Rasmus R. Simonsen interviewed by Massimo Filippi and Marco Reggio

Rasmus R Simonsen, *Animal Studies Repository*

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**Rasmus R. Simonsen** interviewed by **Massimo Filippi** and **Marco Reggio**

1) *You describe a resistance to recognize veganism as a political issue. Such a resistance is centered around your experience as a vegan male, to whom this vegaphobia is linked to homophobia. How these two disposals of denial / removal intersect and enhance each other, in your opinion?*

First of all, allow me to address the question of politics in relation to veganism. I actually think that veganism is inherently political, since the commitment to disavow the consumption of animal products is aimed directly at the *polis*: veganism seeks to dismantle and disrupt the ideological and material structures of meat consumption as they appear in modern society (from the physical place of the abattoir to the mindset that justifies the killing and exploitation of other species). It is true that in my text I set out to align veganism with the anti-futurity thesis of Lee Edelman and other queer theorists. This thesis calls for an ethics of negativity that takes aim at not only conservative forces but, more to the point, the telos of revolutionary politics, which tends to think in terms of anticipation, dreaming of a future that will erase all the injustices of the present. Such a future invariably depends on reproduction as a heterosexual imperative. This is why PETA, for example, focuses so heavily on heterosexuality, not only as a norm, but also as the condition of change through reproduction. On more than one occasion, I’ve heard fellow vegans assert that if they can’t make people change now, they will just have to produce new life that can be molded from birth to fit their ideology. Queer veganism, on the other hand, reveals how the symbolic or ideological structures of meat consumption mirror those of heteronormativity, which, aside from disavowing “deviant” sexualities, historically and culturally has been connected to a certain way of eating. Heterosexual masculinity, in the West at least, is nourished on meat. Homophobic discourse feeds vegaphobia, as choosing to eat differently, for males in particular, is linked to effeminacy and a lack of virility. Veganism and queer theory are obvious bedfellows in this way, since both levels a critique at normalizing impulses in society.

2) *Animal liberation movement seems to have focused on (and identified with) veganism, interpreted as an “alternative” style of consuming. Why this happened? Is it possible (and desirable) a change of this trend?*

Veganism appears as an obvious extension of animal liberation. Nonetheless, there are of course different approaches to veganism and different reasons for someone to go vegan. Viewed purely as a way of consuming, veganism quickly loses its bite. In North America and England, a grocery chain called Whole Foods Market has become the paragon of “alternative” consumption. Not strictly speaking a vegan business, Whole Foods stocks a cornucopia of vegan products alongside organic meat and other “ethically” sourced animal products. The juxtaposition of veganism with the new ethos of ethical
consumption that Whole Foods stands for means that veganism has effectively entered
the mainstream of consumerism (Whole Foods operates more than 300 stores, and vegan
products can of course be found in most other big grocery stores). However, like anything
else that is subsumed by the mainstream, veganism is no longer radical: as another
product on the self, it can only ever pose as an alternative, rather than as a real challenge,
to meat consumption. The trend of viewing veganism as an alternative to “normal” diets
can be seen in the rise of so-called “flexitarian” cookbooks (The Part-Time Vegan is one
title), which offer all the health and taste benefits of veganism with none of the
commitment. It is of course easier to sell the idea of veganism to someone by presenting
it simply as a supplement to one’s established, ordinary pattern of consumption. All of
this is to say that veganism, viewed purely in terms of the self (as a way of bettering
one’s health, etc.) does nothing to challenge the structures of oppression that lie at the
heart of the Western industrialized food complex. For veganism to retain any of its punch
and radical nature, it must be fundamentally “unappetizing” to mainstream consumerism.
In this way, veganism can’t simply be thought of as an “alternative” to meat
consumption, something to indulge in when the mood strikes. To be truly and effectively
troubling to the practice and ideology of meat consumption and the oppression of non-
human species, veganism must stick in the throat of every meat-eater. Veganism can only
succeed by disrupting the pleasure of eating animals. It is thus crucial to distinguish
between the convenient veganism of the flexitarian movement and the kind of veganism
that insists on being uncomfortable, deviant, and un-apologetic in its rejection of animal
exploitation.

3) You spoke about an alliance between queer and antispeciesist issues. Is it possible a
mutual contamination, and a collaboration, between these two movements? And, if yes,
on which basis?

