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Book Review

Griffin, Nathan Stephens. 2017. *Understanding Veganism: Biography and Identity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

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The Personal Causes and Consequences of Veganism: With *Understanding Veganism: Biography and Identity*, sociologist Nathan Stephens Griffin undertakes the task of elucidating what it means to identify as vegan. The *identity* of “vegan” is contrasted sharply from the *definition* of “vegan.” Griffin repeatedly stresses that veganism is generally well-defined as a concept in terms of reducing one’s negative impact on others, but not as an identity, much like gender and sexuality. This is demonstrated by investigating different aspects of veganism (gender, sexuality, politics, ethics, advocacy, etc.) that arose from individual testimonies gathered through Griffin’s personal research.

Griffin situates his book in the context of his own veganism, having grown up in England with a family who eventually all became vegan. In his youth, he toured Europe as part of a punk band which introduced him to straight-edge culture, anarchism, and animal and political activism before deciding to explore these ideas academically. *Understanding Veganism* is a consolidation of Griffin’s graduate school research. The study utilizes semi-structured

biographical interviews in which participants were encouraged to lead a discussion on their personal vegan narratives. Participants were initially selected by spatial convenience and personal acquaintance, but branched out via subject’s associations.

After a couple introductory chapters on theory and method, the bulk of the book outlines various aspects of vegan identity which are roughly categorized as family (Ch. 3), gender (Ch. 4), and activism (Ch. 5 and 6). Family narratives encompass religious and secular influences, as well as subjects’ relationships to their parents during childhood. Gender considerations include parallels with “coming out” as non-heterosexual, and explorations of veganism as a relationship criterion. Both legal and illegal activism experiences highlight some of the unfair treatment vegans encounter because of their counter-culture lifestyle and politics, such as excessive punishments for direct action in the forms of unusually harsh fines or jail sentences, or being the subjects of gratuitous physical violence for nonviolent protesting. This reflects the normalizing of a meat-based diet and the marginalization—indeed, even criminalization—of vegan praxis. Veganism is

growing, but alongside an increase in frequency and intensity of attacks against vegans and vegan ideals. Similar experiences are had by non-vegan activists as well, and, as an example, could be applied to the violence against LGBTQ-identified people. Across family, gender, and activism, certain themes dominate the narratives. These are the feeling of being marginalized, reactions against the mainstream status quo (in various guises), and adhering to veganism as a way to meaningfully embody beliefs.

At the book's core is a discussion of how "vegan identity [is] necessarily fluid, and how vegan biographies have been found to be subject to processes of normalization." Further, Griffin finds that vegans "negotiate normalization through various performances, achieving and managing identities through these performances" (p. 117). Thus, vegan identity is shaped to a significant extent by non-vegan society at large. He also concludes that veganism can be defined by the individual in order to conform with their personal needs, such as disability. This echoes previous scholars who contend veganism is best considered as a spectrum, a lifelong and continuous aspiration to do as little harm as one feasibly can (Dominick 2015; Gruen and Jones 2015). These are important realizations to help promote awareness of and resist harmful (and untrue) vegan stereotypes, similar to racist or sexist stereotypes.

Griffin grounds his study in academic fields of critical animal studies and biographical studies, and by extension reaches into intersectionality and social justice (including nonhuman animal) advocacy. This culminates in the assertion that there exists no singular vegan identity. Intersectionality helps illuminate this by looking at how different facets of identity

(gender, race, etc.) interact differently with and within each individual, defying a standardized outcome or experience. This is reflected perhaps most clearly in "coming out" narratives of veganism. For a variety of reasons (personal, social, practical, or professional), individuals stressed and strategized about revealing their vegan identity for fear of negative repercussions.

In essence, Griffin takes society as it stands and looks at how vegans define themselves and exist within it. Other recent books on veganism (see: Wright 2015; Castricano and Simonsen 2016) have generally looked in the other direction; they have taken veganism as it exists today, and analyzed how society has reacted to its presence. The latter perspective is of a much bigger picture. Alternatively, Griffin's approach complements other texts on veganism by allowing the discourse to be dictated by individual vegans themselves, favoring lived, embodied experiences over theoretical speculations. Both viewpoints are necessary, however, to represent the dynamic phenomenon of veganism accurately. Thus, *Understanding Veganism* not only contributes to (critical) animal studies and biographical studies, but also uniquely to *vegan studies* (Wright 2015).

Often conversion to veganism hinged on expanding one's "cultural menu," that is, being exposed to alternate ways of living that are also consistent with expressing one's values. Alternative sources of cultural influence were major factors in expanding the subject's cultural menus. These included punk music, activist groups, and underground publications which helped contribute to "turning points," important moments in one's life that lead to a fundamental shift in outlook or lifestyle. Reasons for becoming vegan varied per

person. Some interviewees went vegan because it was the opposite of what they were experiencing in their own lives; others converted because veganism seemed like a logical extension of current habits. In common, though, is that all went vegan because, for one reason or another, it felt like the right thing to do to stay consistent with their values.

In light of Griffin's analysis and finding of veganism as a fluid identity, the suggestion emerges that instead of striving to reshape society to be welcoming of vegans, we should deconstruct certain norms (like those around meat-eating and masculinity) and rebuild them altogether differently. Most of Griffin's interviewees got into veganism from a single motivating factor, but later embraced other reasons as well. Some became involved in single-issue social justice issues originally (such as, but not limited to, animal rights) and then saw connections between different oppressions and branched into other causes. For some interviewees, their activism began with being vegan; for others, embracing veganism was a result of their previous activism.

This book is brief and straightforward. Griffin reports how a handful of vegans (who are admittedly lacking in diversity) construct their meaning of the term *vegan* in relation to activism. Vegans for whom activism is not part of their identity, such as those who eat vegan for health reasons, are not included. Several theoretical concepts such as "vegaphobia" and "vegansexuality" are used to provide background information to personal testimonies, and to highlight specific applications of these theories. These and other concepts are briefly described, but the reader who is not well-informed on vegan studies previously will likely have to consult some outside references to fully grasp the struggles faced by those of the included testimonies. What the book does accomplish, however, is a convincing demonstration that vegans face personal, structural, and epistemic forms of oppression similar to the outcomes of more high-profile types of discrimination from sources like race, gender, and class prejudice. More importantly, Griffin expertly demonstrates that these different prejudices interact to influence the identity of an individual, as well as the structure of a society.

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