

The Case for Socialist Veganism

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A paradox exists in the United States, United Kingdom, and other rich countries. Increasing numbers of people realise that the current food system is environmentally damaging. They are attempting to transform it by changing their diets, which they hope will influence corporate investment strategies. They are encouraged to do so by claims that shifting to plant-based diets represents the “single biggest way” to reduce our environmental impact.¹

The paradox is that many of the corporations that are expanding the plant-based food market have an enormous, immensely damaging environmental impact. Expansion into these markets does not portend a

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environmentally damaging mass production of meat, dairy, and other environmentally ruinous activities. Rather, it represents a market expansion strategy combined with, and based upon, attempts at corporate brand greenwashing.

Such strategies reflect and reinforce market dominance by a few corporations. In the United States, for example, less than four companies control more than 75 percent of the market across a range of popular groceries.² We call this strategy corporate veganism.



The vegan flag coat of arms designed by the Dutch artist Maria Tiquah Vegan (September 16, 2017). Credit: Maria Tiquah - <https://veganflag.org/vegan-flag-coat-of-arms/>, CC0, Link.

¹ ↪ Olivia Petter, “Veganism Is ‘Single Biggest Way’ to Reduce Our Environmental Impact, Study Finds,” Independent, September 24, 2020.

² ↪ Nina Lakhani, Aliya Uteuova, and Alvin Chang, “Revealed: The True Extent of America’s Food Monopolies and Who Pays the Price,” Guardian, July 14, 2021.

We argue that corporate veganism deepens animal suffering, human exploitation, and environmental destruction in and beyond the food system. Corporate veganism promotes the ideology of consumer sovereignty, where consumer choice is the key factor influencing producer output.

There is an alternative way of conceiving of and attempting to transform the food system, which we label socialist veganism. While consumer sovereignty entails “end point regulation” (changing consumption patterns), socialist veganism entails attempting to control the “start point” of production (deciding what is to be produced and how) and how products are distributed.³

In Half-Earth Socialism, Troy Vettese and Drew Pendergrass argue for universal veganism, which they conceive as part of a utopian future in which socialism has been fully established. Max Ajl and Rob Wallace subject Vettese and Pendergrass to a strong critique—highlighting their neocolonial and anti-small producer bias.⁴ However, neither Vettese and Pendergrass, nor Ajl and Wallace, ground their visions of alternative food systems in (a) contemporary dynamics of working-class food poverty in rich countries, or (b) the hundreds of billions of dollars being spent (with much more to come) on so-called green transitions by the United States and European Union states.

We conceive of socialist veganism as one element of shifting the balance of class power away from capital to labor, and of beginning to mend the metabolic rift between human (capitalist) society and nature. We argue that, given that billions of dollars are either subsidising fossil fuel industries, and/or being directed into a corporate-dominated green transition, the time is ripe for socialist movements to argue that these funds be directed toward an ecosocially transformative political-economic agenda.⁵

While global agricultural production contributes to around 25 percent of total greenhouse gas emissions, the meat sector is responsible for approximately 14.5 percent of total emissions.⁶ Rich country populations are by far the greatest consumers of meat-based protein. In 2009, for example, the richest fifteen countries had 750 percent greater demand for meat protein than the poorest twenty-four nations.

Such internationally unequal levels of meat-based protein consumption do not mean, however, that rich country populations are healthy or well-fed. In the United States, the United Kingdom, and other rich countries, large sections of the working class, their families, and particularly their children find it too expensive to afford to eat enough (good) food. In 2022, almost a quarter of children in the European Union were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, while one third of primary school age children were either overweight or obese.⁷ In the United States in 2021, thirty-four million people lived in food insecure households and fifty-three million people turned to community programs and food banks to put food on the table. As Jane Dixon puts it, working classes in the Global North “may now be portrayed as...over-consumers, but their overweight bodies are the result of insufficient incomes to consume fewer, less energy dense foods.”⁸

³ ↪ David Whyte, *Ecocide: Kill the Corporation Before It Kills Us* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

⁴ ↪ Max Ajl and Rob Wallace, “Red Vegans against Green Peasants,” *New Socialist*, October 16, 2021.

⁵ ↪ Simon Black, Ian Perry, and Nate Vernon, “Fossil Fuel Subsidies Surged to Record \$7 Trillion,” *International Monetary Fund* (blog), August 24, 2023.

⁶ ↪ Oliver Lazarus, Sonali McDermid, and Jennifer Jacquet, “The Climate Responsibilities of Industrial Meat and Dairy Producers,” *Climatic Change* 165 (2021): 1–21; David Tilman and Michael Clark, “Global Diets Link Environmental Sustainability and Human Health,” *Nature* 515 (2015): 171–176.

⁷ ↪ Sam Jones, “Children Should Get One Healthy School Meal a Day, Say EU Experts,” *Guardian*, October 13, 2023.

⁸ ↪ Jane Dixon, “From the Imperial to the Empty Calorie: How Nutrition Relations Underpin Food Regime Transitions,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 26 (2009): 321–33, 326.