As my previous answers indicate, I would say, yes, definitely. While it is important to
recognize their differences, queer and antispeciesist/vegan issues are both founded on a
minority position in relation to mainstream norms. Both will necessarily occupy a deviant
position in relation to what counts as “normal” ways of being: loving, fucking,
eating…none of these can ever be considered a neutral activity. It may be that for
heterosexual omnivores, whom they love or what they eat appears entirely natural—but
we know that this is only because heterosexuality and omnivorous diets have been
naturalized (i.e., reiterated ad nauseum to a point of discursive equilibrium) within
Western society. As such, queerness and veganism chafe against the norm in different yet
related ways. As I point out in my text, queers and vegans, almost by default, embody a
certain negativity: by virtue of projecting a sexual and social directionality that is not
fixed on reproduction, queerness calls into question the very naturalness of
heterosexuality; similarly, veganism, simply by existing, challenges the centrality of
animal protein as the be all and end all of human health. Queers and vegans re-ascribe or
negate certain patterns of being that in most cases come to rest on the body, which is of
course always caught up in and shot through by social and cultural markers that
determine what a “good” body must act, look, and feel like. Queerness disturbs the aim of
reproduction as the social norm par excellence. This is why Lee Edelman insists that queer theory, rather than attempt to demystify homosexuality, should embrace its negative position against the social value of reproduction. As he puts it in No Future, the value of queer theory “resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself” (6). Just as queerness challenges the value of putting ultimate stock in reproducing, ideologically, the fantasy of a future which is really just more of the same—“an insistence on sameness that intends to re-store an Imaginary past” (Edelman 21)—veganism, in my formulation, challenges the value of a system which is founded on negating the worth of non-human lives. When we begin to realize that queerness and veganism have both been made subject to the same deathly skepticism, with which the ideologues of the norm communicate, as my essay shows, we see how queer and antispeciesist critique, in turn, can converge and supplement each other. This is not to say that all queers will be amenable to veganism or animal liberation, or that all vegans would necessarily want to identify with queerness. It is merely to suggest that queerness and veganism share a stake in deviancy, and that both embody the perverse will to disrupt and impede the operation of sexual, gender, and dietary norms in Western society and beyond.

4) It seems to us that one of the most intriguing aspects of your essay is to bring attention to what we could call “animal pornography”. Carol Adams was one of the first scholar to show that speciesism frequently uses pornography to devalue both women’s and animal condition. Now, it seems to us that a new trend is developing, which is the direct use of animal bodies to produce pornography. This is used both in case of speciesism (e.g., when advertising the so called “happy meat) and of antispeciesism (e.g., in case of the Peta movie you refer to in your piece). How do you interpret such a new tendency? And, in more general terms, what do you think about the use of violated bodies, of grief exhibition, to promote animal liberation?

The first thing that strikes me about your question is the notion of pornography itself, which we can provisionally define as the production of vicarious sexual pleasure. Additionally, pornography of course also concerns the visual and/or physical exploitation of exposed bodies. Since Carol Adams so effectively has established the link between patriarchy and speciesism based on the similar processes of exploitation that animal and women’s bodies are subjected to in print media, especially, I won’t comment on this in detail. It is clear, however, that the discursive processes that Adams has painstakingly revealed are far-reaching. Consider, for example, Lady Gaga’s “meat dress” that she wore to the 2010 MTV Music Video Awards. Apparently, she wore it as a statement against the “don’t-ask-don’t-tell” policy of the American military. The raw beef meat of her dress was supposed to, metonymically, remind everyone that by not taking a stand (in this case against homophobia in the military) one could easily be reduced to a piece of meat (as women have been for centuries). The effectiveness of Gaga’s statement rested on the generally accepted notion that the animals “supplying” the meat for her dress had not been deserving of rights. The fate of livestock animals has in fact become an easy symbol of ultimate disenfranchisement, which “activist” artists, such as Gaga, can conveniently draw upon to address specifically human issues, while, in the process, effacing the actual
exploitation of animals. Gaga is of course known to be an ally of queers everywhere, but whatever issue she was trying to promote by wearing her meat dress quickly became secondary to the spectacle it produced: photos of Gaga posing seductively in her meat ensemble cropped up everywhere (for example, she appeared on the cover of *Vogue* wearing an earlier version of the design). Is this an example of meat porn, then? I am inclined to answer yes: the double objectification of meat and female sexuality projected by Gaga’s body works to produce a visual commodity that triggers both aesthetic and sexual connotations. In this regard, I am reminded of the song “Atrocity Exhibition” by Joy Division which contains the following lyrics:

Asylums with doors open wide,  
Where people had paid to see inside,  
For entertainment they watch his body twist,  
Behind his eyes he says, ‘I still exist.’

Gaga “twisting” her body, covered in layers of meat, does nothing to acknowledge the now-gone existence of what she’s wearing. This is the “atrocious” part of her act: reducing to “entertainment” and spectacle not only the dead animal parts she’s wearing but also the cause she was supposedly commenting on, the plight of queers in the military. The “atrocity exhibition” of Gaga’s dress is however different from the way that antispeciesist campaigns have used the spectacle of violated animal bodies to build awareness. In my early forays into activism, I was responsible for handing out flyers that, in graphic ways, pointed out the atrocities of the animal factory industry. While I think that targeting people’s sense of outrage through visual stimuli can be effective, this kind of aggressive campaigning often backfires. The level of effectiveness really depends on which specific negative affect the images of mutilated animals provoke in the viewer. While some, of course, are outraged by what goes on, anger responses may just as well be directed at the activist for disrupting the pleasure that someone derives from consuming animal products. On the other hand, how should we approach the pleasure that antispeciesist activists might come to experience from shocking and angering non-vegans by exposing them to the graphic end-result of consuming animals? Can this in itself be called “pornographic”?

