subsequent greater possibilities to access and share information encourages feelings of belonging to imagined communities (cf. Papaoikonomou et al. 2016, 217). The Internet has developed into a community-forming device – “a space where [people] may meet and interact with one another and, in many cases, develop what has become commonly referred to as virtual

community” (Fox 2004, 48). Facebook became an important medium during my research, because I noticed that it played a significant role in vegans’ lives. I found that there are many Facebook groups (such as *Vegan in Berlin*) which function as places where people ask group members for information or advice (e.g. about recipes, about how to deal with certain situations, about where to find certain products, about ethical dilemmas, etcetera). Even though these vegans will most likely never meet the other vegans they interact with (or see interacting) online, the perceived existence of other like-minded individuals allows them to feel part of a larger imagined community (cf. Papaoikonomou et al. 2016, 217). The Facebook groups also serve as a means through which vegans arrange meet-ups and promote events. I used them to find informants and to search for events and gatherings I could attend. Furthermore, I noticed that vegans use Facebook as a platform to spread the vegan message to friends and families. Many vegans had vegan images and slogans as wallpapers on their profiles. They posted pictures, videos, quotes, articles, and status updates as an expression of their vegan identities and with the goal of making their followers more conscious.

Thus far, the preceding paragraphs in this chapter have shown that individual identity is a prerequisite for collective identity and collective identity is a prerequisite for a sense of community. The fact that individuals identify themselves as vegans makes it possible for them to relate to one another and feel a sense of “we-ness” that fosters a collective identity. A collective identity gives vegans awareness of others taking similar action, which makes them feel part of a larger community. Even though I explained that strong personal connections are not as likely or important for vegans to be passionate about their lifestyle, I found that vegans in Berlin still organize many events and meet-ups to share food together. The next paragraph discusses how the sharing of food also helps to create a sense of community.

### 3.3 Community through commensality

*Commensality*, which literally means ‘eating at the same table’, describes the “eating and drinking together in a common physical or social setting” (Kerner and Chou 2015, 1). Commensality forms a bridge from individual identity to collective identity. Anthropologist Yvonne le Grand (2010, 52) who conducted her fieldwork with an environmental activist group based in Lisbon, Portugal, argues that the “commensal

intake of food forms a bridge between the sphere of the selfish individual and the social collective”, because the act of eating itself is a self-centered, private activity, but when being done in common, it goes together with collective activities, such as engaging in conversations and discussions and exchanging information. Vegans in Berlin organized many events to share food together. They formed good opportunities for vegans to meet like-minded people while enjoying great vegan food. During her fieldwork, Le Grand (2010) discovered that the commensal meals she joined, which were organized by the environmental association she was researching, performed an interesting double role. She states the following:

*[...] eating turns into a political act as commensality performs the double role of being both the action and the tool for transmitting the ideas behind the eating of vegan food. Thus, commensality is not only a community building tool through the shared eating of a certain kind of food, but a political manifestation expressed through eating this certain kind of food as well. In other words: the personal becomes political (p. 67).*

Commensality is not just a community building tool for vegans because they share food, but because they share a specific kind of food, namely food that does not contain animal products. Like Warren J. Belasco (2006, 44) states: “[t]o eat appropriate foods is to participate in a particular group.” Eating this specific kind of food connects eaters into “a symbolic community with shared values at its heart” (Horton 2003, 71). Because vegan food is so intertwined with ideas and values, it becomes politically loaded. Vegan cuisine is a way to make vegan ideas “knowable, ritualized, and edible” (Clark 2013, 240). Eating and sharing vegan food can therefore be considered a political act. By simultaneously functioning as a community building tool and a political manifestation, commensality plays a double role. Its goal is to spread the philosophy behind the eating of vegan food and the best means to do this is by sharing vegan food. Therefore, commensality becomes “both the action and the tool” (Le Grand 2010, 67).

An important factor that stimulates the creation of community through commensality is the atmosphere that I experienced during vegan events. Whenever vegans got together there would be this incredibly vibrant energy in the air. I

struggled with putting this into words until I noticed that Le Grand (2010) points it out as well in her research. She states that “[i]t usually feels like there is a party in progress because of a ‘buzz’ in the air, a certain excited energy” (Le Grand 2010, 49). During the vegan tour participants were visibly excited about trying vegan cakes in the presence of other vegans (and would-be vegans). The fact that they were surrounded by like-minded individuals, that for once not eating anything from animals was the norm and not the exception, that the cakes looked and tasted amazing and that they were made without harming animals, these were all factors that contributed to creating this excited energy. Le Grand (2010, 73-74) explains it by stating that this buzz makes people (would-be vegans) experience that it feels good to do the right thing, while vegans know they are doing the right thing in that moment because of the buzz.



Figure 2. Sushi at birthday party Talia. Photo by author.



Figure 3. Vegetables with tofu. Photo by author.

