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STUDIES AND RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

Comments, Debates, Reports and Interviews

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Desiring Ethics

Reflections on Veganism from an Observational Study of Transitions in Everyday Energy Use

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ABSTRACT

Ecological issues are becoming more and more salient to our everyday lives as the effects of climate change become evident, resource depletion is put into government's agendas, access to energy becomes increasingly costly and differentially distributed. They call on us to reconsider not only energy consumption and production systems, but also the very cultural and social premises of our societies. In particular, we need rethinking the anthropocentrism that has founded for centuries human exploitation of the earth. In this article I draw on empirical material from an observational study of everyday energy transitions in order to reflect psychosocially on the potentialities of veganism as an energy ethics of sustainability "beyond anthropocentrism". I argue that, despite many promises, the transition to a plant-based diet can become politically dangerous if adopted (and promoted) as an abstract moral imperative and not as a situated and ethical one.

Keywords: energy transitions; energy ethics; everyday life; veganism; sustainability; dietary choices; desire; morality; political ecology; critique.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The current ecologic situation suggests evermore clearly and pressingly that a dramatic change in the ways we produce, distribute and consume energy is due. Current ecologic crises are putting us in front of planetary limits to the consumption of non-renewable energy sources like oil, gas and coal – now at the bases of our economies. Not only these fuels are limited, but they are also causing massive disruption to the planet, above all through climate change. Despite the faith in technological advancement

to provide alternative solutions to maintain or even enhance our current lifestyles via clean and renewable energy sources, there does not seem to be as yet a satisfactory alternative to support in a sustainable way late capitalist economies and societies (Georgescu-Roegen 2003; Latouche 2010).

To be added to these ecological-economic difficulties, old and new contestations around so-called "green" provision systems suggest that energy involves issues of power that are eminently social and political (Alier 2002; Smith and High 2017). Furthermore, the mass extinction of non-human animals and plants that we are witnessing in recent decades also opens questions around *trans*-human relations and justice (Vinnari and Vinnari 2014). Ecology hence becomes not only a matter of economy and wise resource use, but it also shows a radically *ethical* character: the multiple relationalities that bind humans to the rest of nature become subject of evaluations – are they good or bad, and what is the form they ought to take?

In this contingency, one of the central tasks of today's political and cultural ecological practices is to challenge *anthropocentrism*, the assumption that human beings are superior to, and therefore masters of, the rest of nature (Guihan 2008). This core socio-cultural tenet deeply runs through Western cultures, institutions, economic structures, everyday life and subjectivities. Not necessarily made explicit, it is for most of the time unconsciously lived and put into practice in banal and inconspicuous acts, sayings, choices (Bennett 2004). A culture "beyond anthropocentrism" might foreground important consequences in terms of sustainability (Bennett 2010; Braidotti 2006a, 2006b; Haraway 2015) because it can challenge one of the premises of the unsustainable ways in which humans are effectively "disposing" of the world (see Pellizzoni 2015).

This reflection starts to make clear that a transition towards more sustainable and ecological societies defeats mainstream behaviour change and other sustainable development policies. Not only because they themselves often rest on anthropocentric assumptions, but also because they impose a view of what sustainability is, how it should be achieved and what the appropriate "ethics of energy" (Frigo 2017, 8; Groves et al. 2017) are. This has both serious depoliticising effects over ecological issues (Gorz 1980; Blühdorn 2007) and dangerous biopolitical consequences in terms of everyday life (Shove and Walker 2007, 2010; Butler 2010; Shove 2010). Differently, a radical change might be promising in as far as it arises not as a result of abstract and imposed moral imperatives but as a collective, immanent, constitution of a more ecologically-sensitive trans-human ethics.

The social sciences can help in this, for instance, by understanding energy ethics as they are lived and experienced in everyday life, asking

to what extent and how such a movement beyond anthropocentrism can happen and is happening at the level of energy use, consumption and demand. This bottom-up and empirical approach is not concerned with a judgement about the moral worth (or, more generally, desirability) of practices, but rather with the study of what things matter and have significance for social actors (Henwood et al. 2015; Frigo 2017; Groves et al. 2017; Smith and High 2017). Nonetheless, beyond *describing* these values and relationalities as they emerge, there is also the need to map their dynamic unfolding, their lines and, especially, their effects – an *immanent* assessment of the ethics and politics of everyday energy use to become the springboard for a collective constitution of non-anthropocentric transition pathways.