5) Another important aspect of your essay is the discussion around the concept of nature. We do use nature in two opposite (contradicting) ways: a) as something wild that needs to be domesticated or b) as a sort of universal and eternal standard to which make a constant reference for our personal and social behaviors? How do you think a mature antispeciesist movement should handle the notion of nature?

I think that the two definitions you emphasize are mutually related. Prominent eco-critics, such as Timothy Morton, have thoroughly interrogated the notion of nature as “wildness,” or as a primordial “truth” that has been obscured or ground under by industrialization. As an abstract point of reference, “nature” will always remain just beyond our grasp: as an all-encompassing force, or “surround,” it is impossible to point to and say, “that, right there, is nature.” Where does nature begin and society end? Due to its
opacity, the concept of nature, or naturalness, can and has been used to support everything from environmentalism to homophobia. Nature, in other words, is ideology. In turn, and this addresses your second definition of nature, the idea that some identities and bodies are more “natural” than others cannot be sustained once we interrogate its ideological basis. Drawing on Donna Haraway’s by now classic theory of the “cyborg,” Luciana Parisi, in an essay called “The Nanoengineering of Desire,” claims that “the natural has always been artificial”: because our body-selves, and this is true of any historical period, are “embedded in situated knowledges of production – for example, scientific, social, cultural, historical, geographical, communal, technological, and so on” (285) – any claim to naturalness must fail, as any interaction with other humans, animals, plants, or technological processes will result in a degree of “contamination,” whether affective, intellectual, or physical. Social interaction is by definition impure: it is impossible to exist in the world without being influenced, contaminated, by one’s surroundings. “Sociality,” in this regard, refers to any interaction, physical or otherwise, that we engage in. Antispeciesist discourse would therefore do well to adopt the contamination perspective, in order to once and for all declare the ontological or existential barrier between the human and non-human untenable. Conceptualizing contamination as an involved series of processes can also help us expand the critique of the animal products industry. How much of ourselves are we consuming when we eat meat? Going beyond the physical similarities between the human and other species, every piece of meat, glass of milk, etc. represents and embodies a series of negative affects and processes of violence and exploitation. Understanding the ways in which we are embedded in these processes will help to further and elaborate on the antispeciesist cause.

6) The mainstream antispeciesist movement often refers to the sacrality of life. It seems to us that you instead shift the emphasis on what we could call a community of finite and vulnerable bodies. Could you please elaborate on the basis behind this shift and its possible paractical consequences? And, above all, how much of this turn of attention is indebted with Derrida’s (habeas corpus vs habeas corpse) and Butler’s (precarious life) thinking?

What we might term the “vulnerable turn” in critical theory has been very important to my thinking about veganism. A community based on physicality and affect rather than on the pseudo-theological notion of the sanctity of life makes more immediate sense for veganism. In Precarious Life, Judith Butler examines the ethics of vulnerability from a Levinasian perspective. According to Butler, Levinasian ethics concerns “the structure of address itself” (129), which, for Emmanuel Levinas, is predicated on the belief that the self “cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world, within the ontology of sameness” (“Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas” 24). One’s relation to alterity, to the care of the other, is based on an asymmetrical condition to one’s own “ontological right to existence” (24). Ethics, for Levinas, therefore connotes a “refusal of the first truth of ontology – the struggle to be” (24). This leads Levinas to make the paradoxical and powerful claim that ethics is essentially “against nature because it forbids the murderousness of my natural will to put my own existence first” (24). Of course, Levinas is primarily concerned with proving that alterity and vulnerability are specific to how we interact with and as humans. However, the de-prioritization of the self that Levinasian
ethics is based on resonates clearly with the antispeciesist impetus of veganism. Vegan ethics, to re-write Levinas, is about the struggle to let non-human others be, in an effort to guard against what we could call “negative contamination” (impressing upon one species the desire and gratification of another). At the same time, if it is fundamentally unnatural to care for others, putting their concern and welfare above one’s own, what does this tell us about the distinction between nature and artificiality? For Levinas, caring appears to be fundamentally, ontologically, artificial, or at least unnatural. But isn’t this simply to say that when it comes to ethics and caring, the concept of nature is entirely unhelpful? The natural appears to be grounded in a basic mode of survival linked to Being. Yet, only in extreme circumstances (pushed to the very edge of survival) must we, or could we justifiably, revert to a basic murderousness of the will. The right of habeas corpus, having one’s own body (Derrida is skeptical about the possibility of ever completely having this as a right proper), as I see it—in a basic way at least, ignoring the specific provenance of laws against unlawful detention—relates to the freedom of not being subjected to the murderous will of another, to stay with Levinas’ formulation. The animal liberation movement aims to transpose this basic idea to the fight against the animal agriculture industry. Practically speaking, recognizing the basic vulnerability of all bodies—regardless of sex, gender, species, etc.—would render the basic justification for consuming animals unsustainable. To my mind, vegan ethics should focus on thinking through and establishing communities based on sharing physical and affective spaces between and across species. Now, this may sound utopian, but the fact is that such communities do exist (look at Farm Sanctuary in the U.S., for example). It is true, however, that as long as “species” is recognized as a fundamental category, by which humans order their thinking about the world and their place in it, the vulnerable turn in ethics will not, if you will, form a complete circle.

Works Cited