

**Vegatopia**  
**Dr Matthew Cole & Dr Karen Morgan**  
**Birmingham Vegetarians and Vegans**  
**Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> October, 2008**

**Vegatopia**

**What is Vegatopia?**

- A website and resource – [www.vegatopia.org](http://www.vegatopia.org) – launched on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2008.

History of vegatopia – ideas and website (launch date: 25<sup>th</sup> March 2008).

Word/concept ‘vegatopia’ – feb 2007; August 2007 – idea for website, long time in the making!

It is an attempt to contribute towards bringing a better, more peaceful world into being. It involves an examination and analysis of our current relationships with other animals; the ways we exploit them for food and other consumables, for their body parts (for instance through animal testing or xenotransplantation), their use for entertainment, enforced ‘companionship’, enforced ‘workers’ and so on.

*Our ‘qualifications’ for the project:*

Most importantly, of course, we are vegan. Having both been vegetarian for over twelve years, Matthew became vegan about 3 ½ yrs ago and Karen 2 ½ years ago. Both prior to and since becoming vegan, we were both committed to understanding as much as we could about the issues surrounding animal rights, vegetarianism and veganism. Our attempts to inform ourselves about these issues led to a frustration that all too frequently, academia (on the rare occasions it truly acknowledges veganism) and activism are talking different languages and seem mutually incomprehensible. We felt that as experienced academic researchers and lecturers who have both conducted in-depth research on oppressed groups (Matthew looking at the unemployed, Karen looking at violence against women), we could use our skills to try to form a bridge between the two fields of knowledge in relation to the oppression of non-human animals. We are using as our model comparable links that exist between activist groups and researchers working to raise awareness and seek ways to prevent gendered violence and whose work ultimately leads to policy and cultural changes. We believe that working together with other academics and activist groups in a similar way can be a powerful way for us to head towards Vegatopia.

**Also a utopian project**

- A utopian project – veganism is, or ought to be, utopian.
  - Utopia as we understand it does not mean ‘impossible’ ‘absurd’ or ‘perfect’.
  - Utopianism is concerned with ‘bursting the bonds’ of the established social order.
  - Utopias free our imaginations, enabling us to envision better times and places, and to think realistically about how we might get there.

## **We see 5 interrelated tasks for the vegatopia project:**

### **5 dimensions of the vegatopia project: Understanding, Critiquing, Inspiring, Acting, Caring**

#### *1. Understanding: Tracing the history of the human oppression of other animals*

Understanding how we reached the state we are in now, to help us learn what exactly we are up against, and to help us imagine better ways forward. Key issues include unravelling the interlocking oppressions of species, gender, ethnicity, 'race', age, class, sexuality, etc.

- So, we need to analyse the formation of oppressive discourses and practices, emphasising their speciesist manifestations, but cognisant of their intersection with racist, sexist and other inter-human oppressions.
- Examples include the works of David Nibert, Jim Mason, Carl Adams and others, who theorize the interconnections between the history of the oppression of other animals, of women, of children, of people of colour, of the differently abled, and so on.
- The big questions being asked in this form of analysis are, how did we get to where we are now? And why do most of us stay here? But also, how is it that some of us (especially those working in the animals' and other liberation movements) feel motivated to move on, or transform our current circumstances? (we can look at social research for clues, e.g. transformation stories as in 'Vegan Stories').

#### *2. Critiquing: Redefining the status quo as dystopia*

To motivate change, we need to present the current order of things as ethically unacceptable, destructive, oppressive, and exploitative. Challenging the benevolent models of animal farming, vivisection, etc. Drawing attention to the role of other animal exploitation in the suffering of humans.

For example, this involves critiquing:

- 'happy meat';
- the claims of animal science and industrial farming that animals are 'protected' when they are really enslaved;
- critiquing ideas of 'man as hunter' and similar human nature discourses that are used to justify violence against animals;
- critiquing the association of forms of masculinity that are associated with "meat" eating; etc.
- And also critiquing the taken-for-granted nature of our existing relationships with other animals.

These relationships are apparent not only in the obvious ways (for example in animal testing, farming and so on), but also in more subtle ways; the speciesist and objectifying language we use when referring to other animals – the use of 'it' rather than 'he' or 'she'; the categorisation of some animals as 'vermin', others as 'pets' or 'companions'; as 'food'; as 'wild' etc etc. These categorisations tell us nothing about the animals themselves – but about our relationships to them.

