

# **Veganism and Punk – A Recipe for Resistance: Symbolic Discourse and Meaningful Practice**

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**Abstract:** This study explores the construction of meaningfulness through an analysis of food – a powerful conveyor of meaning which, in many traditions, serves as an indicator of religiosity and identity. Food can be viewed as a mechanism through which humans define, understand, and experience themselves as authentic individuals; it serves as the interstice where the “sacred” and “profane” can be demarcated, and through which the desires, passions, hopes, and fears of the individual (i.e., the key ingredients to seeking meaning in the world) are expressed. My paper examines the role food plays in the day-to-day lives of Vegan Punks. In particular, it seeks to explore the way food is used ideologically in the creation of distinct beliefs and practices among a community grounded in a sense of ethical righteousness.

## **Introduction**

To assert that Punk is political is a truism. Punks literally “wear” their non-conformist anti-establishment critique against the violence, corruption, and oppressiveness of the “system”. This paper seeks to move beyond the obvious to explore one of the ways in which Punks embody their purposeful marginalization, namely through their diet. Although Veganism is not the ubiquitous dietary practice of Punks, it is a popular expression of resistance within the movement, and serves as a tool of critique. In the context of Punk, Veganism becomes a powerful force dedicated to upholding a way-of-life that promotes awareness and responsibility. As Anthropologist Brad Weiss noted in his research on consumption, commoditization, and everyday practice of the Haya communities of Northwest Tanzania: “Certain qualities of food make it *the* most appropriate vehicle for describing alienation” (quoted in Clark 2004, 19). By

analyzing Punk discourse and Vegan dietary practice from within its political context I will demonstrate that it is the symbolic discourse and meaningful practice, or the “quasi-religious” characteristics, that make Veganism a powerful symbol and tool of resistance – basically, that Veganism is a powerful way of “living and breathing” Punk. The ideology surrounding what Punks eat, and with whom and what they engage, is “religious-like” in behaviour, and therefore strengthens the cohesion of the group, enabling them to develop a viable form of resistance to the establishment, both locally and globally.

### **A Matter of Definitions**

In the popular imagination, the term “religion” carries significant baggage, mostly as conformist, organized, predictable, hierarchical, limiting, etc. It was not until the creation of the concept “religion” that western society began to define and categorize as “religious” a rather narrow range of belief and behaviour that (allegedly) references a transcendent domain. Of course, the academic study of religion has long permitted a broader definition of what constitutes “religion” and it is within this framework that I situate my work. There are certain qualities and/or patterns among the Punk communities that I interpret as “religious-like behaviour” and these pertain to the meanings and symbols that Punks use to convey meaning of a profound or existential nature. For this reason, I refer to these elements of Vegan Punk discourse and practice as “quasi-religious”. They are “religious” in the broadest sense of the term, but they are social and political as well. Of course, symbols are polyvalent and can be infused with transcendental qualities as well as strong social and political ideologies. Malcolm Hamilton defines this idea of “quasi-religious” in a way that seems appropriate to the context of Veganism and Punk:

... they reflect the rapidly changing, diverse and diffuse character of ‘religious’ life and activity in contemporary societies. A variety of ideas, beliefs and practices seek to address those aspects of life, issues, concerns and puzzles which religion has traditionally addressed, but in

a very different manner; undogmatically, individualistically and without recourse to notions of the supernatural ...it seems to capture the very ambiguity with which we are trying to deal in confronting a phenomenon which is 'sort of' like something but not quite that thing. (Hamilton 2000, 64-66)

Veganism is yet another term requiring clarity. Although certain people would describe themselves as "Vegan" there are different reasons why someone may choose to be labeled as such. The two main reasons why an individual may choose to adopt the label of "Vegan" are: health and ethics.