Le Grand's (2010) definition of commensality emphasizes the sharing of food and conversations. Anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis' (1996) definition emphasizes the sensory and emotional dimension of eating together. She defines commensality as “the exchange of sensory memories and emotions, and of substances and objects incarnating remembrance and feeling” (Seremetakis 1996, 37). Through the use of sensory and visual ethnography I also observed the sensory and emotional dimension

of commensality for vegans. Vegan food does not represent vegans' values only because it is made without animal products. I found the food to also represent their values in a symbolic and sometimes even literal sense. In general, vegan cooking is mainly based on vegetables and fruits, which reflects the colorful (literally) and peaceful message that vegans try to spread. When my roommates and me would unload the groceries in our kitchen after shopping, the kitchen table would look like a feast of color with all the different fruits and vegetables. Tomatoes, bell peppers, different leafy greens, carrots, eggplants, bananas, apples, oranges, just to give an impression. But it is not only the unprepared ingredients that are colorful, while going over the photos that I took of the food I ate during my fieldwork, it struck me what an abundance of color was in all the different dishes, due to the use of so many different fruits and vegetables (see figure 2 and 3). Sharing these kinds of foods makes vegans feel good and healthy, both physically and spiritually. Where fruits and vegetables represent an image of life, health, and nonviolence, they form a sharp contrast to meat, which is more associated with bad things such as death, blood, and violence. The fact that vegan food is food for which no living being had to suffer gives it its emotional and spiritual dimension for vegans.

In this chapter I have demonstrated that identifying as vegan makes it possible for individuals to relate to other vegans on a collective level, which creates a sense of community among them. Commensal acts play a significant role for vegans, because by being surrounded by like-minded people and sharing food that represents their values, commensality builds community and functions as a political manifestation. In this sense, commensal acts also play a role in the relationship between food and social change that I clarify in this thesis. Commensal acts become both the action and the tool for spreading the ideas behind the eating of vegan food (cf. Le Grand 2010). By sharing politically laden food and feeling part of a bigger community, it becomes possible for ideas to spread among members and potential members. It is through the spreading of ideas that social change can occur. The next chapter discusses veganism on a social movement level, in order to clarify the link between food and social change. I will demonstrate that because vegans' lifestyle practices become political practices, a vegan lifestyle can be considered a form of lifestyle activism. Subsequently, I will demonstrate that veganism can be considered a lifestyle movement, because it aims at creating social change through individual lifestyle

change.



## 4. Veganism as a movement

*“We want a vegan world, not a vegan club.”*

- Jack Norris, Vegan Outreach

After discussing veganism in relation to the individual and community level, this chapter discusses it in relation to the level of a social movement in order to clarify how it aims to instigate social change. Thus far we have learned in Chapter 2 that vegans change their lifestyle because they long to see a certain change in the world. In Chapter 3 it was explained how vegans experience themselves as being part of a community of people who are undertaking the same kind of actions. In this chapter I argue that a vegan lifestyle can be considered a form of lifestyle activism, because vegans' lifestyle practices become political practices (cf. Portwood-Stacer 2013). Subsequently, I argue that veganism can be considered a lifestyle movement, because it aims at creating social change through individual lifestyle change. As vegans act individually, by changing their lifestyle, they understand their individual action as having an impact beyond their personal lives. They believe in both the power of their individual action and the power of non-coordinated collective action (cf. Haenfler et al 2012).

### 4.1 Lifestyle activism

*This afternoon a barbecue is being organized by some residents of our apartment building in the common garden behind the building.<sup>21</sup> They have asked everyone to bring some food to share. Oskar, Nadine, Sophie and I decide to go check it out. We bring pasta salad and some tofu sausages for on the barbecue. Most vegans aren't really fond of barbecues, due to the amounts of meat being eaten. When we arrive there is already a lot of food on the table. Salads, bread, and platters with raw meat. Sophie and I check the salads to see if there is something we could eat as well. Oskar helps the men trying to light up the barbecue. Nadine chats with the neighbors. One man goes inside and comes back with another plate full of raw meat. The man sitting next to Nadine looks amused and rubs his hands. The man holding the plate jokes “all very vegan!” Nadine tries to laugh about it, but I know her well enough by now to*

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<sup>21</sup> Fieldnotes May 8, 2016.

