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Johann Most
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1875

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The Vegetarian

Johann Most

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A small sect of comical enthusiasts lets its little light shine here and there to show poor, misguided humanity the way that leads to where coolies and Hindus have long since arrived; and to give the matter a learned air, its believers call themselves “vegetarians.”

It certainly doesn't occur to me to try to disabuse these strange boarders of anything, for this is quite impossible, because people who indulge in such unnatural extravagances undoubtedly suffer from an incurable obsession. What I intend is merely preventative in nature, amounting to a warning to all those who have not yet been afflicted by the disease of voluntary asceticism, but are certainly at risk of being infected with it.

Some of the plant-eaters pursue this more or less as a game and know how to fill their meatless table with a variety of other inviting delicacies. Anyone familiar with fine gastronomy knows that the number of fine pastries and baked goods is legion, that a number of tasty dishes can be prepared from various local and foreign fruits, and that there are also quite a few nobler vegetables.

Furthermore, those who are not exactly orthodox vegetarians do not despise milk and egg dishes. Such vegetarianism would ul-

timately be acceptable—if one's sole concern is enjoyment; it's just a pity that people with limited budgets can't join in.

Other meat-haters, however, take plant-eating very seriously. They also condemn eggs, milk, and fat and only accept plant-based foods cooked in water or served raw. Indeed, one cannot know whether these people will soon adopt the purely root and herbal diet of the mythical forest people. As long as these eccentrics are content with indulging their essentially innocent inclinations, one should not interfere in their private affairs. However, as soon as they formally preach the gospel of roots and herbs or even dare to propose vegetarianism as a means of solving the social question, they must be vigorously opposed.

So far, workers have generally steadfastly avoided vegetarianism – unless forced upon them by necessity – but the possibility cannot be ruled out that necessity will ultimately be turned into a virtue and watery soup will become the obligatory food for workers. This is a danger that loses none of its magnitude, however remote it may be, and which must therefore be combated wherever it may appear. And it does appear here and there; Just recently, a worker (who, he believed, was socialist-minded) seriously tried to prove to me that it was the utmost folly to want to consume anything other than plants boiled in water, that one could live quite well on bread and water, and that the consumption of meat dishes, spirits, and the like was just as useless and even harmful as smoking tobacco. What more could one want?

To prove the fallacy of such views, I will not engage in lengthy chemical deductions; rather, I consider it sufficient to refer to nature itself. In tropical regions, humans require only a small amount of carbon, thus needing to consume only a few fatty substances, because the climatic conditions there do not require the animal heat generated by carbon to be constantly renewed on a significant scale. For this reason, vegetable food is generally more popular there, although (apart from religious vegetarians) meat dishes are not disdained there either. In the far north, however, fat plays

spite his otherwise radicalism, he has no understanding of modern socialism. However, given that Blanqui is an honest man, and especially because he's in prison, I'll refrain from further criticism of him.) Be that as it may: In any case, Blanqui is not suitable to be used as bacon to catch vegetarians.

Finally, I'll allow myself to raise the question of how a society that exclusively adheres to vegetarianism should behave towards the animal world? Surely one couldn't consistently spare animals life, because otherwise they would soon become so numerous that hardly enough plants would grow to feed them, thus creating unpleasant competition for the vegetarians. But one couldn't exterminate the animals either, because one couldn't do without their fertilizers, furs, etc. So, we would still have to raise livestock, the only difference being that in the vegetarian age, we would no longer eat meat as we do now, but would discard it or use it for secondary purposes!

No matter how you twist and turn the matter, you always immediately come across—with all due respect!—the most blatant nonsense, which will hopefully speak eloquently enough to forever protect humanity from running itself into the dead end of vegetarianism.

the main role among foods, because body heat must be continually renewed through the supply of carbon if humans are to avoid succumbing to the influences of the cold climate.

In the temperate zones, therefore, human diets will have to follow a middle path, and indeed, they have always followed this middle path, without any vegetarians or animalists (meat eaters) or anyone else having paved the way for it. The further south a people lives, the more they adhere to a plant-based diet; the further north they are located, the greater their need for meat dishes. This is not, as vegetarians put it, a matter of an old prejudice or blind faith, but simply of following the laws of nature, which cannot be disobeyed in the long run with impunity.