The aim of this article is to explore the dynamics of everyday energy transitions that, characterised by ethical concerns, go in the direction of challenging anthropocentrism. Drawing on data from an in-depth observational study in the North-East of Italy, I concentrate on the challenges and opportunities of *veganism* as a peculiar energy ethics that destabilises anthropocentric categories and possibly pushes a change towards sustainability in other life practices. I now briefly turn to the rationale for this choice; then, I outline the scope and design of my study. The main section of the article is a psychosocial analysis of empirical data. Finally, I present an overall discussion on the prospects and challenges of veganism as energy ethics, i.e. a standpoint from which "good" ways of using energy are distinguished from "bad" ones.

2. Some background

The adoption of plants-based diets is of interest to sustainability transitions and to the constitution of a non-anthropocentric energy ethics for two main reasons. On the one hand, the vast majority of people who choose to eliminate from their diets animals and their derivatives do so out of an ethical preoccupation over the life, pain and suffering of what are assumed to be kin, sentient, beings. This commitment is mainly informed by a conviction that human beings are animals like all the others and there is no neat distinction between "our" and "their" experiences. Hence, if violence and abuse of power over other human beings are deemed wrong, then this should also apply to animals (Regan 2004; Singer 2015). The anti-anthropocentric repercussions of such a claim are quite obvious, for it de-centres what in Modernity have been constructed as human beings' ontological privileges (e.g. sensitivity and sensibility,

the capacity to feel and create bonds, intentionality, etc.) – which in turn have supported animal exploitation.

The fact of not breeding animals can therefore constitute a first step towards the dismissal of the human (especially white, male) dominance over the rest of nature (Adams 2015; Twine 2017). On the other hand, it is now widely accepted that intensive fishing and farming associated with widespread meat, dairies and eggs consumption are having devastating effects on planetary ecosystems both on local and global scale due to the carbon-intensive nature of industrial farming, methane emitted by cows' digestive processes, polluting waste, deforestation, wasteful use of agricultural land, depletion of oceans' livestock, reduced biodiversity, etc. (see, for a comprehensive review, Kemmerer 2014). In the face of a growing population and the threats that climate change is going to present in terms of feeding the planet, the transition to (at least largely) plants-based diets is increasingly being proposed as a structural necessity – especially for affluent countries (Cole 2008; Vinnari and Vinnari 2014).

We might add that the effects of climate change are impinging so deeply on all animal (and non-animal) species on earth that "it is not ontologically or normatively accurate to falsely dichotomise an 'environmental veganism' from a 'veganism for the animals', since the former is also the latter" (Twine 2017, 194). Hence, although in the majority of cases people who adopt a vegetarian or vegan diet are pushed to do so by concerns over animals' wellbeing and rights, one might expect that becoming vegan or vegetarian will imply a wider change in attitudes and practices towards nature, energy use, sustainability, etc. [1].

Yet, quite surprisingly, the link between plants-based diets and sustainable everyday life practices is not much explored. A relevant exception is Twine's (2017) investigation of the dynamics of vegan transitions through a practice theory lens. The author makes clear the link between veganism and everyday sustainability, hoping that a deeper knowledge of successful adoptions of plant-based diets might be of use for society and policy makers to spread veganism among the wider population. The article does not consider, however, the opportunities for a vegan transition to "spill-over" and invest *other* everyday energy practices. In what follows I will try to contribute to the nascent field of study on changing diets and sustainable transitions through an in-depth engagement with qualitative data. Before doing this, I will briefly elucidate something about the research context where the data was produced.

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[1] This does not, of course, rule out the possibility that the opposite happens: more general ecological concerns being a push towards the adoption of plants-based diets.

3. ABOUT MY STUDY

The data I draw upon come from my PhD research project. The overall concern of the study was an in-depth mapping of the dynamics of energy transitions in everyday life. I was interested in how the 2008 financial crisis (with its thoroughgoing consequences in terms of unemployment, reduced affluence, diminished socio-economic stability, changing future horizons, etc.) has impacted people's daily practices of energy use and consumption in the North-East of Italy. On the basis of the recognition that one of the most challenging ecological issues of the present is over-consumption, and in turn over-production, based on the capitalist imperative to economic growth – I asked to what extent the vacillation of this very economic system might be conducive to *ecologic* transitions as well.