*know she isn't laughing on the inside. Sophie doesn't look amused. The man next to Nadine asks her whether she really never misses meat. I understand, through the tone of his voice, that he doesn't think highly of veganism. Nadine kindly explains to him why she chooses to live vegan, even though it seems, by the smirk on his face, that the man doesn't take it seriously. Sophie looks at me and rolls her eyes. When she leaves for the bathroom a little later, Nadine sits down next to me. I can tell that the conversation with the man aggravated her. She says that she always tries to be nice and talk to people when they question her lifestyle. She thinks it's better to remain open and positive. She says that Sophie can't do it, because she gets angry. Oskar joins us with a plate of grilled tofu sausages.*

According to Laura Portwood-Stacer (2013, 4), who conducts research on identity, consumption, and political resistance, “lifestyle is a set of routine choices an individual makes about practices as various as dress, diet, housing, leisure activities, and more.” Regarding alternative lifestyles Portwood-Stacer (2013) states the following:

*Lifestyle choices that depart from the mainstream are particularly noticeable and they seem to indicate an active effort to differentiate from the status quo. Such alternative lifestyles often bespeak alternative ways of thinking about society, sometimes extending to radical visions for how society should change. [...] Politically inflected lifestyle practices contest divisions between what counts as “the personal” and “the political.” Since personal acts hold political meaning for people, it becomes necessary to rethink what it means to engage in political activism (p. 4-5).*

As I have shown earlier in this thesis, lifestyle choices become political choices for vegans. Ethical considerations are involved in even the most trivial daily decisions. Personal acts come to hold political meaning, because they are conscious decisions. They are based on thoughtful deliberation and are part of a bigger strategy aimed at creating change. They are not selfish acts, only aimed at pleasuring individuals themselves. Other living beings are taken into consideration in the hope that their lives can be made better. That is why personal acts become political acts and therefore *meaningful* acts to vegans.

This meaningfulness is what differentiates a vegan lifestyle from non-political lifestyles. According to educational theorist Étienne Wenger (1998, 51-52), meaning is an experience and it is closely tied to practice, because through practice “we can experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful.” I argue that because vegans’ lifestyle choices become particularly meaningful, a vegan lifestyle can be considered a form of activism. Portwood-Stacer (2013, 5, italics in original) argues that “whether a practice can be considered activism does not depend on the measurable *effects* of the action, but rather on the *meaning* people attribute to it.” The deployment of lifestyle for activist purposes is what Portwood-Stacer (2013, 5) defines as *lifestyle activism*. Vegans deploy lifestyle as a means to create social change. Their daily choices have political meaning, making their lifestyle a continuous performance of activism. In his study on the rise of the natural foods movement in the 1960s, Belasco (2006) states:

*Unlike sporadic antiwar protests, dietary rightness could be lived 365 days a year, three times a day. The New Left had always insisted that the personal was political. What could be more personal than food? And what could be more political than challenging agribusiness, America’s largest and most environmentally troublesome industry, with \$350 billion in assets (1969), employing 23 million workers and 3 million farmers, selling \$100 billion worth of food to 200 million consumers (p. 28)?*

Food makes up the most significant part of a vegan lifestyle. It is the medium through which vegans can cause the most impact. The buying and not-buying of certain products is one important part of their everyday activism. Furthermore, the preparing and sharing of vegan food is also one of their primary methods for making a political statement. To vegans, food is a medium for broader change (Belasco 2006, 28).

## 4.2 Presenting veganism

Lifestyle activism, as Portwood-Stacer (2013) defines it, focuses mainly on daily choices regarding practices such as diet and dress. However, I also found a significant element of the activist side of a vegan lifestyle to be in the presenting and promoting of the lifestyle to others in daily life situations. While enjoying our freshly prepared spaghetti Bolognese, I asked Erik whether he considered his vegan lifestyle a form of

activism.<sup>22</sup> He replied with a ‘yes’ and made up the word *Privat Aktivist* (individual activist) to describe himself. He explained that he tries to influence the people in his environment to consider going vegan as well. I have asked other informants this question as well, and remarkably all of them (sometimes after having to think for a moment) answered affirmatively. The main reason they felt like they lived an activist lifestyle was because, like Erik, they tried to have an effect on the people around them. What I found interesting was that every one of them thought about what could be the best way to achieve this. The question ‘How do you get non-vegans to consider going vegan?’ was on a lot of vegans’ minds. They debated the best way to discuss their diet and lifestyle to omnivores (cf. Greenebaum 2012a, 311). The scientific literature presents different results on what is the best strategy. While some scholars argue that showing shocking visual images might be the most effective strategy (Jasper and Poulsen 1995; Jasper and Nelson 1992), others find that non-confrontational approaches, using education rather than shock, have more of an impact (Mika 2006; Munro 2005). I found that my informants also had very different ideas on what works best, resulting in very different approaches in acting out their ‘activism’ in daily life.

As the situation with the barbecue at our apartment building illustrates, Nadine’s strategy for trying to get people to think about veganism is patience and understanding when answering questions. By being open to conversations and remaining calm and friendly she tries to represent vegans and veganism in a positive way. Greenebaum’s (2012a) findings correspond to this. She states “[a]ccording to my participants, it is critically important to represent [...] veganism in a positive light in order for their audience to listen and accept what they hear” (Greenebaum 2012a, 312). Nadine’s conversation with her neighbor can be described as “*front stage behavior*,” because she carefully constructs strategies to manage her presentation of self as a vegan (Greenebaum 2012a, 312, italics in original). Furthermore, our private chat after the conversation can be described as “backstage behavior,” because it was a reaction to omnivores’ reactions, “privately and among peers to vent frustrations, interpret reactions, and strategize future face-to-face interactions” (Greenebaum 2012a, 312).