Here's an example to illustrate what we mean:

*Paired example of pigs – one subjective, visible, one objective, (usually) invisible*

**Piglet: an individual and free pig**

“Three years ago, my family and I were visiting Auckland, New Zealand, when we heard about a pig who lived on a beach just fifteen minutes from downtown. This pig was famous ...

We heard many stories about this amazing pig who liked to go for a swim early in the morning when the sea was at its calmest, and who enjoyed having children sit on her side, as long as they gave her a tummy rub before leaving. She was immaculate, well-mannered, sensitive, intelligent, and kind to strangers... Her emotional life was particularly near the surface. She always let you know what she was feeling; most of the time it was obvious from the smile on her face, especially when she was swimming or playing with her small human friends. But there were mysterious aspects to her as well. She was sensitive to music and liked to hear the violin played. She especially seemed to enjoy music on the beach at night when there was a full moon. Tony took a picture ... of her making the sweetest sounds during a night of the full moon, as if she were actually singing to the moon ... It is another reason to believe that many animals ... may have access to feelings humans have not yet known. Perhaps if we listen carefully enough to the songs that Piglet and her cousins sing at night to the moon, we may yet learn about emotions that could bring us a new and utterly undreamed of delight.”

(from Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson's, *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon: The Emotional World of Farm Animals*, 2004)

**'Hogs': the slaughtered masses**

“Hogs get stressed out pretty easy ... If you prod them too much [giving them electric shocks with a 'cattle prod'], they have heart attacks. If you get a hog in the chute that's had the shit prodded out of him and has a heart attack or refuses to move, you take a meat hook and hook it into his bunghole [anus]. You try to do this by clipping the hipbone. Then you drag him backwards. You're dragging these hogs alive, and a lot of times the meat hook rips out of the bunghole. I've seen hams – thighs - completely ripped open. I've also seen intestines come out. If the hog collapses near the front of the chute, you shove the meat hook into his cheek and drag him forward,”

“You may look a hog in the eye that's walking around down in the blood pit with you and think, God, that really isn't a bad-looking animal. You may want to pet it. Pigs down on the kill floor have come up and nuzzled me like a puppy. Two minutes later I had to kill them - beat them to death with a pipe. I didn't care.”

“When I worked upstairs taking hogs guts out, I could cop an attitude that I was working on a production line, helping to feed people. But down in the stick pit I wasn't feeding people. I was killing things. My attitude was, it's only an animal. Kill it.”

(from Gail Eisnitz's, *Slaughterhouse: The Shocking Story of Greed, Neglect, and Inhumane Treatment Inside the U.S. Meat Industry*, 1997)

So, what's going on here is that the fate of the individual pigs is entirely dictated by how they are defined and understood by humans. This model is a theoretical way of thinking through how this happens:

**Figure 1: How we tend to ‘place’ animals, in our minds and in the world**

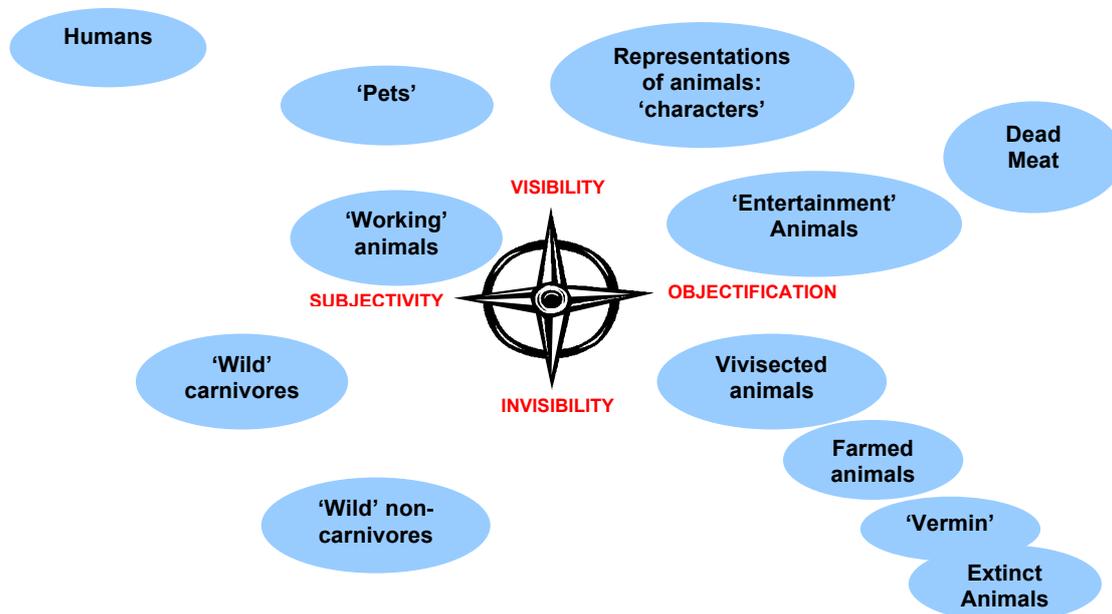
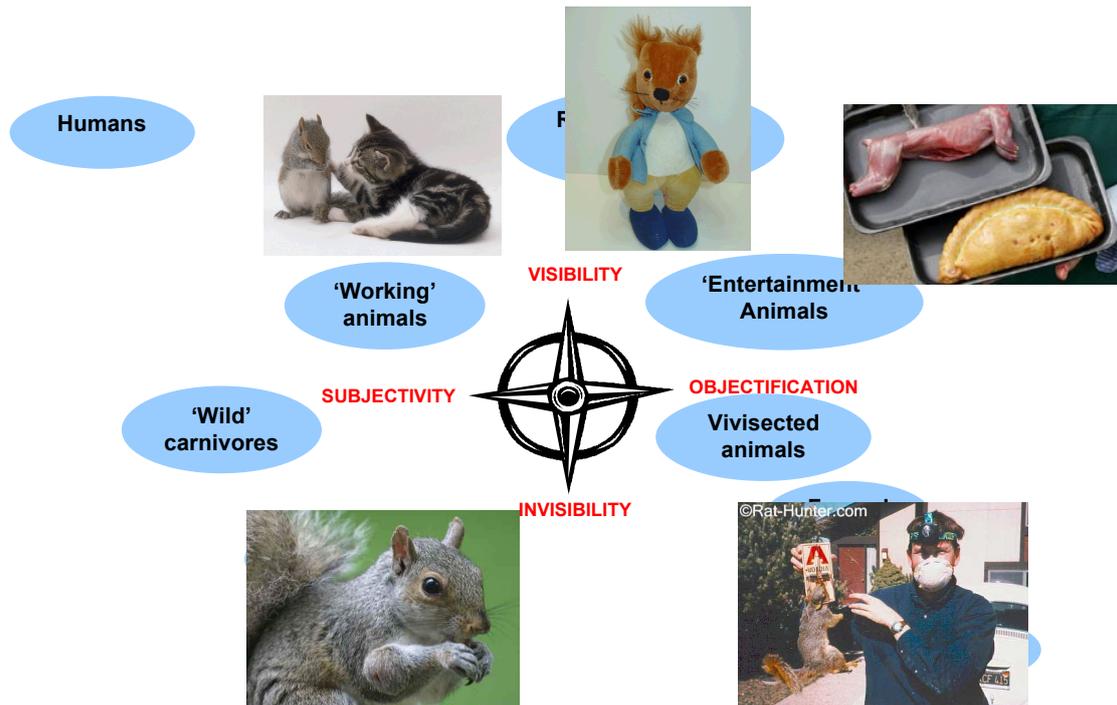


Fig.1 indicates how we are more likely, in most circumstances, to grant other humans the position of ‘subjects’, who are treated as more or less of equal moral worth to ourselves. Human subjects are highly visible in our culture, that is, we generally recognize the significance of the feelings, thoughts, intentions and rights of other humans. We attend to each other’s expressions of pain and pleasure, of dissatisfaction and contentment. In contrast, nonhuman animals are denied subjectivity to varying degrees, depending on the types of use we have for them. Nonhumans tend to be less visible in our culture the more they are treated like objects. To treat an animal as an object, such as for ‘food’ or as a piece of experimental apparatus in a vivisection’s laboratory, is to treat her or him as a means to a human end, and to disregard her or his own subjectivity. To prevent the possibility of empathic knowledge of objectified animals, they are hidden from view. Factory farms, slaughterhouses or vivisection labs do not advertise their presence in the community, and they do not welcome visitors. The power of the law is increasingly being used to stifle attempts to secure undercover footage of what goes on when inspectors’ backs are turned. In the USA in particular, animal activists are being criminalized and stigmatized as ‘terrorists’ in the post 9/11 climate of fear (Best, 2004).