It is noteworthy that the recent victory by the United Auto Workers forces General Motors, Ford, and Stellantis to accept

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that electric vehicle battery production will occur in relatively well-paid, unionised plants, rather than low-paid, non-unionised plants. It signifies the ability of organised labor to shape the beginnings of what is currently a pro big-capital green transition into a more socially just transition.⁹ To be sure, such movements from below will have to proliferate and achieve much more in terms of state

resource allocation under transformed social relations. In this spirit, we see socialist veganism as potentially contributing to movements for greater autonomy and equality for agricultural and non-agricultural workers through an ending of working-class food poverty and new social relations on the land and beyond.

We focus on transforming food systems in rich countries for three reasons. First, by virtue of their far greater consumption of meat-based protein alone, the consumption habits of these countries have a much greater impact upon climate breakdown than those of poorer countries. Second, it is in these countries that interest in, and the beginnings of, a shift away from meat to plant-based consumption is happening most quickly. Third, many poorer countries have radically different agrarian systems compared to richer countries. For example, around 1.3 billion people (mostly in poorer countries) depend upon livestock for their livelihoods.¹⁰ In terms of transforming food systems in poorer countries, we advocate, at the very least, debt write-off and mass reparations from richer countries, as partial recognition for the world-historic damage caused by colonialism and continued unequal and exploitative international relations.¹¹

In the remainder of this article, we propose a marriage between ethical veganism and socialism. We suggest that new food systems could be built upon novel social relations of greatly enhanced equality and the deployment of high and low technologies. Put differently, we propose a novel constellation of relations and forces of production to simultaneously provide good food for all while contributing to repairing our collective relationship to the environment.

The Vegan-Socialist Connection

Many people turning to veganism may be purchasing corporate-produced plant-based foods, but they are also interested in veganism's philosophical and spiritual side, or what is often called ethical veganism. The Vegan Society defines veganism as: "a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of animals, humans and the environment. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals."¹² The "as far as possible" element of this definition represents pragmatic caution against overly sweeping visions, for example, of universal veganism. The latter, as in Vettese and Pendergrass's Half-Earth Socialism, ignores how low-meat or vegetarian food production may, in certain situations, be able to feed more people than vegan food production, as the former can use grazing lands unsuited for crop production. Moreover, the integration of farm animals into agroecological production is important in maintaining and improving the soil, enhancing agricultural productivity. This is consistent

⁹ ↪ "UAW Wins Just Transition at General Motors," United Autoworkers, October 6, 2023, uaw.org.

¹⁰ ↪ Vétérinaires sans frontières, "Avoiding Meat and Dairy: A One-Size-Fits-All Measure to Deal with Our Planet's Environmental Problems or a Real Option for the 1.3 Billion People Depending on Livestock to Assure Their Livelihood and Food Security?," June 12, 2018, vsf-international.org.

¹¹ ↪ Max Ajl, "A People's Green New Deal: Obstacles and Prospects," Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy 10, no. 2 (2021): 371–90.

¹² ↪ "Definition of Veganism," Vegan Society, vegansociety.com.

with allowing animals to be raised in more compassionate and ecologically sound ways, and with reductions in the role of meat in the overall Western diet.¹³

Early vegans drew upon prior religious notions of peace and nonviolence. The ancient notion of ahimsa (meaning “do no harm”) plays an important part in several Eastern religions including Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Vedic religion. Early vegans combined an opposition to exploitation of and cruelty to animals with a commitment to a fair and equal society among humans. As Eva Batt wrote: “Veganism is...a way of living which avoids exploitation whether it be of our fellow men, the animal population, or the soil upon which we all rely for our very existence.”¹⁴ Most recently, Jordi Casamitjana, author of *Ethical Vegan*, argued:

*Becoming a vegan for intersectional reasons is also an ethical approach which combines ahimsa (in this case applying the “do no harm” to marginalised humans as well as animals) and social justice (the fair distribution of wealth, opportunities and privileges within a society), in which all non-human animals could be considered a wider part of the earthlings’ society. Therefore, in addition to religion, health, animal rights and the environment, social justice has now become another gateway into veganism.*¹⁵

The struggle for social justice occurs along many fronts, including the right to sufficient, healthy, and tasty food to sustain a dignified life. Under contemporary capitalism, however, what should be a relatively basic right is out of reach of significant numbers of workers and their families.

Ethical veganism has made significant advances in illuminating the links between dominant dietary habits,

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environmental destruction, and the struggle for social justice.

Socialist politics and Marxist political economy explain why and how these elements are rooted in capitalist production, exploitation, and resistance to it. For socialists, the key to genuinely progressive social change lies in workers’ collective action, which

can alter the balance of class power between capital and labor in favor of the latter. Socialists’ emphasis upon workers’ collective action can contribute to ethical veganism’s search for the agent to bring about a society based upon the principle of “do no harm.”

Historically, shifts in the balance of class power toward labor have been institutionalised by states through the partial decommodification of social life. Modern European welfare states and the U.S. New Deal of the 1930s were established and rolled out under pressure from mass workers’ struggles. Elements of social life that were decommodified ranged from children’s (and sometimes adults’) education, health services, subsidised housing, and varying degrees of subsidised food. A socialist approach to welfare provision is one in which such services are provided across an expanding array of social life as part of the transformation and increasing equalisation of society.

As the Danish sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen argues, the extent of decommodification is “the degree to which individuals, or families, can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independently of market participation.” Thus, it is necessary to identify the potential for decommodification to generate conditions for large-scale social

¹³ ↪ Brian Napoletano, “Half-Earth Socialism and the Path Beyond Capital,” *Jus Semper*, August 2023; Fred Magdoff and Chris Williams, *Creating an Ecological Society: Toward a Revolutionary Transformation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017), 255–57.