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Erik at the dinner table in his apartment April 25, 2016.

Situations like the one Nadine found herself in ask for patience and self-control. I rarely witnessed Sophie engaging in conversations explaining why she lives a vegan lifestyle. She seemed to avoid it. But when she did, the conversation would quickly turn into a heated discussion. She would become visibly aggravated with the person questioning her. As I got to know her better, she eventually admitted that it was her insecurity of feeling the pressure to always have a strong answer present when being interrogated by skeptics. The fact that she did not always know how to answer questions caused her to become irritated. A person who did know the answers and would still get aggravated with people was Talia. She was 42 and from Israel. She worked as a graphic designer and rented out a couple apartments, only to vegans. From the moment I met her I could tell she was very passionate and ethically convinced. She was not afraid of telling people what she knew and how she felt about it. When I added her on Facebook, I saw immediately that she believes showing shocking images is the most effective strategy – they covered her whole timeline. During the interview with her she said she thought vegans should not keep quiet.<sup>23</sup> They should keep the conversation open. In her case it meant that they should not be afraid to talk to people about the abusive practices in the livestock industry. Although she did think that people will only listen when they are open to it, she admitted that she did not always have the patience. “I try not to get angry, but it’s hard for me.”

Some informants made up creative ways to intertwine activism with their daily life practices. Lydia told me that she likes to walk into random restaurants and cafés in the city, look at the menu and then loudly say: “What? You don’t have anything vegan?”<sup>24</sup> And then she leaves again. She does it without the intention to actually order anything at that moment. Her only purpose is to let restaurant owners know there is a demand for vegan food. Another example comes from Julian, who was very occupied with finding ways to get people to think about going vegan. I met him at the *Stammtisch* and he was hard to forget. He had long dark hair and wore colorful clothes, including a t-shirt that said ‘vegan’ in big, bright letters. He came in with a large poster rolled up under his arm. Of course people asked about it. When he showed it to us there were pictures of animals on it, such as a cow, a pig, a fish, and a chicken. The text read: ‘*JEDES Leben ist wertvoll. Lebe VEGAN. Sei ein HELD.*’

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Talia at the dinner table in her apartment  
April 27, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Lydia at the kitchen table of her apartment  
April 26, 2016.

(Every life is valuable. Live vegan. Be a hero.) He told us that he shows the poster to people during his daily rides on the subway.<sup>25</sup> He never leaves the house without it. He said that he truly believed that this was the best way to get people to think about their actions. Even though this poster act could be almost considered as hardcore activism, not far removed from protests and demonstrations, this could still be considered lifestyle activism, because he intertwined it with his everyday practices. Veganism is even a part of his daily subway rides.

This section shows that spreading the vegan message is also a part of vegans' daily lives. Some people did this in a more active sense than others. Talia and Julian, for example, had a very direct and outspoken style. I knew that they were also very present in the activist scene in Berlin and joined protests and demonstrations. Nadine did not join public actions. She would only discuss veganism with the people in her environment. Nevertheless, she was responsible for her two younger sisters, my other roommates Sophie and Krista, to go vegan as well. These examples show that, even though one person is more active than the other, almost every vegan is passionate and engaged in some way. They all dream of making a change in the world. They all want veganism to spread. They have their own ways of trying to achieve this.

### 4.3 Lifestyle movement

As the previous paragraph illustrated, vegans make up a very heterogeneous group of people. Each individual has his/her own way of shaping his/her vegan lifestyle. Nevertheless, veganism is conceptualized as a social movement in the scientific literature (Cherry 2006; Haenfler et al. 2012). Cherry (2006, 156) states that “[v]egans represent a new form of social movement that is not based on legislation or identity politics, but instead is based on everyday practices in one's lifestyle.” Haenfler and his co-authors (2012) introduce a new term for this new form of social movement: *lifestyle movement*. They define lifestyle movements as “loosely bound collectivities in which participants advocate lifestyle change as a primary means to social change, politicizing daily life while pursuing morally coherent ‘authentic’ identities” (Haenfler et al. 2012, 15). According to Cherry (2006) membership of vegan organizations is not a good indicator for estimating the number of practicing vegans. Social movement organizations play a less significant role in lifestyle movements

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<sup>25</sup> Informal conversation with Julian during the *Stammtisch* March 17, 2016.

than they do in traditional social movements. Therefore, veganism should be considered as “a larger, more diffuse movement than organizational membership alone implies” (Cherry 2006, 156).