One advantage of looking at animals in the context of fig.1 is that it shows how the way we think about animals is ‘socially constructed’ – that is, it is a product of the types of (often violent) relationships we have with them, not a product of the ‘nature’ of the animals themselves. Think about squirrels, for instance.



The pasty photo at the top right comes from a recent story in the Metro newspaper (Metro, 2008). Here is the butcher's justification for squirrels counting as 'meat':

"It seems shoppers can't get enough of the healthy meat which tastes great, is good for the environment and is very free range. Butcher David Simpson, who sells the pasties in Fraddon, Cornwall, said: 'People like the fact it is wild meat, low in fat and local – so no food miles.'"

The story generated some interesting responses online from Metro readers, rejecting the definition of squirrels as meat because squirrels are either:

**1. cute:**

"They are most charming and enduring little creatures. They were a favourite pet of the pioneers in the early 1800's."

**2. wild**

"You cannot just stick with eating ordinary livestock, now you want to eat an extremely small wild animal."

**3. vermin**

"The mistake is that you call them 'squirrels.' They are TREE RATS, people. Get a grip. Save your sympathy for something cute."

And think about how we play favourites with red vs. grey squirrels...

### 3. *Inspiring: Creating alternative utopian visions*

What would a vegan landscape look like? A vegan city? How can veganism be made relevant and compelling in different cultural contexts? Can we achieve vegatopia with a universal vision, or is social change more messy and difficult than that?

Creating alternative utopian visions of a vegan future requires envisioning ‘solutions’ to all of the dystopian accounts described in section 2 (like a carrot to the stick of section 2). Examples include the work of VON – making a reality of living free of animal exploitation. We need to envision, and argue for the benefits of, altered landscapes and cities based on compassionate vegan ethics. We also need to think about how these might be made relevant in diverse cultural contexts. This means reaching out beyond the, perhaps too often, white, middle class, Western heartland of veganism, and thinking of how veganism can play a part in broader struggles against poverty, racism, sexism, and so on.

### 4. *Acting: The theory and practice of enacting utopia*

Combining academia and activism – can academics offer activism more effective, research-based, strategies? Can activism invigorate academia and give it a focus? Forging alliances with other liberation struggles, to both learn from and to teach them.

Theorizing and experimenting with ways to bring these utopias into reality, or at least to move towards them. This means reworking what we analyse in section 1 in order to lead us to vegatopias of peace and compassion, and not reinventing our current dystopian predicament of violence and exploitation (i.e. research based strategies)..

- a. We need to learn from the mistakes of the past – how is it that oppressions became so interlocked? To disentangle them, we need strategies that resist and overthrow oppression in all its manifestations, this means avoiding being a single issue movement.
- b. What can we learn from academic research to help guide us, especially sociological research? For example, our own current work seeks to bring to light how social characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, religion or sexuality might be connected to dietary ethics.
- c. How can we make the liberatory message of veganism resonate for humans living in very different circumstances from our own? (one way must be to make the connections with human oppressions of other humans).

### 5. *Caring: ‘Be the change that you seek’*

Forming compassionate relationships with ourselves and each other; learning to stop reproducing oppressive ways of thinking and acting.

How can we, as individuals and in our relationships with others, ‘be the change we seek’? We might prefer to think of this as techniques of the care of the self, for example how do we need to be transformed in order to stop reproducing speciesist, sexist or racist social structures and relationships in our everyday lives? And concomitantly, how do we start to become the living building blocks of anti-speciesist, anti-racist, feminist social structures and relationships?

Please do not quote without the permission of the authors:

Matthew Cole: [matthew.cole@vegatopia.org](mailto:matthew.cole@vegatopia.org)

Karen Morgan: [karen.morgan@vegatopia.org](mailto:karen.morgan@vegatopia.org)

This involves a process of education of self and others, and of experiencing living and working in anti-oppressive ways. Being and staying vegan is part of this, but only part.

