

An Anti-Civilization Mythology

A Review of Lierre Keith's "The Vegetarian Myth"

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I understand completely why someone might want to write a book about the “myths” of vegetarianism. We live in a world where capitalism has this amazing ability to co-opt anything and everything (you’ve almost got to admire what a good job capitalism does at that). “Green” capitalism is a case in point. Even radicals may have a hard time resisting the pull of green capitalism, though perhaps by accident. For vegans and/or vegetarians (heretofore referred to as “veg*ans”) who use their diets as a radical act, if they are promoting what to eat or not eat, buy or not buy, then there is really no way to avoid advocating for a different way of consuming—something capitalists can make loads of profit off. In addition, it’s easy to critique the idealism that some veg*ans hold: that, by way of their diet, they are not engaging in the hurting or killing of any animals, nor hurting the earth for the most part. This is of course obviously not true. Another easy critique to have of veg*ans is of their often-claimed belief that we can change the world by our diets alone; a silly idea, at best.

Lierre Keith’s book *The Vegetarian Myth* aims to discuss the “myths” of vegetarianism, but she sees these myths as something quite different than what most anarchists advocate for: a basic critique of capitalism and the need for actual movements that not only resist the structures we live under, like capitalism and the state, but also movements that provide space for resisting the ways we’ve come to relate to ourselves, each other and the non-human world (and create new, egalitarian and sustainable relationships!). Keith does point to a few things that are easy to get behind, but most of her book is a diatribe against veg*ans as people, as well as how, health-wise, a veg*an diet is a diet that will kill you—literally. I went back and forth from reactions like “that’s a good point” when she wrote of the destruction of the earth that is part and parcel of monocrops and agriculture in general, to reactions like “wow, that’s really offensive” when she wrote three entire chapters dedicated to explaining why a veg*an diet is basically “wrong” and “immature.”

The book has two different themes that are distinct. One theme focuses on the material ways that mass-agriculture and the cultivation of monocrops are destroying the earth—and quickly. The other theme is that of a couple different philosophical arguments like: agriculture is the base of all evil, as well as the argument that veg*anism is actually wrong and detrimental to the earth and our human bodies, and that veg*anism is “immature” and that all humans should be eating meat. I’ll break this review down by responding to the question of agriculture, responding to her critiques of veg*anism “the diet” as well as “the person,” and I will finish off the review with my

take on the violent pieing of Lierre Keith that took place at the 2010 Bay Area Anarchist Book Fair.

“Agriculture, as we know it, is swallowing entire ecosystems whole ”

As far as agriculture being the basis of all (organized) evil—that needs to be challenged, of course. Having said that, the way agriculture often (mis)utilizes irrigation and deforestation; plants annual grains; depletes (almost all) top soil, rivers and aquifers; causes desertification and total removal of tons of species; misplaces animals, human and non-human alike—I think it’s easy to make the case that agriculture, as we know it, is swallowing entire ecosystems whole (p. 42). At the same time, Keith concludes, like many anti-civilization theories, that agriculture is the basis of all domination, coercion and control and that we need to go back to a way of living that came before agriculture (agriculture is synonymous with civilization in her text). To do that, we’d need to kill about 5 billion people; so, it’s easy to see immediately, the problem with this analysis. In my thinking, domination, coercion and control are what we need to eradicate. I am so used to reading texts that reduce domination to the economic sphere that reading a “civilization-reductionist” text was a breath of fresh air—a breath, however, that will never bring us to a state of being that is truly free, participatory and healthy for all living things. Killing off (or the need to kill off) 5 billion people is not an answer to anything. We need to find ways to exist sustainably (buzz word of the year) with each other and the non-human world, something I think is possible without killing off billions of humans and forcing people to eat meat.

Keith is correct that veg*an monocrops are detrimental to the earth. Anyone who has studied diet and sustainability has seen those statistics that “growing” meat is less sustainable and more wasteful than growing vegetables, fruits, grains and legumes: for as much water as it takes to grow the grain to feed the cattle, we could just grow the grain and eat that; that far more fossil fuels are used to “grow” meat rather than to grow crops; that methane from cattle is awful for the environment. At the same time, we need different ways of growing crops; the way we’re doing it now is depleting top soil, creating salinization of the waters and causing desertification. It’s not as simple as “eating meat will save the world”. On the other hand, there are different ways of raising cattle and other animals that we slaughter for meat. One of Keith’s main points in the book is that cattle and such aren’t supposed to be eating grain in the first place; factory farming itself is unsustainable and has caused much of the crises that many blame “meat” in general for, when we need to be blaming the ways we “grow” and feed cattle and other livestock, perhaps not the existence of livestock itself.