Both Snow (2001) and Haenfler and colleagues (2012) argue that social movements such as veganism depend on collective identity. It serves as “a resource and reference point for individuals as they craft morally coherent and meaningful personal identities” (Haenfler et al. 2012, 8). Because participants in lifestyle movements continually integrate movement goals into every aspect of daily life, the distinction between individual and collective identity becomes especially muddy (cf. Haenfler et al 2012, 8). In the previous chapter I demonstrated that collective identity is important for creating a sense of community among vegans. This sense of community is important, because it forms the basis from which a movement can develop. Community and movement are two different things; they serve different goals. Community is an element of a social movement. The vegan community is where people find support and exchange information. Here they can form personal ties with other vegans and perform ‘backstage behavior’ (cf. Greenebaum 2012a). Community fosters commitment (cf. Haenfler et al. 2012, 8). The vegan movement is all about action, collective action. About large numbers of people who do not necessarily have strong social connections. The only goal is to spread the vegan message and instigate social change.

Traditionally, social movement organizations would play a central role in ‘structuring’ movements. As I mentioned, most vegans have limited contact with such organizations, so there are more factors that shape the vegan movement. Haenfler et al. (2012, 10) state that “[m]uch of the structure of [lifestyle movements], including movement ideology and authority, tends to emerge from a diffuse discursive field rather than in the course of a highly organized campaign [...]” They name three factors that give lifestyle movements their structure: informal networks, cultural entrepreneurs, and connections to formal organizations (Haenfler et al 2012, 10). I found these factors to shape the vegan movement as well. Before they became vegan, people often learned about veganism through their friends or family. Alternative lifestyles such as veganism spread through “informal social networks, rituals, and events that infuse meaning and significance upon consumption patterns and other daily habits” (Haenfler et al. 2012, 10). As the previous chapter showed, commensality is a good example that illustrates how the spreading of veganism

through informal networks functions. ‘Cultural entrepreneurs’ are individuals who emerge as “movement ‘authorities’ by producing popular books, audio recordings, newsletters, magazines, or documentaries” (Haenfler et al. 2012, 10). During my fieldwork I heard vegans often mention the same titles of works that inspired them and that they show to friends and family in the hope to inspire them too. Some

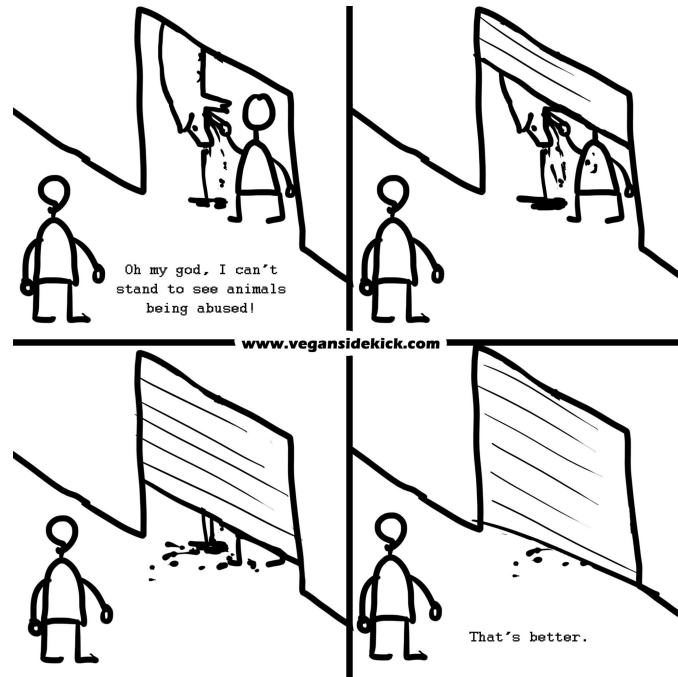


Figure 4. Comic from Vegan Sidekick. Illustration by Richard Watts.

examples are: Jonathan Safran Foer’s book *Eating Animals*, Kip Andersen’s documentary *Cowspiracy*, Richard Watts’ *Vegan Sidekick* comics, and speeches by Gary Yourofsky and Melanie Joy. These people are cultural entrepreneurs, because they gained status based on their individual charismatic writings and lectures, which provide ideological structure and boundaries to the vegan movement and become part of the movement’s “cultural toolkit” (cf. Haenfler et al. 2012, 11). Marieke, a Dutch girl whom I met at the *Stammtisch*, recommended for me to show my friends and family *Cowspiracy* and give them a book from *Vegan Sidekick*, as if that was some kind of ‘converter package’ that would guarantee to make people go vegan.<sup>26</sup> Finally, even though there are far more practicing vegans than there are members of vegan organizations, lifestyle movement organizations, NGO’s, and businesses help to structure the movement as they “organize and groom leaders, build a collective identity, refine movement ideology, organize public events and social networks, and mobilize adherents to spread movement ideology” (Haenfler et al. 2012, 11). I found the German organization of *PETA* (*People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals*) and the *VEBU* to be the two biggest and most influential organizations in Berlin. One way

<sup>26</sup> Informal conversation with Marieke during the *Stammtisch* March 17, 2016.



in which they helped to structure the movement is by providing information and suggestions for lifestyle action (cf. Haenfler et al. 2012, 11).