I conducted ethnographic multi-media participant observation of everyday life (complemented by interviews). The total number of case studies was 10. These cases were selected among people living in an area that refers to the town of Vittorio Veneto (TV), in the North-East of Italy[2]. I was interested in the intersections between economic and bio-graphical transitions as moments of change in the ways energy is used, interpreted and "sensed" in the sphere of daily life. This apparently private sphere of existence was sociologically examined as part of wider communities, flows of objects and things, material and cultural milieus, socio-historical lines, etc. Hence, I understood everyday transitions as part of institutional, discursive and material changes that are power-ridden and traversed by different and opposing forces in the social field.

At the same time, I posed attention to how the everyday is always-already a space of micro-resistance as the bodies and desires that inhabit it are irreducible to social determinations. In line with this commitment to respect singularity in the social, I adopted a bottom-up approach to understand sustainable transition as emergent *within* lived experience rather than *imposed* in the form of technocratically pre-established "solutions". More than an interest in behaviour change interventions and strategies, therefore, my study aimed at taking stock of the changes that are spontaneously happening in the conundrum of the economic, eco-logic and social crises that are traversing Western countries – as they are embodied at the fleshy and affective level of lived experience. Against

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[2] This is an area where meat consumption, especially cured meats from pig, is very traditional and recognised as part of the local identity. My participants themselves often mention being fond of these foods before becoming vegetarian and then vegan.

hegemonic unsustainable assemblages, I asked to what extent the resistances arising in the everyday could foreground more ecological ones.

Central to both data gathering and analysis was Deleuze and Guattari's philosophies. Their work allowed me to focus attention on post-representational issues such as materiality, affect, desire and the body without nonetheless forgetting the socially constructed nature of "reality" (see Lather and St. Pierre 2014). This was important in two senses. Firstly, ecological issues are by nature very material and therefore need to be dealt with on this level (Coole and Frost 2010); secondly, the everyday as habitual and embodied sphere comprises much more than rational calculations or even discursive power effects: it includes things, matter and the bodily, sensuous, unconscious dimensions of desire and affects (Bennett 2015). Finally, the "empiricist" attitude that characterises Deleuze's philosophy was in line with studying the everyday in an immanent way – *as it unfolds*, without the super-imposition of moral codes or normative views of how *it should be*; attentive to the potentialities of "molecular" resistances to established moral (and indeed) "molar" practices (see Deleuze 1991; Deleuze 2002; Deleuze and Guattari 2014, esp. 76-7).

In what follows I would like to concentrate on a few cases of energy transitions that were co-emerging with dietary choices and specifically a turn to veganism. The data I use comes from the engagement with three participants and there is no claim to statistical generalisability. Yet, it might be argued that there is some consistency among at least part of the people adopting veganism, for the latter often comes to form a "lifestyle" that is relatively shared, codified and promoted through official and institutional declarations, discourses, on-line posts, images, etc. (Twine 2017) – something I could personally observe during my fieldwork. This warrants some, partial and provisional, theoretical generalisations of empirical micro-observations to a wider social context.

4. DIETARY ASSEMBLAGES AS DESIRING AND AFFECTIVE ENERGY ETHICS: AN EXPLORATION

Throughout my fieldwork, food repeatedly stood out as one intensive point through which participants related to issues of energy, sustainability and ecological transitions. For instance, concern for health and a good bodily functioning normally co-emerged with an interest in organic and natural food – therefore with a commitment to production practices that are less impacting on ecosystems. This tended to have the effect of

introducing wider ecological concerns in everyday life, such as attention to means of transportation, detergent products, household heating, etc. But, as far as I could witness, the most thoroughgoing transformations that dietary transitions implied were related to participants who turned to plant-based diets. These, although spurred mostly by concerns for animals and their suffering, introduced a change in other energy practices as well.