But if one examines the economic side of the vegetarianism question, one encounters quite different things. Suppose the workers one fine day became convinced that all their previous struggle for freedom and equality had been in vain and that only vegetarianism could achieve their goal—how long does the die-hard vegetarian believe this illusion would last? But we don't want to cause anyone much headaches; instead, we'll provide the answer quite briefly and bluntly. This illusion could not last longer than until the workers bumped heads against the economic law of wages; and this would have to happen very soon. If the workers can live more cheaply than before, their wages must also fall by exactly the amount of the differential. Anyone who can't immediately figure this out, despite living in a society with free competition, should let any halfway reasonable worker explain the effect of this competition and, in general, the nature of the economic law by which wages are determined. As long as one isn't clear about this, one shouldn't even want to talk about things that touch on the social question. Incidentally, the consequences of a future vegetarianism—fortunately only fictitious—of the workers would be of the most disastrous nature for them for other reasons as well. The economic law of wages would not only apply in a single way, but in two and three ways.

If workers abstain from all meat consumption, all spirits, and smoking tobacco—in short, from everything that is abhorrent in the eyes of vegetarians—then a large portion of those previously engaged in the production of the aforementioned articles will necessarily become “redundant.” The supply of labor within the remaining branches of industry will far exceed demand, and thus wages will generally fall, continuing to fall until they reach the level just sufficient to sustain a vegetarian existence. The solution to the social question is therefore “out of the question”!

It should strike vegetarians as obvious that capitalists give workers very similar advice to themselves, namely, that they constantly talk about saving, saving that would only be possible for workers if they embraced vegetarianism and similar whims of lack of needs. If workers could accumulate capital in this way, they would be able to provide themselves—organized in cooperatives—with the means of production and produce independently; but the capitalists would no longer be able to play entrepreneurial roles; their property monopoly would be transformed into a dead nut, and their thalers would no longer lay eggs. The austerity apostles know full well that the consequences of saving would have to be of a completely opposite nature (apart from the repercussions of saving already mentioned above, it should also be noted that any saving that results in a reduction in consumption and simultaneous accumulation of capital may appear to promote production, but in reality must impair it, since one cannot truly produce more if less is consumed). That the entire theory of saving is vain nonsense, and that is why they preach about it, and why they rave about public kitchens, etc.

The fact that vegetarianism cannot improve the situation of workers is not the worst of it, however, because it would have to result in a significant deterioration of working-class conditions, a deterioration not only in material but especially in spiritual terms. Although plant-based diets do contribute to strengthening bones, which is why, for example, the miners of Peru are eagerly

encouraged to eat bread containing a strong mixture of bean flour, the replacement of the used-up brain, for example, is significantly impaired — especially qualitatively — when eating exclusively plant-based diets, because there is too little phosphorus in the vegetables.

If we examine tribes that more or less adhere to vegetarianism, we find that they are totally incapable of defending themselves against the worst oppressions. Lacking energy, lacking intellectual vigor, and with complete apathy toward any higher endeavor, they are dully resigned to their fate. The mere contentment with a miserably monotonous, pleasure-free existence must make one not even consider a more pleasant existence worth striving for. We can learn more about this in East Asia, where vegetarianism is the strongest pillar of despotism, and from where, to the horror of American workers, a sense of contentment and a sense of servitude are shipped across the great ocean with the plant-eating coolies.

Individuals who, despite being vegetarians, display great energy, even passion, cannot be cited as counterexamples, for great causes and great effects in national life cannot be observed in individual people.

The aforementioned worker drew my attention to the French revolutionary Blanqui and pointed out that, despite his “Spartan” (that wouldn’t really be apt, since the Spartans lived simply, but not vegetarian) lifestyle, he was truly full of energy and drive; but I can’t even recognize this comment as appropriate. Blanqui was so mistreated for nine years in Fort Michel under the reign of Louis Philippe that his body was permanently broken; no wonder, then, that his nature can only tolerate very light food. And that his spirit, despite all this, remained healthy and fresh is because he—well, because he is Blanqui. It’s as if, at times, a principle seeks to embody itself in some person, and such a person seems to be Blanqui; at least, he is often considered the incarnation of the revolutionary idea. (Personally, I’m not too enthusiastic about Blanqui because I don’t consider his coup-making tactics practical and because, de-