Both Cherry (2006) and Haenfler et al. (2012) state that veganism is a diffuse movement with a lesser degree of organization than many commonly studied movements. However, lifestyle movements have “a degree of long-term continuity and stability that differentiates them from the more spontaneous forms of collective behavior such as fads, crazes, and panics” (Haenfler et al. 2012, 10). Due to the emphasis on individual lifestyle change the movement becomes part of people’s daily lives, which makes it easier for people to stick to it on the long term. Living a political lifestyle will probably take less effort in the long term than going out on the streets to protest regularly. I asked some of my informants what they thought of veganism being portrayed as a trend in the media. Many of them had experience people dismissing veganism as a trend and they were not pleased with it. Still, they did recognize the rapid increase of veganism’s popularity during the past couple of years. Erik said: “Veganism is indeed a trend, but that always sounds as if it will go away again, and I think it will not.”<sup>27</sup> I also asked informants how they saw the future of veganism. Their answers were remarkably different, ranging from extremely pessimistic to wildly optimistic. The pessimists expressed their fear of rapid developing countries such as China and Brazil, where the demand for meat will probably keep increasing in the coming years. The optimists believed that through ongoing education and activism the number of vegans would keep expanding. I even met someone so optimistic that he claimed that the question was not *if*, but *when* (the world would become vegan).

A question that kept intriguing me during my fieldwork was: why is it that veganism has become especially popular in Berlin in comparison to other European cities? Why does Berlin provide particularly fertile ground for the vegan movement to develop like it has? Barbara Becker-Cantarino (1996, 1), who writes about cultural transformations in Germany, states that “Berlin has been the primary site of political, social, and cultural transformation in modern Germany. [...] The abruptness of political and social transformation during [the twentieth] century has meant that the relationship between Berlin as a cultural site, its varying groups of inhabitants, and Germany at large had to be renegotiated repeatedly.” It gave the city its reactionary

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with Erik at the dinner table in his apartment  
April 25, 2016.

atmosphere in which all kinds of alternative subcultures and countercultural movements have been able to thrive for decades now (cf. Balzer 2004, 62). Berlin has become a place for people who do not fit in in the societies where they originate to find like-minded people and live the life they imagine. Many of my informants came from towns and villages (both in Germany or other countries), where they grew up in families where meat and other animal products formed a major part of the diet. Berlin is a vegan hub in a meat-loving Germany where living a vegan lifestyle becomes easier because of the many opportunities that have been established there over the last years. I met up for coffee one morning with the girl behind one of the Netherlands' most popular vegan blogs. She was in Berlin for a couple of days. She told me a story about one of her friends.<sup>28</sup> He was a Dutch guy who left for Berlin without anything. He started baking vegan donuts and selling them at festivals and events. They became a hit and his business grew so well that he is now opening his own donut shop in Neukölln. This story illustrates just how fertile the ground in Berlin really is. People with a good idea for a vegan business have good chances for success in this city. There appears to be plenty of demand.

In this chapter I have demonstrated that a vegan lifestyle can be considered as lifestyle activism. Portwood-Stacer (2013, 5) argues that “whether a practice can be considered activism does not depend on the measurable *effects* of the action, but rather on the *meaning* people attribute to it.” As daily lifestyle practices become political practices for vegans they become meaningful practices. Furthermore, I argued that part of vegans' lifestyle activism is the effort to try to influence others to consider going vegan as well. I explained that veganism can be considered a lifestyle movement, because it aims at individual lifestyle change instead of legislative change. Veganism is a diffuse movement, which is depending on collective identity. The sense of community that I described in the previous chapter is what forms the basis for the development of a vegan movement. The city of Berlin appears to be a specifically fertile ground for the vegan movement to become as omnipresent in the city as it is nowadays.

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<sup>28</sup> Informal conversation at a vegan café with girl behind Dutch vegan blog March 22, 2016.

## 5. Food and social change

On April 18, 2016, a new vegan restaurant opened in Neukölln. It was a restaurant inspired by the typical American diners. They served vegan fast-food such as hamburgers and fries. For the opening they announced on Facebook that there would be “free burgers and booze.” About 800 people showed up. It was so crowded that people were standing on the street blocking the traffic. The police had to step in to lead people away from the restaurant. The next day the happening was picked up by a lot of news websites, even in the Netherlands. Many of my friends sent me links of the articles. The Dutch news channel posted their article on Facebook and many people commented on it. The headline said: “Too many hipsters at opening vegan restaurant in Berlin.”<sup>29</sup> As I read through the comments I saw someone who tagged a friend, who was apparently living in Berlin, saying: “you’re so mainstream in Berlin.” The friend replied to the comment by saying: “no dude, I’m basically the only person here who still eats meat.”