I will exemplify this with the help of three participants, who are very closely related and whose life trajectories are intertwined and interdependent: Laura, a 18-year-old girl, her brother Mark (24-year-old) and Eleonore, Mark's girlfriend (22-year-old) [3]. It was the entering of Eleonore in Laura and Mark's family to initiate the transitions that I will outline. When Eleonore and Mark started dating, Eleonore was already vegetarian and she convinced Mark to become vegetarian as well, out of respect for her decision not to kill animals for eating. After Mark started to believe in the rightness of being vegetarian, the two persuaded Laura. Gradually, knowing about the mistreatment of animals in farms, Eleonore started to avoid animal products altogether, followed initially with some reticence by the others. Finally, they all became vegan – including other family members.

4.1. *For the love of animals (and girlfriends) – Passionate transitions*

It is often taken for granted that adopting a plant-based diet is mainly the outcome of rational-ethical considerations, contrasting with a sensuous-desiring drive towards the (assumed) pleasures and habits of meat. This position has been challenged by empirical literature in which, through the narratives and accounts of vegans, we start to appreciate how much changing diet brings with it novel and sometimes expanded food pleasures, sensitivities and physical wellbeing (Cole 2008; Vinnari and Vinnari 2014; Twine 2017). In relation to this debate, my data suggest a tension between these two poles.

I start with the latter. My participants often reiterate the sensuous pleasures and bodily benefits of being vegan. Laura, for instance, emphasises that her physical situation has improved: she now has less spots, less oily skin and hair; she has also managed to lose weight without effort – something she had tried to do in the past with little success. Eleonore, on her part, likes to experiment with cooking and tells me that she has found back pleasure in food since she became vegan. Before, she only

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[3] I use pseudonyms throughout.

liked meat and would rather get all the rest of her nutrition via tablets; since she gave up meat and derivatives, she discovered the wealth and tastiness of plants, which are also good for her health.

Beyond this, all three trajectories of becoming vegan suggest that their "choices" emerged not primarily out of rationally autonomous and free deliberations, but rather at the crossroads of encounters, proximities and intensities between bodies, human and non-human, that are affective-desiring in nature. For instance, Eleonore recounts how she suddenly stopped eating meat. She has always loved animals. When she was 17 she was volunteering in a cat refuge: one day, going back home, she realised how stupid it was to help cats and then go home and eat cows, "and so I started to get informed and I became vegetarian basically on the spot".

Here, Eleonore does construct her choice as "rational" in implicit opposition to the "stupid" fact of acting in contradictory ways (I will return to this below). Yet the story is about a sudden realisation, an event, the passing of a "threshold" (Deleuze and Guattari 2014, 62) that is first of all *affective*: it depends on her body being involved in proximities with cats and their animal intensities. Open to these encounters, Eleonore is involved in processes of "becoming-animal" (Deleuze and Guattari 2014, esp. 271-360) that de-stabilise both the socially codified distinction between Eleonore-human and cat-animal *and* the categorisations of the animal world in pets for loving cows for eating. In this, the very divide between humans and non-humans starts to crumble in favour of suppler distinctions, responsive to the affective continuity that threads through proximate living beings.

Similarly, Laura talks about a life-long commitment to, and love for, animals. After realising that meat was not necessary to her subsistence, she was able to better respond to this very sensitivity through the adoption of a plant-based diet. And although Mark was rather indifferent to animals before meeting Eleonore, his transition too can be seen as an affective one, for it was guided in the first instance by his attraction for Eleonore, his desire to please her and the will to "be a good person" like she was in his eyes.

4.2. *Spilling over: veganism, information technologies and ecology*

In all three cases, as non-human animals enter the same collective as human ones, they are granted dignity of existence *per se* and not as functional to human feeding and/or entertainment. This opens territories of

experience *beyond anthropocentrism*. Importantly, these non-anthropo-
centric lines of assembly also expand beyond animal relationalities and
towards a generalised respect for planetary ecosystems, informed by
new knowledge that veganism introduces in daily life. Becoming vegans
means completely changing food habits, tastes and norms about what is
"good" to eat or not; it implies an opening up of novel problems, avenues
of reflection and research. Information is looked for (especially via the
internet and social media) as my participants seek to develop a wider
knowledge around the body (human and non-human), ethics, moralities
and the discourses circulating around food, meat eating and "alternative"
diets.