Moral vegans distinguish themselves from moral vegetarians in accepting and practicing prescriptions or altogether avoiding benefiting from animal exploitation, not just of avoiding benefiting from the killing. Vegans take the killing to be merely one aspect of the systematic exploitation of animals. (Zamir 2004, 367)

I deal specifically with ethical or ontological Veganism where the individual chooses to eschew all animal products (food, clothing, body products) to protest against what they believe are harmful and oppressive practices, such as animal husbandry/factory farming and the hegemonic ideologies of the dominant consumer capitalist system. The term "Veganism" is relatively new and I would argue that its creation marks the need to clearly define the diet in ethical terms. It has gained currency in response to the increasingly dire consequences of industrialization and the mass production of animal flesh ("meat"), as well as the negative ecological impact of production and uneven distribution of goods and capital worldwide. In addition, Veganism is a political stance against anthropocentrism - the belief that humans are of a higher moral category than other living beings, or a part of a single moral category excluding all other living beings. Therefore, the exploitation and killing of animals on a massive-scale, and its rationalization via the idea of human superiority vis-à-vis other beings, sparked a need to

create a dietary practice eschewing all forms of animal exploitation.

## **Punk**

There is much debate regarding the status of Punk as a movement. Punk is above all else about “*dis*-organization”. Because Punk is anti-establishment, it is more appropriate to consider it counterculture than label it a subculture (O’Hara 1993, 24). Initially Punk consisted of working-class youth bent on rebelling against their position of powerlessness to the system. At the outset, Punk had less political rhetoric and was more about shocking or destabilizing convention through dress, music, and a non-conformist extreme DIY (Do-It-Yourself) attitude:

For the large number of people on welfare – or “the dole,” as it is known in Great Britain – especially young people, the outlook for bettering their lot in life seemed bleak. In this atmosphere, when the English were exposed to the seminal Punk Rock influences of the New York scene, the irony, pessimism, and amateur style of the music took on overt social and political implications, and British Punk became as self-consciously proletarian as it was aesthetic. (Tricia Henry quoted in O’Hara 1993, 26).

Therefore, the economic hardships experienced by youth in Britain, combined with the Punk Rock influences in the U.S. created the modern Punk scene – it is here where we observe the transformation of Punk from a rather “mild” subculture to a politicized countercultural movement. The politicization of Punk opened up new avenues of resistance. Being “against” the system no longer simply meant being reactionary, but now involved a commitment to resist capitalism, conformity, exploitation, and oppression (racism, sexism, speciesism, etc.). It was, and is, a rejection of mainstream culture with its supposed mindless focus of work, profit, consumption/materialism, and the suppression of the individual.

Perhaps the most essential value professed by the punks was a genuine disdain for the conventional system. Their use of the term *system* here referred to a general concept of the way the material world works: bureaucracies, power structures, and competition for scarce goods. This “system” further referred to the ethic of deferred gratification, conventional hard work for profit, and the concept of private property. (Fox 1987, 352)

Today, everything from Punk language and ideas, as well as their unconventional style is politicized. For example, their unconventional style reverses ideals of beauty, branding, order, and cleanliness. In addition, a Punk way-of-life reverses traditional ideas of home and work. The acquiring of a “career” and investment in a “home” are considered capitalist fabrications ensuring that individuals remain dependant on the system. In sum, Punk is a way-of-life that stresses the importance of becoming an authentic individual – an individual who in their opinion does not require mindless consumptive indulgences and false securities.

### **Punk Cuisine: “good(s) to think with as well as good(s) to eat” – Food as a Symbol of Resistance**

I chose to quote Claude Levi-Strauss’ (1969) commentary of food as “good(s) to think with as well as good(s) to eat” because it embodies the meaning of food in Punk praxis. Veganism is not only a matter of eating good food, but a matter of transcending its physical properties and symbolizing all that is wrong with the dominant culture. “We feed not only our appetite but also our desire to belong. Foods express social values, and by consuming them we acknowledge a shared set of meanings” (Fiddes 1991, 34). Conceiving the intangible out of the tangible, that is, producing symbols and meanings from food, Punks conscientiously transcend everyday thought and discourse through dietary practice. Veganism becomes a place for Punks to express and implement an ideology of critique against oppression. The non-conventional or “misfit” dinner table without the items of exploitation becomes a symbol of