In this thesis I have shown that veganism, both as a lifestyle and a research subject, has gained in popularity over the past years. Veganism is increasingly present in the media and public consciousness. By using a holistic approach, I have explained how the vegan movement in Berlin takes shape. The aim of this thesis was to explain the relation between food and social change through the vegan movement in Berlin. Furthermore, I wanted to highlight the role of the sharing of food in this relation. In this concluding chapter I further deepen this relation and reflect on my research.

The central argument that I explained in this thesis is that vegans’ everyday lifestyle practices become meaningful practices, because they serve as a means to perform a certain activism. I have illustrated this by explaining what happens on the level of the vegan individual, the vegan community, and the vegan movement. I started with investigating why people become vegan in the first place. I learned that every vegan has a personal story of why and how he/she became vegan. Because vegans think of all animals as equals, they envision a world in which people live with – as opposed to depend on – the other species on the planet (cf. Soifer 2003). People become vegan because they strive to live in line with their ideals. To them it is the logical way to

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<sup>29</sup> “Te veel hipsters bij veganistisch restaurant Berlijn,” NOS, accessed August 6, 2016, <http://nos.nl/artikel/2100012-te-veel-hipsters-bij-veganistisch-restaurant-berlijn.html>.

achieve the world they envision. As a consequence, ethical considerations become part of the most trivial decisions of everyday life. I have shown that by identifying as a vegan it becomes possible for people to relate to other vegans, creating a collective identity. The experience of other like-minded individuals undertaking similar action makes vegans feel part of a larger community. I found the Web to be particularly important to creating this 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983). I found that vegans in Berlin organize many opportunities to share food together, which also helps to build community among them. Commensality appeared to play the double role of being both the action and the tool for spreading the ideas behind the eating of vegan food (cf. Le Grand 2010). Because vegan food is a representation of vegans' values and ideas, it becomes politically charged. Therefore, commensality functions as a community building tool through the shared eating of a certain kind of food, as well as a political manifestation expressed through the eating of a certain kind of food (cf. Le Grand 2010). The politicization of vegans' lifestyle practices caused me to argue that a vegan lifestyle can be considered a form of lifestyle activism. Lifestyle activism is the deployment of lifestyle for activist purposes (Portwood-Stacer 2013). Whether a practice can be considered activism depends on the meaning people attribute to it (Portwood-Stacer 2013). Lifestyle choices become political choices for vegans, because they are part of a bigger strategy aimed at creating social change. Personal acts become political acts and therefore *meaningful* acts to vegans. Veganism becomes a movement because of the focus on collective action to spread the vegan message. I have demonstrated that the vegan movement can be considered a lifestyle movement, because it is a loosely bound collective in which participants politicize daily life and advocate lifestyle change as a primary means to social change (cf. Haenfler et al. 2012). It is a diffuse movement with a lesser degree of organization. However, due to the emphasis on lifestyle change it has a relatively high degree of long-term continuity and stability.

## 5.1 Food as a means for creating social change

Using the vegan movement in Berlin as a case study, I have shown that food is viewed as a medium through which social change can be accomplished. Over the past decades, food has become increasingly political, due to the growing liberalization of international markets, which led to the increasing globalization of the production and

consumption of food. People often feel as if they have lost control over the ways their food is being produced. At the same time, through activist and media attention, people have become increasingly aware of the links between production and consumption. More and more people are concerned about the negative effect of their practices on the well-being of other humans, nature, and animals. They realize that they can use their consumer decisions to support practices they find just and avoid practices they find unjust. This trend is called ‘ethical consumption’ in the academic literature, and it is an increasingly popular research subject among social scientists. Social scientist Clive Barnett and his co-authors (2005, 26) argue that consumption and consumerism are inherently “ethical” or “moral” realms of social practice, because they involve a set of questions about the relationship between how people want to live and how society should be organized.

Food forms a major part of people’s consumption patterns. Therefore, it seems that changing food practices, especially if done collectively, can be a very effective way to have an impact on food systems and society. However, food appears to be an extremely sensitive subject. This has to do with the central role it plays in our lives. As Belasco (2014, 28) rightly states: “What could be more personal than food?” Food habits are imprinted almost from birth. Food patterns change very slowly and it takes considerable effort to change them. According to Belasco (2014, 28), the altering of one’s food practices is almost like psychoanalysis: “a confrontation with subconsciously ingrained values, tastes and behaviors.” Therefore, the power of food as a medium for social change lies in the power of food as a medium to change consciousness. As I argued in this thesis, social change can be achieved through the spreading of ideas. For the spreading of ideas people need to be open to hear them. This is where social movements can play a significant role. I have demonstrated in this thesis that the rise of the vegan movement has led to veganism being increasingly present in the media and public consciousness. Through informal networks and with the help of movement organizations more and more people come into contact with the ideas and values that the movement stands for. This can generate increasing public support. Public support is “one of the most important resources social movements mobilize in their efforts to overcome cultural inertia and the interests of powerful actors” (Stern et al. 1999, 81). This is because supporters of a movement potentially may become participants (or even activists) (cf. McCright and Dunlap 2008, 652).