Through this process of information-gathering Laura, Mark and
Eleonore become aware of the gravity of the planetary ecological situa-
tion, climate change, resource depletion, excessive land use and global
energy-food injustices. These are, in fact, increasingly linked to indus-
trial farming and fishing, especially in vegan blogs and posts. Through
these searches they also come to recognise that climate change, pollution
and other kinds of ecosystem damage are more generally related to the
unsustainability of Western everyday habits and lifestyle. In the face of
this, and already lead towards a respectful opening to other beings' lives,
the three begin to modify many of their everyday practices as a means
to reduce ecological impact, especially in terms of energy consumption
from non-renewables. They all try to commute by bike and train, reduce
heating in the house, cut their purchase of clothes and appliances, reuse,
recycle and sometimes self-produce everyday necessaries like detergents.
This change in energy use is well encapsulated by Eleonore:

E: Well it's surely changed. I mean I am careful with everything now.
If I leave a room I switch off the light, I get angry with my mum if she
doesn't … things like that. Also the central heating. Before, I would always
stand close to it whereas now I have understood that if I am cold I need
to wear more clothes! I should not just switch on the heating whenever
I am a bit cold! I mean it's a matter of being a bit … if I am cold I put
long socks on instead of having the air that keeps coming in! Eheh. […]
because I gained consciousness of all the issues! I mean before I was …
how old was I …? I did not use to think much about these things. I didn't
even have doubts, I didn't ask questions. Then, becoming vegan, I found
out many things and so … I mean, a consciousness regarding these themes
has grown …

A: So it was the fact of becoming vegan that brought about this … this
change?

E: Precisely. Yes, definitely.

Changing diet means changing "consciousness", but also relations with other people (the mum, who is pushed to save energy), with one's own body and sense-perceptions around being cold, warm, comfortable or at ease within the house. For Eleonore, but also Mark and Laura, passing the threshold of veganism means destabilising the mindless repetition of taken for granted ways of thinking, doing and sensing. Instead, they are situated in novel affective assemblages of energy, built through and around discourses (being parsimonious, not wasting) and material arrangements (long socks, one more sweater, colder rooms) of interrelationality and care between human and non-human nature.

4.3. *Everybody should become vegan!*

The awareness of the impacts of farming and fishing on climate change and other ecological issues functions in turn to reinforce the three participants' endorsement of plant-based diets. The latter, in fact, start to appear as not only commendable because they spare animals from suffering, but also necessary to the very survival of life on the planet as we know it. Mark repeatedly affirms that "we know" that animal farming is responsible for 51% of the total GHG emissions. From this assumption [4] flows that there is no more suitable measure to "save the planet" than the whole humanity becoming vegan.

Thus constructed, veganism stops being a personal choice and becomes a moral *duty* for all people who care about future generations, plants, animals and, more generally, life on earth: a universal moral imperative that applies to all and irrespective of contingent situations. In turn, such a construction of veganism leads the three to downplay the desiring and affective dimensions of their "choice": these are dismissed as characteristics of embodied human beings, situated, partial and therefore imperfect and fallible. Following the typically Western-modern dualism of mind and body, only the impartiality of a rational and disembodied choice can be universally ethical and therefore *right*. Hence, the three emphasise a purportedly "rational" and deontological character of veganism.

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[4] Not itself uncontested since official measures regarding GHG emissions deriving from animal farming range from 14.5% to 51% of the total (Twine 2017, 193).

4.4. *Veganism as will to power: possible dangers*

The issue with this is two-fold. First, at a closer look, the situated and power-laden nature of this same rationality becomes evident. As I provocatively ask Laura why should we respect non-human nature at all she replies:

> *L*: because we are part of nature so, apart from being wrong, it is extremely *stupid* not to respect nature! […] Then, it's wrong but first of--- first of all it's *stupid*, I think. Just because of that: 'cause it's a bit like … I mean, our life is based on nature. So … for this reason is wrong, I think. […] If I live in a house, I would never get myself into … into destroying its foundations … *casually*! 'cause the roof would collapse … and I would die. A person who does not do that, and stays in it and lives, it's not a good person! […] I mean it seems almost absurd, to me, to think of my stance as an "ethical" one – as if it were something positive. While it's other people who are wrong. I mean, to me it looks like I am … I am behaving just normally!