### How might [www.vegatopia.org](http://www.vegatopia.org) contribute to these tasks?

- ✓ Providing tools for others to work on the same problems, from their own perspectives
  - In practical terms, we aim to provide the tools for as many people as possible to be involved in this task of critique, destruction and creation. Through making as many materials as possible freely available to others to make their own contributions, alone or in collaboration with us, towards vegatopia. This is the purpose of the bibliography media archive, resources, links, etc.
- ✓ Sharing ideas and expertise
  - The forum is intended to be a space for exploring and debating effective strategies. Also public statements.
- ✓ Building the academic profile of veganism, with a view to Vegan Studies finding recognition as an academic discipline.
  - building a rationale for a vegan studies degree module and eventually, whole course, so that veganism comes to be taken seriously and on a par with women's studies or peace studies courses of the past (a vegan studies course would also tie together the various, interdisciplinary, strands of veganism – philosophical, sociological, psychological, biological, geographical, ecological, etc,etc);
- ✓ Asserting the importance of anti-speciesist language on a par with anti-sexist or anti-racist language
  - In much the same way that racist, homophobic or sexist language that may have been accepted as 'normal' just a few decades ago, we want people to start thinking about the language they use now in relation to other animals and to recognise the speciesism within it.
- ✓ Exposing the inherent violence of *all* animal exploitation
  - We want to expose not only that which is already perceived as 'horror' – other organisations are already doing that (Animal Aid, PETA, Uncaged, Viva! to name just a few). What we also want to do is to facilitate a fundamental re-examination of human-animal relations and thereby to illuminate the inequalities inherent in those relationships not necessarily currently recognised as horrific by the general population – this might include the obvious such as 'free-range' farming but also, for example, our apparent inability to 'leave-be' as regards wildlife (the killing of grey squirrels for example) and, frequently, our relationships with companion animals.
- ✓ Centring compassion in vegan thought and action – a countervailing principle to 'might makes right'
  - Compassion as a wider issue; move towards overcoming the idea that caring for and working against the oppression of human groups is incompatible with caring for and working against the oppression of non-human animals. Oppression can only truly be overcome when all disparate groups are able to work together, sharing ideas, experience

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Matthew Cole: [matthew.cole@vegatopia.org](mailto:matthew.cole@vegatopia.org)

Karen Morgan: [karen.morgan@vegatopia.org](mailto:karen.morgan@vegatopia.org)

and techniques and ensuring that the ending of one form of oppressive behaviour does not entail shifting to another.

- ✓ Calling institutions and individuals to account for speciesist practices, including the media
  - Vegatopia should make it impossible for those who continue to deny their own complicity in the exploitation, abuse and suffering of other animals to be able to do so. Individual responsibility should be acknowledged and the current *status quo* of a conspiracy of silence in relation to the true horrors inherent in our relationships with nonhuman others should be ended.
- ✓ Asserting that ***change is possible*** by challenging the anti-utopian ‘culture of resignation’ that surrounds violence and exploitation.
  - In short, given the normalisation of many forms of violence against other animals (under the guise of farming, animal testing and so on), the powerful meat and dairy-production lobbyists, and the negative images of vegan/ism perpetuated by the same lobbyists, their proponents and the mainstream media, Vegatopia’s task is to challenge the ‘culture of resignation’ engendered by such normalisation. Vegatopia aims to present veganism and its associated ethical concerns as *the* obvious, positive choice. Meat and dairy consumption should no longer be seen as the default position but as harmful, abusive and *deliberate* choices made by those who continue to insist on such behaviours

### **Our limits**

Our limits are the constraints on our time from other commitments, money to be able to run the site and hire help, and ability in relation to limits to our skills as web designers.

We could use some practical help, whether financial, or in relation to people offering their time. We have many ambitions for the site that have been on our ‘to do’ list since before the site was even launched.

This includes:

- list of vegan courses/academics;
- forum itself;
- dynamic media monitoring and response, linked to longer ‘public statements’ – a way of making the vegan movement less passive/defensive;
- transforming academic (and other) spaces into peaceful spaces, i.e. working for anti-speciesist catering practices, opposing animal testing in universities, etc.