Once movements gain more participants, their potential for making a significant impact and creating social change increases.

## 5.2 Implications for anthropology

With this research I hope to have made a distinctive contribution to the anthropology of food and the study of social movements. The relationship between food and social change is relevant within anthropology, due to the increasing politicization of food. This gives rise to questions such as: ‘Why do people want social change?’ and ‘Why is food such a powerful medium to achieve this?’ In this thesis I have answered these questions by using the vegan movement in Berlin as a case study. I have demonstrated that veganism as a way to reject the livestock industry and the use of animals for human convenience has become increasingly popular. Within anthropology, there is a growing interest in the concept of sustainable citizenship. It takes the well-being of other humans, nature, and animals into account in daily life. I have illustrated that veganism is an ultimate act of sustainable citizenship, because their choice of lifestyle is the outcome of critical examination of their food and lifestyle practices. Therefore, this research contributes to the current knowledge on how sustainable citizenship is taken shape in practice.

I have shown that lifestyle action is increasingly used as a means to stimulate social change. As a consequence, the popularity of lifestyle movements is also expanding. Through ethical consumption, people increasingly deploy consumption patterns to make a statement and to support or deliberately avoid certain products and practices. The current scientific literature on lifestyle activism mainly emphasizes daily choices regarding practices such as diet and dress. However, in the case of a vegan lifestyle, I found that presenting the lifestyle to others also formed a significant element. I discovered that every vegan deliberates the question what is the best way to present and promote his/her lifestyle to others. This comes forth out of a certain passion and engagement that every vegan experiences. There is discussion, both among vegans as well as in the scientific literature, about what kind of strategy works best to make people consider a vegan lifestyle. The success of social movements is dependent on the spreading of the ideas and values behind the movement. Further research could provide more insight into the process of the spreading of movement

ideas. This is an important process. A better understanding of this would lead to a better understanding of how movements develop and expand.

I have demonstrated that it is useful to investigate modern movements such as veganism on different levels of analysis. This way, it becomes clear which factors are important to shaping these movements. I found that the Internet, and specifically social media, plays a very important role in the shaping of the vegan movement. Vegans use social media to share information, organize events, and promote their vegan lifestyle. Still, due to the focus of my research I have only paid limited attention to this aspect. I recommend that anthropological research might benefit from further research on the importance of the Internet and social media on the spreading of social movements. In this globalized and digital age, it has become increasingly easy to share information. It has also become easier to connect with people across the globe. This could explain why veganism is not just growing in Germany, but in many countries all over the world. The fact that vegans in Berlin talked about the best international vegan travelling destinations illustrates this. Le Grand (2010, 57) mentions the possibility of the development of “genuinely global social movements.” Through the Web, movement participants can form large regional and international networks, becoming movements without borders (cf. Le Grand 2010, 57).

### 5.3 Importance of an anthropological perspective

To gain insight into social phenomena, ethnographic research can be of great value. This kind of research makes it possible to zoom out, by zooming in. With that I mean that by collecting individual stories, ethnographic research can make larger, more complex issues become more insightful. I was able to unravel how the vegan movement in Berlin takes shape, by talking to the individuals of which it was made up. Through conversations and observations I was able to notice the difference between what vegans said and what they did. For example, since veganism is about making your actions consistent with your beliefs, it was interesting to discover that in practice some vegans would not always be as consistent as they wanted to be. These are the nuances that are important to understand how vegans fill in their lifestyles.

Furthermore, the use of visual and sensory ethnography gave my data an interesting extra dimension, which I would not have been able to capture otherwise. It taught me that food forms a very important part of vegans’ lifestyle. Vegans are crazy

about food. It was one of the main topics of conversations whenever I would eat with vegans. They spend a lot of time and effort on it and it shows in the food they prepare. They get much satisfaction of cooking delightful meals for which no animals had to be harmed, especially if they can show it off to their non-vegan friends and family. I have seen and tasted the attention and creativity that vegans put in their food in the dishes that I have eaten during my fieldwork and I hope that I have been able to bring that across in this thesis.

Finally, I want to reflect on my research position in the field. Being part of my research population, a vegan in Berlin, I had to continually balance between my role as an objective scientist and my role as an engaged vegan. I have purposely chosen for this position, because I want veganism to become more present in the societal and scientific debates. It gives me the opportunity to do something for the vegan movement through my work as an engaged anthropologist. I take an example from Elizabeth Cherry, whose work I have used in this thesis. She is a vegan ethnographer who does research on animal rights activists, hoping that her research can benefit their activism (see Cherry 2010). As a scientist and an insider, I can explain how my group of study should be understood. I can therefore form a link between those outside of the movement and those inside the movement, hopefully bringing them closer together. Regardless of my position, I have striven to portray every side of a vegan lifestyle and the vegan movement in this thesis. It is the only way in which I can truly be of help to the vegan movement and my informants.



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