In this extract, the duty to respect nature is firstly framed around an imperative of *self-preservation* that risks to found sustainable transitions on self-affirmation: not to get extinguished *as human beings*. Far from being a decidedly eco-centric statement, this extract seems to oscillate towards that same anthropocentric will-to-power that foregrounds humans' exploitation of nature. Furthermore, although the primacy and naturalness of the drive towards *self*-preservation can be seen as a socio-cultural construction (especially associated with modern capitalism), it is naturalised as "normal". In turn, what is natural is also believed to be rational and, finally, morally *right*: it is stupid to destroy one's own house, *therefore* one who does it is *wrong*. This culturally specific self-preserving rationality becomes a crypto-morality that nonetheless dictates an abstract imperative: everybody *ought to* become vegan.

Here, I believe, start the possible dangers of certain assemblages emerging around veganism. For, from positing one single way of living as "right" it follows that anything that does not conform to this abstract ideal is dispelled as "wrong". And not only other people's, but also one's own, desires are condemned in as far as they do not conform to what is (rationally) right. Following Nietzsche (1984; Deleuze 2002), we might see this dynamic as nihilistic, for it implies the denial of Life as such on the basis of transcendent imperatives, unresponsive to its being and becoming. And precisely in line with the Nietzschean argument, nihilism co-emerges with an ascetic logic that, as we have seen, downplays lived, embodied and immanent experiences of the world. These are criti-

cised as *mere* matters of desire and contrasted with what is rational and therefore morally elevated. For instance, the "information" that animals and their derivatives are not *necessary* to human subsistence and are ecologically and energetically very impacting implies that desiring a piece of meat is not rational and, as a consequence, wrong – a selfish indulgence into the fleshy intensity of the bloody and salty taste of meat. As Mark reports saying to his father: "don't you realise that you killed an animal *just because you felt like it?*".

To be doubly sure, I am *not* proposing that a plant-based diet goes against a "natural" desire for meat. Quite the contrary, I do believe that a diet which does not procure unnecessary suffering to animals can be life-affirmative and conducive to novel trans-human alliances. Nor am I proposing that embodied pushes should be followed without them being subjected to an evaluation of their character and consequences. What I am nonetheless pointing to is the danger of *imposing* moral imperatives to recalcitrant bodies; furthermore, I suggest the need for these evaluations to be sensitive to the contextual and contingent character of life assemblages. Differently, the danger is that veganism remains blind and deaf to desire, sacrificed in the face of a Truth that specifies "from above" what is "right" – as this extract makes quite evident:

> *M*: in the end, all of our discussions end up on vegans because the vegans are – being vegan: being vegan is the cause if you will, the big cause of all it's happening. […] [but] If it came … *God*, if Jesus Christ came and told me: "I I *swear*, look: I am Jesus Christ and I tell you that reality is like this and this and that …" – thanks, Jesus Christ, I didn't know it …! So just give me some time to settle back again […] if it came out that eating meat is just good *for the animal*, that he [sic] *wants* to be killed, that animals actually *absorb CO_2* and release oxygen in the air [Eleonore and I laugh] … if you'd tell me: all these things are *true* and meat is good for your health, and I found out that all is the other way around … I would not feel defeated, quite the contrary! I am *happy* to eat a cotoletta [fried pork cutlet], do you understand?
>
> *A*: mh
>
> *M*: I mean I don't do it for bothering other people. I do what I think is the right thing to do, fuck aaaargh! […]

Interestingly, Nietzsche (1984) relates the nihilism of the ascetic in particular to Christianity – and it is remarkable how, in the passage above, the language is characterised by so much religious rhetoric despite Mark, Laura and Eleonore being self-proclaimed atheist. Like the Christian ascetic, who sacrifices his/her desire on earth in the interest of a life after death, Mark sacrifices the cotoletta in favour of a higher Truth, the big

cause: that veganism is the only way to save the planet (and ourselves). He would *happily* eat meat, but he does not do it because he believes it is *wrong*.

Indeed, Mark, Laura and Eleonore often admit it is "difficult" to be vegans in a society full of meat and dairy temptations – "and how can you not surrender?!". Not surrendering, for them, implies a high degree of self-control and effort. This appears, in turn, to generate precisely the *ressentiment* that Nietzsche (1984) identified as the side-effect of the denial of Life in favour of religious Ideals. This manifests in a generalised annoyance and hatred against all who do not sacrifice in the same way:

> M: we need to concentrate towards *not hating people*: "come on Mark, keep calm: they don't know things either, you should see what they'd do in case things were explained to them in the right way. Keep calm, Mark! Keep calm …".

