

MAKING CLIMATE CHANGE MEANINGFUL: CELEBRITY VEGANS AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF MEAT AND DAIRY CONSUMPTION

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The disconnection between what we know about climate change, and how we relate this to the cultural values of our everyday lives, is a gap that needs addressing if we are to deal with this issue in a meaningful and effective way (Doyle 2011a; Corner, Markowitz and Pidgeon 2014). Climate impacts across the globe are becoming increasingly visible and felt, but for those living in the north and western hemisphere, climate change can still feel a distant and remote issue if not experienced directly (Pidgeon 2012; Harvey 2015), with seemingly little connection to the social practices and concerns of our daily lives. Yet, climate change is intimately bound up with our daily activities, from the food that we purchase and the transport we take, to the products we buy and the values we hold. Creating more sustainable societies requires significant changes to our energy intensive lifestyles. But how do we achieve this?

Connecting climate to culture is essential (Doyle 2011a; Hulme 2015). Making climate culturally meaningful involves creating linkages not only between what we do and how this affects our climate, but also using culture (through popular music, arts, literature, media, entertainment and sport) as a way of inspiring and helping achieve social and political change. From this perspective, the dominance of celebrity culture within our media and cultural landscape means that celebrities have an increasing role to play in the cultural politics of climate. Indeed, a growing number of scholars are focusing critical attention upon celebrity involvement in environmental and humanitarian activism (Brockington 2008; Littler 2008; Boykoff and Goodman 2009; Anderson 2013).

Celebrities can help draw attention to an issue and galvanise youth engagement (Alexander 2013). At the same time, the individualisation and commodity relations which support the societal processes of celebrityization (Driessens 2013) can be problematic in the context of climate change, which requires significant socio-economic shifts to achieve sustainable societies. Yet, given the disconnect between climate science and the social practices of the everyday, celebrities can act as important intermediaries to help make the complexities of climate change more accessible and relevant to our daily lives. Food is one such area where celebrities can help link the impacts of climate change to our consumption habits. Indeed, as one of the largest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, the production and consumption

of meat and dairy (Gerber et. al 2013), is a crucial social practice that requires further interrogation.

The climate politics of meat and dairy consumption

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) meat and dairy consumption contributes 14.5% of human induced global greenhouse gas emissions (Gerber et. al 2013). This report builds upon FAO's 2006 publication, *Livestock's Long Shadow*, which brought significant attention to the climate impacts of the livestock sector. Emissions are produced through land use for livestock pastures and animal feedcrops, leading to significant deforestation; methane via animal effluence; nitrous oxide via animal waste, and water use for the irrigation of animal feed crops, particularly soy beans (FAO 2006). In 2006, the FAO stated that 'civil society seems to have an inadequate understanding of the scope of the problem' (FAO 2006, 282).

NGOs have been reticent to engage with this issue for fear of alienating people and for addressing what is perceived to be too personal an issue – the food that we eat (Doyle 2011b, Laestadius 2014). Prominent environmentalists such as Bill McKibben have further contributed to a general reticence within civil society to tackle this issue (McKibben 2010). Likewise, governments have been disinclined to promote the reduction or elimination of meat and dairy because they are generally 'reluctant to tackle questions of personal choice and consumption', instead focusing their climate campaigning efforts upon household energy consumption (Robins and Roberts 2006, 39).

This failure to adequately address the climate impacts of meat and dairy illustrates how forms of consumption are embedded within existing socio-cultural practices: meat and dairy consumption is largely conceived as a 'natural' practice within western, and middle-class, societies (Heinz and Lee 1998). Lack of engagement by NGOs and governments thus means that the opportunity to link climate to the practices and values of everyday life (even when this involves questioning those values and practices) is significantly reduced.

The celebrity politics of veganism

Despite this failure to engage, the recent rise in the number and profile of celebrity vegans, that is, celebrities from the fields of entertainment, sport and politics who have publically adopted a vegan diet (CBS News 2011) –involving the elimination of meat, dairy, eggs and fish – offers the potential for a previously stigmatised practice (Greenebaum 2012) to achieve mainstream credibility. Forbes announced 'high-end vegan cuisine' as one of the Top Ten food trends of 2013 (Bender, 2013). Historically, veganism has been largely viewed in a derogatory way, framed in mainstream media as ridiculous and 'difficult', with vegans characterised as 'oversensitive', 'ascetic' and 'hostile' (Cole and Morgan, 2011,139). The

increasing visibility of vegan celebrities is thus welcome, bringing an ignored or stigmatised identity (Greenebaum, 2012) into mainstream media culture.¹

In order to consider the potential influence of celebrity vegans, it is important to understand their different celebrity profiles. For example, the actor and writer, Alicia Silverstone, most famous for her role in the film *Clueless* (1995), and comedian and TV entertainer/talkshow host, Ellen DeGeneres, are two prominent female celebrity vegans who use their celebrity status to promote veganism – through books (specifically Silverstone), television interviews, websites and social media. Both are celebrities within the entertainment industry, but present very different approaches to communicating their veganism, and their own vegan philosophy. Silverstone's veganism is communicated through her book, *The Kind Diet: A Simple Guide to Feeling Great, Losing Weight, and Saving the Planet* (2009), which is accompanied by an environmental lifestyle website/blog called The Kind Life, and supported by a Facebook page and Twitter feed (The Kind Life, 2014). As part of The Kind Life brand, the books, website and social media presence work as an integrated platform to promote Silverstone's personal vegan lifestyle and philosophy. Utilising discourses of self-help and healing, Silverstone places the self as central to veganism, where being kind to oneself and others is the route and basis to becoming vegan.