resistance. Dylan Clark quotes: “In punk veganism, the daily politics of consumption and the ethical quandaries of everyday life are intensified” (2004, 24). Clark bases his analysis of Punk discourse and praxis on Levi-Strauss’ conceptions of the raw, cooked, and the rotten, however, Clark appropriates the “tripolar gastronomic system...basic to all human cuisine” (*ibid*, 19) and places it within a different context so that the categories become part of Punk discourse. “Food practices mark ideological moments: eating is a cauldron for the domination of states, races, genders, ideologies, and the practice through which these discourses are resisted” (*ibid*, 19). With this basic principle in mind, Punks eat and talk about food in a manner that expresses their alienation and disdain for exploitation, as well as their desire for a “revolution”. It is important to note that Punks generally do not conceive of completely overthrowing the establishment, but rather aim to create fissures in society that shake the taken-for-granted norms and influence change at the social, economic, and political levels in various possible forms.

Punks who practice Veganism are those who adhere to an ideology of anarchism, animal and human rights, ecological well being, etc. Punks do not practice what they call “yuppie” Veganism, that is, dietary choices from high-end grocers at high-end prices. Instead, desirable food is that which is considered discarded food (day old or ripened food whose fate is the trash) or what one may scrounge from store dumpsters (dumpster diving). Whatever is considered unwanted or “not good enough” for mainstream society is considered by Punks as ideal to consume. By accepting society’s “rejects”, Punks are making a very blatant statement about their own marginality and their own rejection of the mainstream.

American food geographies have shifted toward processing (or cooking) food. Industrial food products are milled, refined, butchered, baked, packaged, branded, and advertised. They are often composed of ingredients shipped from remote places, only to be processed and sent once more around the globe. From a Levi-Strauss perspective, then, punks consider industrial food to be extraordinarily cooked. Punks, in turn, preferentially seek food that is more “raw”: i.e., closer to

its wild, organic, uncultured state; and punks even enjoy food that has, from an American perspective, become rotten – disposed of or stolen. (2004, 20)

Punk discourse and practice is imbued with symbols and meanings of the pure and polluted – their rejection of mainstream culture is not only politicized but reified in creating a symbolic set of meanings that structure their worldview in terms of what represents the “good” (ethical, aware) life and what does not. Their creation of clearly defined boundaries between themselves and the “other”, as well as the symbolic representation of the content of such boundaries suggests utopian, if not quasi-eschatological predispositions. The future for which many Punks are striving is an idyllic state where humans and non-human animals, as well as nature, are no longer exploited or oppressed.

For Punks, then, processed or “cooked” foods (“frankenfoods”) are “polluted” due to their industrial manipulation, as well as the massive ecological consequences of such manipulations, and by the fetishism that goes along with the commodification of food on a mass-marketed scale. The foods Punks choose to eat possess certain “magical” properties by carrying with them pristine or sought-after “tainted” qualities. Raw organic, local farmed food, brandless, bulk, or home-grown, DIY goods are considered “pristine” or pure. The polluted false symbols (e.g., brand fetishisms) of corporate food are rejected in favour of purer symbols of social and political awareness and group solidarity. “Through a dialogue of symbols and meanings, social actors develop collective discursive repertoires, which they use to collectively diagnose a social problem and advise a specific route for social change” (Cherry 2006, 158). Rotten food is rejected by normative culture because it no longer qualifies as “good”, meaning it is no longer “shiny and new”. This makes it pure within Punk counterculture. In addition, polluted or “cooked” foods can be reclaimed by removing them from their original context and imbuing them with new symbols.