Both non-vegans and vegans who are not as active in communicating "the cause" (as they believe one should do) become the target of a latent and ready-to-burst rage. At this point, what they define as a "super-respectful diet" starts to twist towards a divisive and sorrowful denial of life that looks rather *un*-respectful to all of its non-conformant manifestations. This is even truer as sacrifice is libidinally compensated for by claiming a moral superiority that sometimes takes on the connotations, again, of a violent will-to-power, a desire to emerge and demonstrate one's superiority over other people:

> M: I mean if a girl [Mala Ala] who's like 20-year-old – I think, won the Nobel for peace … I mean, if she won one, I should get *fifty* Nobel for peace, for what I am doing. Because she fights for the rights for the females. You can fight as much as you want for the rights of the females, but in thirty years, when we'll no longer have any food and any water, when as they are forecasting there will be three hundred millions environmental refugees … climate refugees – I dunno how to say it exactly – because there will be desertification everywhere, there will be an increased level of water--- the level of the sea raised by seven meters and it will have submerged the bigger cities, all this … are you still fighting for the rights of the females?! You're an asshole! […] It seems obvious to me that the females should have the rights, but I'm sorry this is not our *priority* now. This is not the person to which one should give the Nobel: *I* should get the Nobel, fuck! Yesterday when I was at the university I was talking to a former class mate. I explained to her why she should become vegan as well […] I got to the class 15 minutes late just because I took my time to thoroughly explain to her ho--- … and she's stayed there for the whole time looking at me wide-eyed, asking questions … I managed to make her *super*interested! She also felt guilty!! That … I mean, of course I should

not make people feel guilty because I get the opposite effect – they feel accused. I mean, I ha--- I managed to make her feel involved in what I was saying! She reflected on what I said. I got to the class a quarter of hour late just for this! I didn't think about myself, I didn't think "oh there will be exams soon, it's better you arrive in time for the class"; I thought: "this is the moment for change. I need to explain to this person *immediately*, right now – because I won't see her again! […] this is the right moment to educate her! I don't give a fuck of the class! I rather not going, in case! I talk to her!". *To me* they should give the Nobel!!! Right! because this is … this is it, now. These are the things now--- but not not to me in sense … to *the people like me*. Because, okay, I do these things and I save--- I mean, I sacrifice the class for explaining to her these things that are *extremely important*.

Of this notable passage, some key points are worth unpacking. First, there is the affective quality and intensity of Mark's long talk and argument. He is truly upset and truly excited, pointing to the fact that there is more than a rational acknowledgement of our "priorities" to his talk. Instead, we almost perceive a libidinal intensity in the perspective of winning a Nobel prize and have his position universally recognised as right and good. This further substantiates what has been suggested above, that veganism as an "ideology" (as he calls it) and life choice is far more than the rational, moral and disinterested (or other-oriented) choice that Mark, Laura and Eleonore purport it to be.

Secondly, the language of sacrifice (missing 15 minutes from the class) and guilt opens some caveats in the recently supported view of veganism as a mainly *positive* opening of life to more wealth, richness and variety of experience. If this is certainly the case for my participants, extracts like the ones above *also* suggest that self-denial might be at work in the transition to a plant-based diet, in turn accompanied by a resentment and bitterness that appears less than constructive for a wider transition towards sustainability.

4.5. *Veganism and the (im)political*

Time and again my participants recount how their efforts of turning other people vegan, or imposing vegan food in their presence, are frustrated – often with outrage and accusations of being "extremist" or "Talibans", which foment their resentment itself. These episodes start to suggest that whenever a certain energy ethics is imposed as a transcendent morality, it is resisted by non-aligned desires that feel crushed, denied the right to existence and for this reason angry. My participants' rage and contempt

towards otherness forecloses alliances and contact with different episte-mologies and systems of values, preventing them from connecting and communicating with subjects who might not straightforwardly accept their endorsement of veganism. Such a divisive attitude is politically disempowering for it does not allow larger alliances around collective ecological emancipatory projects, *but* vegan ones.