¹⁴ ↪ Eva Batt, “Why Veganism? (1964),” *Animal Rights: The Abolitionist Approach*, abolitionistapproach.com.

¹⁵ ↪ Jordi Casamitjana, *Ethical Vegan: A Personal and Political Journey to Change the World* (Tewkesbury: September Publishing, 2020), 178.

transformation. Further, he argues, “When work approaches free choice rather than necessity, de-commodification may amount to de-proletarianisation.”¹⁶

There are numerous ways in which the decommodification of food could occur—including the provision of free meals in schools, hospitals, and care homes; subsidised or free workplace canteens; community restaurants; and subsidised grocery stores.¹⁷ Food production itself could be increasingly brought under democratic control by workers, their communities, and consumers, which would limit significantly capital’s power over labor. But none of this will be possible if the shift to plant-based food production is left in the hands of giant profit-oriented corporations.

Corporate Veganism and Environmental Wreckage

Veganism is promoted by large food corporations and the mainstream media as simultaneously a route to a healthier diet and an effective way to reduce humanity’s environmental impact. Increasing numbers of people understand the ways in which meat and dairy production contributes to climate breakdown—including through deforestation, the greenhouse gases emitted by cattle, unsustainable irrigation of feed crops required to rear livestock on an industrial basis, and the overuse of chemicals in agriculture—and want action taken.

However, the move into the plant-based market is part of a dual strategy of greenwashing and continued market expansion. Such strategies reflect, and are made possible by, the domination of much of the food system by a few giant corporations. The adoption of meat-free product lines by fast-food chains such as Burger King and McDonald’s is driven by their quest to maximise profits, rather than by genuine environmental concerns or animal welfare. Such strategies aim to attract new customers to purchase a mix of original (plant-based) and more established (meat-based) products. As José Cil, the CEO of Burger King’s parent company, noted, “We’re not seeing guests swap the original Whopper for the Impossible Whopper. We’re seeing that it’s attracting new guests.”¹⁸

McDonald’s “McPlant burger” is represented as a “step to a greener world.”¹⁹ However, the corporation continues to be

Almond milk is widely touted as an environmentally friendly alternative to dairy milk. Yet almond production contributes directly to immense environmental damage through mass killing of bee populations.

one of the world’s largest buyers of beef and a key link in the global grain-livestock complex. As Michael Briscoe notes, such corporate strategies represent a “meatless menu paradox,” where “fast-food chains offering more plant-based food options could have the counterintuitive consequence of increased overall meat consumption.”²⁰ This paradox extends beyond fast food to much of

the plant-based industry.

In another example, almond milk is widely touted as an environmentally friendly alternative to dairy milk. In North America, the almond milk market is expected to grow from approximately \$2.5 billion to over \$4.8 billion between

¹⁶ ↪ Gösta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 37.

¹⁷ ↪ Matt Bruenig, “Chicago Is Considering Opening a Municipal Grocery Store,” Jacobin, October 28, 2023; Benjamin Selwyn, “Community Restaurants: Decommodifying Food as Socialist Strategy” in *Socialist Register 2021*, eds. Leo Panitch and Greg Albo (London: Merlin Press, 2020), 1–12.

¹⁸ ↪ Quoted in Chas Newkey-Burden, “More Fast-Food Chains Are Offering Plant-Based Food—but Should Vegans Be Celebrating?,” *Guardian*, January 7, 2020.

¹⁹ ↪ Adrienne Matei, “Laugh if You Want, but the ‘McPlant’ Burger Is a Step to a Greener World,” *Guardian*, November 18, 2020.

²⁰ ↪ Michael D. Briscoe, “The Meatless Menu Paradox?: Environmental Theory and Plant-Based Fast-Food Options,” *Society and Animals* 1 (2022): 1–10; Anthony John Weis, *The Ecological Hoofprint: The Global Burden of Industrial Livestock* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

2023 and 2029.²¹ Yet almond production contributes directly to immense environmental damage through mass killing of bee populations. Almond groves in California's central valley produce around 80 percent of the world's almonds, involving over 1.3 million acres. Agribusiness almond production depends upon heavy chemical applications (pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides), which increased, for example, from twenty-nine million to thirty-four million tonnes between 2013 and 2017. Commercial beekeepers across the United States report losing vast numbers—up to a third—of bees because of their exposure to such chemicals. For example, during the winter months of 2018–19 alone, around fifty billion bees were wiped out.²²

Three Case Studies

The strategy of combining corporate greenwashing with market expansion is widespread, as shown below. In each case, major corporations have bought up firms engaged in plant-based food production. While they use these investments to trumpet their environmental credentials, they continue their market expansion through environmentally destructive activities (see Table 1 for a summary).

Table1. Corporate Veganism & Environmental Wreckage

| Vegan brand | Products made by vegan brand | Non-vegan parent company | Parent company's environmental impact |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| Vivera | Vegan meat substitutes | JBS: the world's largest meat company | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Environmental damage from mass-scale meat production o Support for illegal deforestation o Company funds backed by government bribes |
| The Vegetarian Butcher | Vegetarian and vegan meat substitutes | Unilever: owns over 400 brands including brands that sell dairy products | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o High levels of plastic pollution o Consistently fails at sustainability schemes in Southeast Asia o Lobbying against banning plastic sachets in Southeast Asia |
| Alpro | Vegan dairy products | Danone: one of the biggest dairy companies in the world | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Environmental damage from mass-scale dairy production o High levels of plastic pollution o Damaged natural water sources for locals in France and Mexico |

²¹ ↪ "North America Almond Milk Market Size," Mordor Intelligence, mordorintelligence.com.