By bathing corporate food in a dumpster or by stealing natural foods from an upscale grocery store, punk food

is, in a sense, decommodified, stripped of its alienating qualities, and restored to a kind of pure use-value as bodily sustenance...This behaviour suggests an axiom of punk culinary geometry: in the act of being stolen, heavily cooked food is transformed into a more nutritive, gustative state. Stolen foods are outlaw foods, contaminated or rotten to the mainstream, but a delicacy in punk cuisine. (Clark 2004, 21)

It is difficult to discern how widespread dumpster diving and upscale grocery theft is, as acts against consumer capitalism, since individuals choosing to participate in such acts are not organized within a set group or geography; however, unconventional lifestyles based in Punk and/or anarchist ideology are much more inclined to acquire food in such a manner. Transformative processes of decontextualizing certain foods is “quasi-religious” since symbolic discourse transforms the status of the food – what was once totally and utterly inedible to Punks is now considered even more powerful since its polluted symbolic properties are transformed. Clearly food is a powerful symbolic vehicle capable of carrying an ideological message. It can be saturated with notions of the pure, liberated, or free, just as easily as it can carry ideas of the polluted, exploited, unwanted, and fetishized.

There are pollution powers which inhere in the structure of ideas itself and which punish a symbolic breaking of that which should be joined or joining of that which should separate. It follows from this that pollution is a type of danger which is not likely to occur except where the lines of structure, cosmic or social, are clearly defined. (Douglas 1966, 140).

Vegan creations are considered an expression of resistance: the preparation of food and its consumption represents the struggles of life –good foods and transformed foods are reminders of why one is Punk, as well as Vegan. Although Punks may not “identify” with their food on a superficial level (brand-identity: I buy therefore I am), they are ingesting a way of life in such a

way that food is no longer simply a matter of sustenance, but also of the *substance of a meaningful life*. I would argue that similar to how food is considered “rotten” the context in which food is prepared is also “rotten”, because it rejects the conventional notions of hygiene and sanitation. Cleanliness for Punks is symbolic rather than superficial (cleanliness equated with wealth). Aesthetically Punks choose to reverse conventional ideas of cleanliness and dress. In the case of food, Punks also reject the conventional ideas of “clean” food – sanitization is polluted whereas the symbolic “rotteness” of food is clean. These reversals have “quasi-religious” implications in that they transcend their original meaning and create new symbolic contexts, which enable the forging of alternative beliefs and practices. Essentially, sanitization is polluted due to its real toxic qualities (chemical based cleaning products, pesticides, etc.). In addition, metaphorically sanitization represents the sterile, dogmatic, and oppressive hegemonic ways of a capitalist patriarchal society. The conventional ideas of what is “clean” or “right” is appropriated and placed within a Vegan Punk discourse to represent their opposite, that is, the “dirty” and “wrong”. Clark comments on the context of an anarcho-Punk Vegan gathering place located in Seattle known by Punks as the Black Cat Café:

The place and the food rejected strict adherence to conventional conceptions of hygiene, where even the appearance of filth somehow infects the object or the body. Here hygiene was associated with bleached teeth, carcinogenic chemicals, and freshly waxed cars, and operated as a code for sterility, automation, and alienation...what to make, then, of a restaurant which rarely produces a tahini salad dressing the same way twice or a pile of homefries without a good many charred? What of a restaurant with spotty service, spotty dishes, where the roof leaks, and the bathroom reeks? For five years, the Black Cat found a way to thrive in spite of, or because of, its unorthodox practices. (Clark 2004, 22)

It is important to note that “rotten” foods are not only foods of marginal status (expired, cosmetically damaged, etc.), but foods which represent grander ideas of gluttony, waste, and the injustices of corporate greed and exploitation. It is a critique of the capitalist system of food production and distribution which depends for its success on greed and over consumption, as well as on the stratification of people (rich/poor) by means of (among other methods) food costs (healthy expensive foods vs. processed cheap foods).