Relatedly, in search for a universal Truth to invoke in order to sup-port their universalistic claims, the three tend to silence the ethical and political debate around the contents of this Truth. This was already evident in the long extract above: Mark desires God to come and tell him the truth about reality and, as a consequence, illuminate him around what is morally "right" to do. Yet, this can amount to the capitulation of critique and contestation about what reality is, how it is constructed by existent systems of power and how it might be different. This is extremely problematic, for it opens the way to the determination of what is real, rational and good (in terms of environmental politics) by *others* in their stead. In particular, the danger is that the unequal and exploitative economic mode of production and consumption that is responsible for our current ecologic crises remains unchallenged in defining the ends, means and directions of the politics of the environment. As Mark tells me at the dinner table, "the priority is *giving up* doing certain things. And thinking about the system where this happens is secondary [...] I mean, for fuck's sake, what's the point in thinking about the economy?!".

5. CONCLUSION: EVALUATING DANGERS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF VEGANISM AS ENERGY ETHICS BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

In this brief article I have tried to throw a few provocations, more than conclusions, to start thinking about veganism as energy ethics beyond anthropocentrism and as an occasion for the transition to more sustain-able lifestyles. One of the aims was to contribute to the nascent literature on veganism and sustainable energy transitions; furthermore, I was inter-ested in assessing what energy transformations are traversing everyday life and with what effects. Drawing on empirical data, I have sought to evaluate social, cultural but also libidinal and desiring dynamics charac-terising some vegan transitions. Although I do not claim my observations to fit every case of adoption of plant-based diets, I hope some of my remarks might be relevant in highlighting their complexities, opportuni-ties and dangers.

I have made a strong point in favour of veganism as an affective-desiring process of destabilisation of given cultural categories that separate human beings from other animals. As such, I have argued, it is promising for a movement beyond anthropocentrism and towards more respectful relations to the rest of nature. In this sense, becoming vegan might be a springboard for novel, eco-centric and more sustainable energy ethics. All the more so as this "choice" tends to "spill-out" and reshape energy assemblages beyond food – e.g. domestic heating and lighting, water use, commuting, dressing, disposing of waste, etc.

Nonetheless, I put a warning through. In the moment veganism stops being lived and felt as a desiring, situated and perfectible – "human, all too human" – ethics, to become an abstractly moral system that claims to embody a superior Truth; in this moment we are faced with a few dangers. These are, in part, existential – for the self-sacrifice that this "ideology" requires becomes the source of a bitter *ressentiment* towards Life. Even more significantly, there is a danger of depoliticising ecology to turn it into a matter of management of resources, land and CO_2 emissions – not the creative and desiring political project of constituting different, fairer, livelier and more inclusive trans-human collectives.

But in what ways can an experience-near, immanent, approach to energy transitions contribute to produce more widespread, and at the same time more life-affirmative, ecological change? As psychosocial researchers, we inquire into the affective texturing of everyday energy assemblages. Yet, we should always remember that they arise as part of social and collective patterns of organisation that can be more or less ecologically damaging. I believe one of our tasks is to show how everyday desires can be made part of an ecologically-sound, life-affirmative, energy transition: they point to needs of emancipation and simultaneously suggest what pathways might be more or less feasible.

That many people are now embracing plants-based diets suggests a desiring pull towards less damaging trans-human energy assemblages. The fact that being vegan is sometimes "difficult" and produces sorrowful affects therefore might have very little to do with the bare abstinence from animal products. Rather, we can say it is the result of a social context in which meat and meat-eaters are systematically promoted as superior to plant-based food and vegan people – who become almost lesser and minor social subjects in need to justify "deviant" food assemblages and sometimes react by imposing their own morality as better or superior.

The vegan/omnivorous hierarchical binary that is thus established (irrespectively of which of the terms is positioned as superior) can thus become less than helpful in terms of a collective transition to sustain-

ability. As those who do wish to transition to plants-based diets find it difficult to joyfully embrace them, the divide between the two sensitivities widens instead of shrinking: as such, it becomes more and more difficult to jointly experiment collective energy assemblages that are at once sustainable and responsive to diverse lines of desire. Building new alliances in this sense seems to require that we avoid reducing life to a play of abstractly defined categories of right/wrong, inferior/superior and instead evaluate it in a way that is immanently ethical: responsive to the singularity and contingency of all those trans-human assemblages that can move us beyond anthropocentrism.

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