²² ↪ Annette McGivney, "'Like Sending Bees to War': The Deadly Truth behind Your Almond Milk Obsession," Guardian, January 8, 2020.

Vivera

Vivera, a vegan meat producer, is sold in the United Kingdom in Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda, and Morrisons. Vivera's website suggests that consumers should buy vegan products for "the wellbeing of the planet." They promote their products by saying that "you will feel proud that you are positively changing the world bite by bite."²³ Vivera is owned by JBS, the world's largest meat producer.²⁴ Every day, its global operations slaughter 8.7 million birds, 92,600 hogs and 42,700 head of cattle.²⁵ The company owns forty-five (mostly meat-oriented) brands in the United States.²⁶ Its purchase of Vivera—which it acquired in 2021—does not signify a move away from meat. Shortly after acquiring the plant-based food company, it announced plans to invest \$130 million in two of its U.S. beef processing plants in order to increase cattle slaughtering capacity by around 300,000 each year.²⁷

Beef production is the greatest cause of deforestation in the Amazon rainforest.²⁸ Since 2019, Global Witness has tracked deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon and identifies JBS as one of the main contributors to it.²⁹ The company attempts to deflect attention from its responsibilities for environmental wreckage by passing the buck. It (and other Brazilian beef companies) claim that so-called indirect suppliers are their greatest challenge when it comes to keeping deforestation out of their supply chains. Indirect suppliers sell cattle to other farms, which supply slaughterhouses. JBS, as well as other companies, claim that they cannot monitor such suppliers.³⁰

However, an audit in the state of Pará found that one in six of the cattle farms that directly supply JBS engaged in illegal deforestation to make space for cattle grazing.³¹ An investigation by *Réporter Brasil*, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, and the Guardian also shows that JBS does have direct contact with at least one so-called indirect supplier. Photographs revealed a JBS truck driver moving cattle from Fazenda Estrela do Aripuanã, whose owner, Ronaldo Venceslau Rodrigues da Cunha, was fined £340,000 for illegal deforestation in 2012.³²

JBS's involvement in illegal deforestation has been supported by corrupt Brazilian government officials. For example,

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Onyx Lorenzoni, a congressman who worked for former president Jair Bolsonaro, received illegal campaign funds from J&F, the holding company of JBS.³³ This is only a drop in the ocean compared to the multiple Brazilian government officials involved in J&F's U.S. \$148 million

bribery scheme, which operated from 2005 to 2014. J&F pleaded guilty to this large-scale scheme, which secured

²³ ↪ Vivera, "Life Is Better When You Eat Less Meat," vivera.com.

²⁴ ↪ "Vegan Food Brands Whose Owners Sell Meat or Dairy," *Ethical Consumer*, March 22, 2023, ethicalconsumer.org.

²⁵ ↪ Ben Lilliston, "Behind the Curtain of the JBS Net Zero Pledge," *Institute for Agricultural and Trade Policy*, October 21, 2021.

²⁶ ↪ Blankfeld, "JBS: The Story Behind The World's Biggest Meat Producer," *Forbes*, April 21, 2011; Daniella Genovese, "JBS Meat Products: Where They're Sold and Under What Name Brand," *FOX Business*, June 2, 2021.

²⁷ ↪ Lilliston, "Behind the Curtain of the JBS Net Zero Pledge."

²⁸ ↪ "Climate Change: Do I Need to Stop Eating Meat?," *BBC News*, November 12, 2021.

²⁹ ↪ Evie Calder and Veronica Oakeshott, "Banking on Destruction: Tracking Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon—and Exposing Its Backers," *Global Witness*, April 24, 2023, globalwitness.org.

³⁰ ↪ André Campos, Andrew Wasley, Alexandra Heal, Dom Phillips, and Piero Locatelli, "Revealed: New Evidence Links Brazil Meat Giant JBS to Amazon Deforestation," *Guardian*, July 27, 2020.

³¹ ↪ Calder and Oakeshott, "Banking on Destruction."

³² ↪ Campos et al., "New Evidence Links Brazilian Meat Giant JBS to Amazon Deforestation."

³³ ↪ Schipani, "Bolsonaro's Chief of Staff Faces Campaign Fund Investigation," *Financial Times*, December 4, 2018.

financing from state-owned banks like Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social and Fundação Petrobras de Seguridade Social. By using U.S.-based bank accounts and real estate to bribe Brazilian government officials, J&F benefited their company and its entities, including JBS.³⁴ JBS's former CEO, Wesley Batista, was arrested because of this corruption scandal.

Despite Vivera producing plant-based meat to enable more sustainable diets, its activities are part of a broader market-expansion strategy by one of the global pillars of meat-based capital. Unsurprisingly, this information is not available to the consumer in a supermarket.