Historically, animal suffering and anti-speciesism (against distinctions between humans and animals) are the political and ethical basis of veganism (Adams 2010; Cole and Morgan 2011). Silverstone also adheres to this: 'The dairy industry is, in a word, cruel: That is why I gave up dairy in the first place' (2009, 42). Silverstone's vegan ethics, however, are human centred. Discussing why meat and dairy is 'nasty,' Silverstone argues that these harm the health of your body, then discusses their impacts on animals, and then the planet.

Silverstone's Kind Life brand positions veganism through a framework of compassion, care and emotion; an important component of a vegan ecological ethic (Plumwood 2002; Adams 2010). Silverstone makes valuable interconnections between humans, animals and environment, particularly important for an understanding of climate change. Yet, the personalized lifestyle presented by Silverstone – such as shopping choices and socializing with celebrity friends – draws upon and extends her celebrity commodity status, making it difficult to disentangle the political and ethical from the individualized commodity lifestyle of celebrity culture.

Since 2003, Ellen DeGeneres' – the 5th most powerful celebrity of 2013 (Forbes 2013) –has hosted her daytime talk show, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, where her affable, warm and empathetic persona has made her a mainstream success. Yet, DeGeneres career was significantly affected when she came out as a lesbian in 1997, causing a 3year hiatus in her career. In 2008 she became vegan and had a high profile vegan wedding with actor, Portia De

Rossi, which reinforced her celebrity status. DeGeneres' migrated into vegan lifestyling in 2011 with the launch of her website, *Going Vegan with Ellen* (Pollack, 2011), which has since been subsumed into a section called 'Ellen's Healthy Living' on the Ellen DeGeneres Show website.

Whereas Silverstone's vegan message is consistent across all media platforms, DeGeneres' veganism represents only a part of her celebrity profile. On her website, veganism is presented primarily through discourses of health – 'Going vegan increases your metabolism, so even if your calories increase, you won't necessarily be gaining weight' (Ellen DeGeneres Show, 2014) – and to a lesser extent animal welfare. DeGeneres deploys other celebrity vegans to communicate her message: images of 'Famous Vegans' from entertainment, sports and politics appear with descriptions next to each ranging from health and weight loss benefits, animal rights, and to a much lesser extent, environmental concerns. The integration of other celebrities within the promotion of veganism is a strategy that contributes to the celebritization of this issue, increasing the potential reach and accessibility of veganism, yet further inscribing this within celebrity commodity relations (Driessens 2013).

Although it is through a celebrity public self that DeGeneres' veganism is situated, a private self is revealed in an interview with journalist, Katie Couric (CBS News 2010). DeGeneres explains her veganism as an expression of the need for love, compassion and equality for all humans and species, thus revealing a more radical vegan ethic than is communicated via her talkshow and website. Yet it is through her talkshow that DeGeneres is able to present her beliefs and values in a humorous and non-threatening way. DeGeneres has a staggering 29.7 million twitter followers (Silverstone has 249,000). Her tweets replicate the humorous and caring public self of her TV show and website – combining jokes, celebrity promotions, excerpts from her TV show, social and political issues (such as anti-bullying and LGBT equality) and funny/cute animal stories. It is through this relationship with her audience that a consideration of the effects of DeGeneres' veganism thus needs to be undertaken.

Climate, culture and celebrity

Making climate culturally meaningful is an urgent matter. Celebrities can help by relating the causes and impacts of climate change to existing socio-cultural practices, facilitating not only a questioning of cultural values (such as meat and dairy consumption) but simultaneously making the necessary changes to our habits appear more positive, achievable and accessible. Yet, we must also be mindful of questioning the individualist aspirational lifestyle that accompanies celebrity culture, and be attendant to the range of possibilities for meaningful and wide scale socio-cultural changes necessary for addressing climate change.

Julie Doyle is a Reader in Media at the University of Brighton, UK. She is on the Board of Directors of the International Environmental Communication Association (IECA) and a co-founder of the Science and Environment Communication Section of the European Communication and Research Education Association (ECREA).

1 A more detailed analysis of celebrity vegans is presented in my forthcoming article, 'The politics of being vegan: celebrities, ethics, ecology and feminism', *Environmental Communication*, Special issue: Spectacular Environmentalisms (2015).