Vegan Punks emphasize the correlation between food and power. Food becomes a symbol of gender relations and geographic locations. Punk feminists consider food as a site of repression perpetuated by a patriarchal culture in its stifling of female individuality and independence by controlling what, how, and how much women eat. Certain Punk feminists reclaim their independence by adopting a Vegan ethic and rejecting the diet of “meat” (patriarchal power), and “cooked” foods, which they consider to symbolize the subordinate: just as foods are extraordinarily processed and commodified, so are women. By adopting a Vegan Punk ethic women are transforming their bodies and perceptions into something “raw” or pure:

Thus, many punks identify the body as a place where hegemony is both made and resisted. Punks are critical of the beauty industry and of the commodification of the body. They argue that food is part of a disciplinary order in which women are taught to diet and manage their bodies so as to publicly communicate in the grammar of patriarchy. (Clark 2004, 23)

It is important to note that this idea of “raw” or pure is not necessarily a “romantic” idea of woman returning to nature, or being “raw” and closer to nature. Rather, it is the idea of reclaiming an authentic identity. Therefore, by means of food female Vegan Punks reclaim their bodies, and create their own individual definition of what *woman is* and shed expectations and suppressions (rather than pounds). In sum, it is clear that food is a site of power. Punks are participating in a dialogue with normative culture and by reversing the status quo Punks reclaim power.

Punks also deliberately use food as a weapon in their protest against globalization (or imperialism) of western capitalist principles and ideologies. “Free trade” is critiqued as an unequal relationship in which the West profits from the exploitation of smaller nations in order to increase western luxuries, choice-consumerism, and cheap goods – all of which Punks reject.

For punks, mainstream food is epitomized by corporate-capitalist “junk food.” Punks regularly liken mainstream food geographies to colonialism because of their association with the Third World: destruction of rainforests (allegedly cleared for beef production), the creation of cash-cropping (to service World Bank debts), and cancer (in the use of banned pesticides on unprotected workers and water supplies). (Clark 2004, 20)

And:

Ultimately this vortex brings about the complete objectification of nature. Every relationship is increasingly instrumentalized and technicized. Mechanization and industrialization have rapidly transformed the planet, exploding ecosystems and human communities with monoculture, industrial degradation, and mass markets. (Watson quoted in Clark 2004, 21)

Adopting a Vegan diet and imbuing it with Punk philosophy creates an ideal form of political and metaphysical protest.

Punks employ a specific kind of discourse and practice to politicize everyday life and to reclaim the power of the individual. Whether the individual stands alone or is part of a group, the voice and individuality of that person is recognized. Punks choose to stand apart from the mainstream and by doing so, distinguish their speech and actions from that of the norms. Boundaries are clearly demarcated as an indicator of their disdain for the system. By radicalizing the way they think and talk about food, and by consuming their symbols, Punks are

literally living and breathing their ideologies. When Vegan Punks eat together, the symbolic implications of their meal are often ritualized. What they ingest is consciously chosen and ideologically informed; it holds power and this in turn empowers their discourse. In the words of Mary Douglas, “Ritual recognizes the potency of disorder...ritual expects to find powers and truths which cannot be reached by conscious effort” (Douglas 1966, 117).

Ritual reversals are present in the very specific choosing of foods that are rejected or abhorred by mainstream culture – this food becomes saturated with symbols of egalitarianism, freedom, independence, etc. Every meal reclaims power, as well as re-establishes and reinforces the Punk way of life.

### **Punk and the Global Framework: Coming to Terms with “Globalization”**

Although Punks do not constitute a global movement, it is important for many Punks to know that other Punks in different parts of the world share similar concerns, and this acknowledgment strengthens the movement’s cohesiveness at the local level. Punks, and more specifically Vegan Punks, communicate via different mediums, such as Punk shows, Vegan potlucks, the Internet, and Zines. Zines, in specific, are an excellent networking source from country-to-country and city-to-city, whether in hardcopy form or via the Internet<sup>1</sup>. Zines are underground anti-professional bodies of writing that people share; in the Vegan Punk context, they function as a critique of mainstream culture whether by means of personal expression, recipe sharing, poetry, etc. Zines are an opportunity for people to share and acquire knowledge. Basically, Zines offer a medium of expression, namely of discontentment, especially regarding western foodways.