This is where Keith could use a much bigger (or any, really) analysis of capitalism and its role in the livestock “industry”. Keith’s main point about grain-fed beef and other livestock is that the reason humans eat other animals is that the animals we feed on feed themselves on the grasses that we can’t digest, that is, we get the grass’s nutrients through the animal we eat that have eaten the grasses. Eating animals that eat grain is pretty ridiculous since we can just eat that grain ourselves. At the same time, the grain we feed animals is awful for their own health and livelihood, and ours, in return, when we eat them. Eating animals can be nutritious if they eat the food they naturally feed on, if you look at the nutritional content of factory-farmed and grain-fed animals (as food for humans), the nutrients aren’t there and the animals have become unhealthy to eat in the first place.

Moving on from there, the rest of the book is a diatribe against veg*ans as people. She writes three chapters: “moral vegetarians,” “political vegetarians” and “nutritional vegetarians”. All

three types of vegetarians are proven “wrong” by Keith. Funny thing is, none of those chapters describe me and my veg*anism—but that’s beside the point. She argues that vegetarianism is an “immature” standpoint and that when and if folks adopt an “adult knowledge,” we will see that eating meat is “natural,” glorious and correct (I’m paraphrasing here). “Adult knowledge,” according to Keith, is basically that death is embedded in all life, that we should accept that and stop trying to get out of “killing” and start eating meat like we’re supposed to (p. 77). Keith seems to think that vegetarians are folks with “child-like” brains that ultimately want to close their eyes and pretend like death isn’t happening all around them—I’ll let readers decide how they feel about this notion on their own. There are a slew of other silly conclusions from Keith, one being that anorexia is ultimately the fault of vegetarianism (p. 230) and that vegans are “obsessive” and “rigid” due to their lack of proteins and fat (p. 236)—in my opinion, some vegans are obsessive and rigid because of their dogmatism and ideological arrogance (along with many anarchists, for that matter). In short, it doesn’t take any particular diet to be an asshole with the Correct Line that everyone MUST adhere to.

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I ultimately feel like her book is a rant, filled with massive sweeping statements (many quite insulting) that rely on some really unfounded “scientific” claims that don’t seem to have any good sources, or that are the exact opposite of other “scientific” studies—so who do we believe if both premises can be “proven right” (veg*anism is “good” and also “bad”) ?

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If you want to pull something useful from this book, here it is: 1) we need to reassess the way we mass-produce everything from lettuce to cattle, 2) we need to let go of ideologies as “identities” and use them as ways to understand, not let them control us or our conceptions of, well, anything, really, 3) capitalism is one of the main causes of unsustainable food production (I’m being generous here, she never really states this, which is one of my main critiques of the book), 4) a veg*an diet won’t save the world.

Having written all this, and as a veg*an, I am totally against the attack of Lierre Keith at the 2010 Bay Area Anarchist Book Fair this past March. I attended the book fair, randomly, and was outside during her talk. But three able-bodied men attacked a woman who needs a cane to walk. They didn’t try to embarrass her or humiliate her with a pie plate full of (veg*an) whipped cream. Instead, they directly attacked her with three pies filled with not only whipped cream, but also with hot pepper and cayenne (à la what cops use as pepper spray). Furthermore, what does this say about the anarchist “movement” in the States? That if we disagree with people we should physically attack them? That doesn’t give much hope for progress within our struggling “movement,” or the fact that many veganarchists thought the attack was “delightful” and not sexist or ableist at all. Ok, I’ll let the readers try to figure out that one too. Funny thing is—they attacked Keith in the middle of her speech when she was denouncing factory farming.

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My conclusion of all of this in a nutshell? Diets alone won't change the world, but we need to construct, specific to this book, different relationships with animals and the non-human world, relationships that are good for all of us. We also need to develop different ways of conception: ways that allow folks to exist as veg*ans or not, but that don't create identities out of diets (or much at all, really) and find ways in which we can rally around broad agreements instead of physically attacking folks we disagree with. New social relationships combined with mass movements can change everything—and must.

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