The Vegetarian Butcher

The Vegetarian Butcher makes vegetarian and plant-based meats sold in supermarkets and in popular food establishments like Subway and Starbucks. The brand is owned by Unilever, acquired in 2018 as part of the latter's move into the vegan food sector. Nitin Paranjpe, an executive at Unilever, said that the Vegetarian Butcher is a good fit among their existing portfolio of brands that have a "positive social impact."³⁵

Such claims contrast with Unilever's real environmental impact. In 2022, it was named one of the top ten global plastic polluters.³⁶ In its attempt to reduce criticism of its plastic use, in 2017 Unilever launched a waste-collection scheme in Indonesia because plastic sachets (small, throwaway plastic packages containing microportions of everyday consumer products that are heavily marketed in the Global South) from its brands were polluting Indonesian waters. After only two years, however, uncollected waste began piling up outside of waste banks because the scheme was abruptly ended by Unilever without forewarning citizens.³⁷

In 2020, Unilever's former CEO Alan Jope publicly called for the phasing out of plastic sachets. Simultaneously, however, Unilever privately lobbied against proposed plastic sachet bans in India, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka was the only country to impose a ban (on sachets under twenty millilitres).³⁸ Unilever found a loophole by repackaging six-millilitre sachets, printing on them that they cannot be sold individually, but that they are to be sold as a four pack of twenty-four-millilitre units. Rather than banning them, Unilever has focused on reducing and recycling plastic sachets, but with minuscule positive environmental impact.³⁹

One method of promoting the image of a responsible company involved in recycling waste is by installing refill dispenser vending machines for products such as shampoo and dishwasher liquid. In 2019, Unilever publicly launched three refill-dispenser vending machines in central Manila, Philippines, as part of their #ReuseRevolution; by 2022, all units had been removed, two of which were confirmed to have been removed within a month of launch.⁴⁰

³⁴ ↪ Schipani, "[Bolsonaro's Chief of Staff Faces Campaign Fund Investigation](#)," Financial Times, December 4, 2018.

³⁵ ↪ "[Vegan Food Brands Whose Owners Sell Meat or Dairy](#)," Ethical Consumer; Zoe Wood, "[Unilever Buys Meat-Free Food Company The Vegetarian Butcher](#)," Guardian, December 19, 2018.

³⁶ ↪ [Branded: Five Years of Holding Corporate Plastic Polluters Accountable](#) (Brand Audit, 2022), brandaudit.brea

³⁷ ↪ Karen McVeigh and Gemma Holliani Cahya, "[Single Servings at Low Prices: How Unilever's Sachets Became an Environmental Scourge](#)," Guardian, August 1, 2022.

³⁸ ↪ Matt Oliver, "[Unilever Secretly Fought Ban on Plastic Sachets It Branded 'Evil'](#)," Telegraph, June 22, 2022.

³⁹ ↪ Joe Brock and John Geddie, "[Unilever's Plastic Playbook](#)," Reuters, June 22, 2022.

⁴⁰ ↪ Brock and Geddie, "[Unilever's Plastic Playbook](#)."

Moreover, the House of Representatives of the Philippines passed legislation in August 2021 to phase out several different single-use plastic items. Once this bill moved to the Senate, deliberations were led by senator Cynthia Villar, chairperson of the Environment and Natural Resource Committee. Unilever has a previous corporate relationship with Villar, collaborating with her charity and hosting her as keynote speaker at a Unilever event in 2017.⁴¹

In 2021, Unilever encouraged the government to focus on cleaning up plastic sachets instead of imposing a ban. Villar announced the Senate's Extended Producer Responsibility Act in 2022, mandating that brands contribute financially to the collection and disposal of plastic waste, assisted by the state through the provision of tax breaks.⁴²

Alpro

Alpro manufactures vegan dairy products and is owned by Danone.⁴³ Danone bought Alpro in 2017 with the aim to “capitalise on healthy eating trends.”⁴⁴ On their website, Danone claims to be number one globally in both dairy products and vegan products.⁴⁵ Alpro's website states that you are “Doing your bit with a simple bite.”⁴⁶

While Danone is expanding into the plant-based market, this does not signify its retreat from its core dairy product lines. As a food industry newsletter put it, “the company...is looking to cross-promote its plant-based and traditional dairy beverages to households where individuals dabble in both categories.”⁴⁷

According to some calculations, cow's milk creates three times more greenhouse gas emissions, uses ten times as much land, and two times more freshwater than plant-based alternatives.⁴⁸ Alpro uses similar statistics to promote their products online, stating they use less carbon and land than dairy milk producers.⁴⁹ This is ironic—by consuming Alpro products, its customers are inadvertently supporting Danone's market-expansion strategy.

Danone is one of the top ten biggest plastic polluters in the world, alongside Unilever.⁵⁰ Three French NGOs (Client Earth, Surfrider Foundation Europe, and Zero Waste France) are suing Danone for its silence regarding plastic pollution in its vigilance plan, which is required by the French “Duty of Vigilance” law. Danone used more than 750,000 tonnes of plastic packaging in 2021.⁵¹

This is not the only environmental lawsuit Danone has faced. In October 2022, Evian, owned by Danone, was sued by plaintiff Stephanie Dorris in the U.S. Southern District Court of New York.⁵² This class action lawsuit was filed on the claim that Evian water bottle labels are giving misinformation to consumers regarding the product's carbon neutral

⁴¹ ↪ Brock and Geddie, “Unilever's Plastic Playbook.”