Punks perceive in everyday American food an abject modernity, a synthetic destroyer of locality and

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<sup>1</sup> Ethical cross-cultural interaction is a form of “globalization” which punks support

diversity. The “cooking” of foods, to which punks vociferously object, is an outcome of the industrialization and commercialization of modern food production, which are made visible and critiqued through punk culinary practice. (Clark 2004, 26)

Clark incorporates a quote by David Harvey in order to elaborate on the perception that Punks have regarding the consequences of mass-marketing and mass-consumption at the local which are caused by the intensive and often invasive labour and/or business practices of monocultures (cash-cropping and limiting biodiversity – maximum yield at minimum cost):

The whole world’s cuisine is now assembled in one place...The general implication is that through the experience of everything from food, to culinary habits, music, television, entertainment, and cinema, it is now possible to experience the world’s geography vicariously, as a simulacrum. The interweaving of simulacra in daily life brings together different worlds (of commodities) in the same space and time. But it does so in such a way as to conceal almost perfectly any trace of origin, of the labour processes that produced them, or of the social relations of their production. (Harvey quoted in Clark 2004, 25-26)

By means of their diet, Vegan Punks reject this disconnection from their food source, as well as the ecological, animal, and human exploitation involved in certain food production practices; in addition, they reject the class differentiation stemming from the pricing, selling, and advertising of food.

The Punk movement and its position as anti-establishment can, of course, only exist in light of the “establishment other”. Although Punks are suspicious of certain contexts of globalization (political-economic), they are not removed from that process, and seek to affect change from within. They remain directly involved in the process of globalization and *glocalization* typically as critics and agitators for change.

Modernity temporalized its universalism: eventually all would/could become modern. Globalization spatializes it: the local has to come to terms with the global. It (re)constitutes itself in the way that it does this. The reverse side of this mutual relation is that the global cannot be global except as plural versions of the local. Hence globalization is always also glocalization (Robertson 1995), the global expressed in the local and the local as the particularization of the global. (Beyer 2007, 98)

What Punks say and do, or what they eat and how they eat, is a local representation of their experiences with the global. Although the Punk movement remains relatively young, their ideologies of resistance are rooted in western imperialistic and colonialist history and their resistance is a local representation of contemporary modes of western “imperialism” and/or cultural domination on a global scale. Their local expressions are indicative of what they believe is occurring at the global level – they are a piece of the puzzle that concretizes globalization. What Punks choose to consume symbolizes their protest – by swallowing symbolic goods, they are living-breathing-walking representations of resistance. “By promoting vegan ideals through punk subculture, and by interacting with other punk vegans...punk vegans [create] publics and frameworks of belief through which they and other punks [understand] the world” (Cherry 2006, 163).

### **Punk-Vegan Fusion: A Viable Form of Resistance?**

#### **Conclusion**

By adopting a Vegan diet Punks literally embody their resistance. Vegan Punks embody a contested place – every action, word, or morsel of food is political, but also more than that. Consuming their frustration and symbolizing their struggles and resistance in the meticulous acquiring, preparing, and consumption of food ensures the ideological realm of Punks transcends the superficial and becomes an integrative system of deep-seated meaning embedded within their everyday life. In this way, their world is made meaningful. One could argue that

a kind of religious behaviour is in the interstices of Punk vernacular and praxis – it is within the conversations at the Black Cat Café, or in the transformation of “cooked” food scrounged from the dumpster. It becomes quite clear that through diet Punks are doing much more than just eating and talking – they are shaping their existence in meaningful terms and staying true to Punk as a way of life, and that way of life is in interaction with many different facets of society as well as with the global community at large. Punks are local observers and critics of the global – they see and feel the effects of exploitive cross-cultural interactions and express their disdain for such abuses by forming new systems of meaning, especially by means of food. For Punks, Veganism is a recipe of opposition; their bodies vehicles of resistance through the ingestion of symbols. What Vegan Punks choose to eat and how they choose to live symbolizes the raw power of our everyday experiences and practices which seep into the fissures of convention and stir up the taken-for-granted norms.

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