⁴² ↪ Brock and Geddie, “Unilever's Plastic Playbook.”

⁴³ ↪ “[Vegan Food Brands Whose Owners Sell Meat or Dairy](#),” Ethical Consumer.

⁴⁴ ↪ D. Clerq, “[Danone to Switch Dairy Factory to Plant-Based Alpro as Diets Shift](#),” Reuters, November 17, 2021.

⁴⁵ ↪ “[Danone Essential Dairy and Plant-Based: An Essential Part of Daily Life](#)” Danone, danone.com.

⁴⁶ ↪ “[Doing Your Bit with a Simple Bite](#),” Alpro, alpro.com.

⁴⁷ ↪ Christopher Doering, “[Danone's 'Big Runway' for Growth Is Built on Brand Relevance, N. America CEO Says](#),” Food Dive, February 9, 2021.

⁴⁸ ↪ Hannah Ritchie, “[Dairy vs. Plant-Based Milk: What Are the Environmental Impacts?](#),” Our World in Data, January 19, 2022.

⁴⁹ ↪ “[Doing Your Bit with a Simple Bite](#),” Alpro.

⁵⁰ ↪ Branded: Five Years of Holding Plastic Polluters Accountable.

⁵¹ ↪ “[Danone to Face French Court over Plastic Megapollution](#),” Client Earth, January 9, 2023, clientearth.org.

⁵² ↪ Jeff Gelski, “[Lawsuit Focuses on Evian's Carbon-Neutral Claim](#),” Food Business News, October 24, 2022.

status.⁵³ The bottles are labeled as “carbon neutral” and are certified as such by the Carbon Trust, but the lawsuit claims that consumers are being misled to believe that “carbon neutral” is synonymous with “carbon free.” While the manufacturing of Evian’s products still emits carbon dioxide, the company purchases carbon credits to “offset” the emissions. This information is not easily available to the consumer.⁵⁴ The lawsuit questions whether Evian’s carbon credits and subsequent offsetting are effective, in part because the company Evian uses for carbon offsetting, Livelihood Carbon Funds, is cofounded by Danone.⁵⁵

There have been disputes in Mexico between Danone’s water bottle companies and local communities. In 2021, Mexican locals protested by occupying a Bonafont (also owned by Danone) bottling plant, which extracted 1.4 million litres of water a day from volcanic streams. This has forced locals to consume bottled water rather than use natural resources, while Danone paid just £120.92 a year to the local state to extract water.⁵⁶

These cases show how little such corporations can be trusted to lead the green transition, and how corporate investment strategies place profits above genuine environmental sustainability. Such strategies also have nothing to say to workers enduring food poverty. A socialist approach to veganism can, we argue, contribute simultaneously to environmental sustainability and social justice.

The Case for Socialist Veganism

Decommodification and democratisation of food systems could be part of a broader process of managed degrowth. Billions of dollars are being spent on green transitions that are designed to benefit capitalist corporations. Part of a socialist green transition would entail forcing states to redirect these resources toward pro-labor investments. Through greater equalisation of social relations (the reduction and eventual elimination of capitalist exploitation, economic democracy, and greater equality in the distribution of social wealth), less economic growth could yield greater material abundance to the working class. As John Bellamy Foster puts it: “Continued growth would occur in some areas of the economy, made possible by reductions elsewhere. Spending on fossil fuels, armaments, private jets, sport utility vehicles, second homes, and advertising would need to be cut in order to provide room for growth in such areas as regenerative agriculture, food production, decent housing, clean energy, accessible health care, universal education, community welfare, public transportation, digital connectivity, and other areas related to green production and social needs.”⁵⁷

How might such managed degrowth work to simultaneously alleviate working-class food poverty while contributing to mitigating environmental destruction and climate breakdown? We share some of Vettese and Pendergrass’s commitment to rewilding. However, we reject the notion of rewilding as a program to clear land of human populations.⁵⁸ Rather, we view it as part of the broader transformation of the food system to overcome the metabolic rift—the separation of the working population from the land and the subordination of workers and nature to the ecosocially destructive requirements of competitive capital accumulation.⁵⁹ In this way, rewilding can support a range of agricultural methods,

⁵³ ↪ David Worford, “[Evian Faces Lawsuit over Packaging’s Carbon Neutral Claims](#),” Environment and Energy Leader, October 25, 2022, [environmentenergyleader.com](#).

⁵⁴ ↪ Gelski, “Lawsuit Focuses on Evian’s Carbon-Neutral Claim”; Worford, “Evian Faces Lawsuit over Packaging’s Carbon Neutral Claims.”

⁵⁵ ↪ Worford, “Evian Faces Lawsuit over Packaging’s Carbon Neutral Claims.”

⁵⁶ ↪ Tamara Pearson, “[Mexico: Indigenous Communities Take Over Water-Bottling Plant to Use as a Social Centre](#),” Green Left, August 9, 2021, [greenleft.org.au](#).

⁵⁷ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, “[Planned Degrowth: Ecosocialism and Sustainable Human Development](#),” Jus Semper, September 2023.

⁵⁸ ↪ For a critique see Dolly Jørgensen, “Rethinking Rewilding,” *Geoforum* 65 (2015): 482–88.

⁵⁹ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism’s War on the Earth* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011).

such as agroforestry. It can also contribute to overcoming land privatisation, through the provision of housing, education, and leisure, thus enabling workers to gain access to nature in ways proscribed by capitalist private property.

We also share Ajl and Wallace's advocacy of agroecology. However, we suggest that novel technologies in food production—including robotics and precision fermentation—should be considered as an element of socialist food politics.⁶⁰

The “Ten Years for Agroecology” research exercise, an initiative of Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations, a French think tank, models how a future European Union could increase food production and reduce food imports through the adoption of agroecological methods, to the extent that it would be able to feed Europe's projected population of around 530 million people by 2050. In the United States, the Rodale Institute's Farming Systems Trial shows that agroecological methods can reduce direct use of fossil fuel inputs in agricultural production, enable organic agricultures to play a role in carbon sequestration, and maintain high crop yields.⁶¹

Agroecological methods of farming such as agroforestry are increasingly recognised by farming communities as viable alternatives to chemical-intensive farming. Such methods include the reliance upon biodiversity and multifunctional (diverse) agricultural systems and the use of traditional knowledge (including farmer innovations and technologies) to regulate and reproduce ecosystems and to provide diverse food sources. Agroecological principles include facilitating, building, and conserving soil fertility; using biological controls for diseases, insects, and weeds; intercropping; seed saving and selection; smaller-scale multiple harvesting cycles; and the integration of small-scale pasturing and grazing.⁶²

There are a range of new technologies that could, if deployed under changed (decommodified and democratised) social relations of production, increase output while lightening the load of agricultural production.

While illuminating, Peter Rosset and Miguel Altieri portray agroecological practices as essentially low-tech forms of farming.⁶³ This risks ignoring the potential benefits of high-tech agricultural production and leaving it in the hands of capitalist corporations. There are, however, a range of new technologies that could, if deployed under changed (decommodified and democratised) social relations of production, increase output while lightening the load of agricultural production.

Computerisation and robotisation can potentially raise the productivity of land-based farming while reducing the labor burden. Agrorobots are capable of identifying and using lasers to destroy eight hundred different types of weeds, hugely reducing the need for chemical fertilisers. Soon they could map the land, plant seeds, weed, and harvest crops.⁶⁴

Automation of food production through hydroponics (growing plants without soil) in vertical farms is another potential transformative boon. Vertical farms could be established in unused or newly constructed high-rise urban buildings or be

⁶⁰ ↪ Benjamin Selwyn, “A Green New Deal for Agriculture: For, Within, or Against Capitalism?,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 48, no. 4 (2021): 778–806.

⁶¹ ↪ Xavier Poux and Pierre-Marie Aubert, “An Agroecological Europe in 2050: Multifunctional Agriculture for Healthy Eating: Findings from the Ten Years for Agroecology (TYFA) Modelling Exercise,” *Institute of Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI)* (Paris: IDDRI, 2018), 18.

⁶² ↪ Peter M. Rosset and Miguel A. Altieri, *Agroecology: Science and Politics* (Rugby, UK: Practical Action Publishing, 2017); Tony J. Weis, *The Global Food Economy: The Battle for the Future of Farming* (London: Zed Books, 2007); John Harris, “‘We’ll Have Space Bots with Lasers, Killing Plants’: The Rise of the Robot Farmer,” *Gu*

⁶³ ↪ Rosset and Altieri, *Agroecology*.

⁶⁴ ↪ Harris, “The Rise of the Robot Farmer.”

built in rural areas.⁶⁵ Such techniques have reportedly enabled the production of greens (lettuce and herbs) using up to 90 percent less water while yielding thirty times more crops per acre of land than some forms of land-based farming.⁶⁶ In other cases, hydroponics has led to four- to five-fold yield increases of tomatoes and cucumbers compared to soil cultures.⁶⁷ Technological advances combined with strategically directed finance could enable such investments to be paired with solar-generated energy (either directly through photovoltaic panels built onto the vertical farms and/or through solar-powered grids).

A potentially world-changing solution is being developed by a small company, Solar Foods, funded by the European Space Agency's business incubation program.⁶⁸ The company produces a wheat flour-like compound called Solein, composed of 65 to 70 percent protein, 10 to 15 percent dietary fibre, 3 to 5 percent mineral nutrients, and 5 to 8 percent fat. It is made using electricity from solar panels to electrolyse water (splitting water cells) in a bioreactor (similar to a fermentation tank for beer), releasing hydrogen. The hydrogen is then combined with carbon dioxide and other nutrients (phosphorus, sodium, and potassium) and soil-derived microbes. Producing Solein, it is claimed, requires twenty thousand times less land than is required to produce the same amount of soy-based protein. It can substitute for protein in processed foods, could replace animal fodder, and may produce palm oil substitutes.

Another new technology is precision fermentation—a form of brewing. Brewing beer, raising bread, and fermenting foods such as soy sauce and sauerkraut rely upon multiplying microbes. Precision fermentation is a refined form of brewing/multiplying microbes to create proteins and fats that are identical to those in meat and dairy products. Microorganisms like yeast and bacteria can be genetically programmed to create specific ingredients (such as whey). Other raw materials will need to be cultivated—sugar fibres, sunflower seeds, and grains. These can be fermented, fed on hydrogen or methanol, which can be made with renewable energy plus water, carbon dioxide, and very small amounts of fertiliser. Precision fermentation techniques are already being used to make foods that taste like cheese, beef, eggs, milk, and cream.⁶⁹

The potential of precision fermentation to produce large amounts of healthy and affordable food while reducing land dedicated to livestock and feed crops is enormous. It could produce the same amount of protein as soy production does in the United States on 1,700 times less land.⁷⁰

Precision fermentation has already yielded enormously positive results. In the early twentieth century, insulin—used to treat diabetes—was made from pig and cow pancreases. Approximately fifty thousand slaughtered animals were required to make one kilogram of insulin. In the late 1970s, companies discovered ways to produce insulin through precision fermentation, eliminating the need for the slaughter of millions of animals. Today, precision fermentation accounts for around 99 percent of globally produced insulin.⁷¹

⁶⁵ ↪ Dickson Despommier, "The Rise of Vertical Farms," *Scientific American* 301, no. 5 (2009): 80–87.

⁶⁶ ↪ Nathan Smith, "America's First Autonomous Robot Farm Replaces Humans With 'Incredibly Intelligent' Machines," *Guardian*, October 8, 2018.

⁶⁷ ↪ Howard M. Resh, *Hydroponic Food Production: A Definitive Guidebook for the Advanced Home Gardener and the Commercial Hydroponic Grower* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2022).

⁶⁸ ↪ "Solein: Food Out of Thin Air," Solar Foods, solarfoods.fi.

⁶⁹ ↪ "Precision Fermentation," Reboot Food, rebootfood.org.

⁷⁰ ↪ George Monbiot, "Embrace What May Be the Most Important Green Technology Ever: It Could Save Us All," *Guardian*, November 24, 2022.

⁷¹ ↪ "[Precision Fermentation](#)," Reboot Food.

Such innovations could, through reducing cropland, enable large-scale rewilding (to expand the world's carbon sinks and restore the diversity of plant and animal species), through restoration of grasslands, wetlands, forests, and savannas. Rather than conceiving of these rewilded areas as excluding humans, as in some re-wilding scenarios, they could contribute to mending the metabolic rift (the capitalist-imposed separation of humans from nature through private ownership). Re-wilded areas could be part of a broader publicly owned commonwealth. Nature-based education (for example, teaching children and adults about nutrient and water cycles) and leisure activities for the many could be expanded significantly.

It is true that large-scale roll-outs of precision fermentation, hydroponics, Solein production, and agricultural robotics would require investments in bioreactors, raw materials, concrete, plastics, and energy. It is also true, however, that renewable energy sources—such as wind, solar, and hydropower—could be deployed to facilitate such production. The project of socialist managed degrowth could accommodate growth of such areas if it is sufficiently balanced by greater degrowth in areas such as fossil fuel-based industries.⁷²

At present, these high technologies are in private, for-profit hands. But there is no reason why progressive policies could not invest in them (instead of subsidising environmentally damaging industries) to facilitate a socially just transition. For example, the Reboot Food network advocates open-source precision fermentation, backed by state subsidies and investments.⁷³

As part of a decommodifying and democratising agenda, such investments could also contribute to relocating elements of food production. As George Monbiot argues, “If production is distributed...every town could have an autonomous microbial brewery, making cheap protein-rich foods tailored to local markets.”⁷⁴

Conclusion

Corporate veganism is a greenwashing strategy designed to enhance firms' brand image and expand market share and profitability while contributing directly to not only environmental destruction, but the exploitation of and harm to

We argue that ethical veganism and socialist politics share significant interests. There are genuine reasons to believe that the two movements can combine forces to struggle for a socially just, ecologically sound food system.

animals. Far from complementing ethical veganism's objectives of generating a socially and environmentally sustainable world, corporate veganism actively undermines them. It is not just that corporations that produce meat-based food are expanding into the plant-based market as part of a greenwashing strategy. It is also that many plant-based

products contribute directly to large-scale environmental wreckage and animal harm. Luckily, however, many people who are interested in veganism are also genuinely concerned with the fate of the world's environment and want a more just society.

We argue that ethical veganism and socialist politics share significant interests. There are genuine reasons to believe that the two movements can combine forces to struggle for a socially just, ecologically sound food system. The recent victory by the United Auto Workers union, which forced the big three U.S. auto companies to agree to produce electric vehicles

⁷² ↪ Riccardo Mastini, Giorgos Kallis, and Jason Hickel, “A Green New Deal without Growth?,” *Ecological Economics* 179 (2021): 106832.

⁷³ ↪ “Reboot Food: A Manifesto,” Reboot Food (2023), rebootfood.org.

⁷⁴ ↪ Monbiot, “Embrace What May Be the Most Important Green Techn

in unionised plants, illuminates the power of labor to begin to influence the direction of the green transition. A genuinely socially just and ecologically sound green transition will have to go faster and further than this victory, but all movements start somewhere. Our notion of socialist veganism hopes to contribute to such a mass movement.

Socialist veganism does not mandate universal veganism for all. It does suggest how vegan food production can, through de commodification and democratisation of social life, contribute to providing good quality and affordable food for the many, mitigating climate breakdown, and contributing to mending the metabolic rift. Socialist veganism should, we argue, be open-minded about the use of new technologies. If they are designed for socially just purposes and deployed under increasingly equalised social relations of production, such technologies can increase output, reduce the workload, and contribute to enhanced free time—all of which are key elements of the socialist project.

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