

“I can excuse racism, but I draw the line at animal cruelty”: the Exploitation of People of Colour  
Disguised as Environmental Activism and the Unprincipled Practices of Ethical Veganism as  
Supported by *The Communist Manifesto*

In the year of 2020, social activism has never been a more prominent aspect of our culture. A-list celebrities and public figures such as Greta Thunberg, Leonardo Dicaprio, Mark Ruffalo, and Joaquin Phoenix have been at the forefront of the contemporary environmental movement, and have been a part of a handful of individuals who encourage their supporters to make extreme efforts towards living a ‘green lifestyle’. Environmentalists have said, if there is no active change made in the next decade, some of the habitual damages made on the planet will be irreversible (Berwyn, et al. “What Does '12 Years to Act on Climate Change' (Now 11 Years) Really Mean?"). I do not think anyone with a moral compass and/or general appreciation of life would deny that a focus towards replenishing the planet is something that should not be prioritised. But, over the years I have taken notice that the plans created to encourage everyday individuals to do their part in reversing man made climate change have been both one sided and subtly accusatory. Discussions on who is responsible for the current state of our climate conveniently seem to miss the mark. Many individuals have stated that in order to ensure the human race has a comfortable time on Earth, the world needs to do the following; go vegan/cruelty-free, shop locally both in fashion and in produce, and eliminate the purchase of single use plastics are just a few things we as a collective society are motivated to try. And while I agree these contributions would most definitely create some beneficial changes towards regenerating a healthy ecosystem, I find that these demands insinuate that it is everyday individuals [working and lower working class citizens] that are ultimately responsible for the

state of our planet's depleting environment. This blame is not only misdirected, but it is simply not true.

Throughout this paper I will be using the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* to further develop a deeper understanding as to why ethical veganism is not a plausible or universally accessible way of life under capitalism, as well as argue how the modernisation of climate activism has become less about saving the planet, and more about silencing, exploiting, and blaming the working class [whose majority is made up by people of colour] for the state our planet is currently in.

What many animal rights and climate change activists fail to acknowledge when making the argument that going vegan is the ultimate way to restore the planet is that veganism is not accessible to everyone biologically, culturally, or financially and that there are larger factors that contribute to the destruction of Earth's climate. In short: not everyone can simply just 'go vegan'. They also fail to acknowledge that in a world run under a capitalist structure, ethical consumption is not attainable as service workers are vehemently abused in order to produce what is branded as 'cruelty free' products. To ignore the participation corporate companies play in destroying the environment, is to place a form of accountability on circumstances the working class are subjected to engage with out of their own control. It exempts those with social and financial capital to distribute their wealth towards a solution, fundamentally keeping the rich richer and the poor poorer. It also ignores the exploitative nature that stems from capitalising a lifestyle that is animal by product free as well as negates cultural practices of nonwhite nations who have a deep appreciation towards the natural world while also consuming the products it provides [i.e., Indigenous, Asian, African pre and post colonial period etc].

I want to preface that I do not think that the solution towards restoring the environment is black and white. I do believe that if everyone is able to contribute towards living a life that benefits the state of the planet, they should do so to the best of their ability. However, I do not believe we are at a place in the current world, socially or economically, where this expectation should be guilted into the lives of those who cannot meet these expectations.

I had previously stated that the working class are subjected to engage with routines that are not eco-friendly and are out of their own control. What I mean when I say this is that the working class cannot be faulted for their decisions that negatively contribute to the environment because no other options are financially attainable to them. This lack of agency granted to the working class, referred to as the proletariat by Marx and Engels (8), is a direct connection of the control the upper class, the bourgeois (3), have over them. In *The Communist Manifesto* it is stated that “[...] modern bourgeois society [...] has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society [and] has not [yet] done away with class antagonisms [...] but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, [and] new forms of struggle in place of the old ones” (3). Because the upper class has made eco-friendly resources inaccessible to the masses while also projecting the notion that to live eco-friendly is to save the planet, the working class are placed in a position of guilt and shame, as they are forced to contribute to a lifestyle that is ultimately hurting the planet [i.e., eating meat, buying single use plastic, purchasing fast fashion etc]. Respectfully, this same financial control is what generates the exploitative culture behind what is ironically referred to as ‘ethical’ veganism.

Ethical veganism is a subcategory of veganism that chooses to avoid the consumption of any form of animal byproduct because they believe it is immoral to do otherwise. They argue

that their choices “are shaped by their desire to avoid cruelty and suffering to animals at all practical costs” (*Sentient Media*, “The Ethical Vegan Versus a Plant-Based Diet: What Is the Difference.”). While this cause and overall way of life is an admirable one, under capitalism there is no form of ethical consumption. Ethical vegans claim that because they are not harming any animals in their participation in consumerism, they are not harming anyone at all. Many of them even make comparisons in regard to the abuse farm animals face and the abuse human beings face as to emphasise why consuming animal products is a betrayal against humanity. In vol 448 of *Counterpoints*, there is a journal article titled “One Struggle” by Stephanie Jenkins and Vasile Stănescu, who compare the Civil Rights protests against Jim Crow in the South to protesting against the consumption of meat, and that to consume meat is to condone sexual violence. They argue “[...] all meat always and already is intrinsically incompatible with the core ideas of feminism, queer theory, and sexual autonomy” (Jenkins & Stănescu 82). Here they are insinuating that to eat meat is to be incompatible with the beliefs of feminism and sexual liberties, ultimately saying that those who consume animals are a social cancer towards minorities. Like Jenkins and Stănescu, I in no way condone the abuse of any living animal, human, or otherwise. But, in an attempt to equalise the struggles of Black Americans to that of goats, cows, and sheep is to subsequently place the rights of these animals as equal to Black Americans, as this comparison devalues the real discriminations Black individuals face, both historically and presently. It is this mindset that causes society to encourage environmentalism at the expense of working class people of colour.

An important thing to understand about race in relation to class is that there is a history behind it. Slavery and colonialism played major roles in the transition of treatment towards

people of colour in the modern Western world and are the biggest contributors as to why poverty percentages are highly represented by nonwhite individuals. While *The Communist Manifesto* does not make any direct statements regarding race, many of the observations made regarding exploitation as addressed by Marx and Engels can be applied to oppressive structures people of colour who make up the working and lower working class are forced to operate under. The manifesto states that “all the preceding classes that got the upper hand sought to fortify their already acquired status by subjecting society at large to their conditions of appropriation” (11). Essentially, Marx and Engels argue that through exploiting the working class by paying them with barely liveable wages, the bourgeois secure their wealth, status, and power. Moreover, since the working class are placed in a position where they rely on the upper class to provide them with these wages, their role in society is too secured, but not in the way that they desire. To further ensure that these positions are maintained, the bourgeois strengthen their capital by creating competitions between the proletariat class through wage labour (12), fundamentally using exploitation of the working class to turn them against one another. These claims can be applied to both an economic understanding, and a social understanding in regards to the experiences of people of colour who make up the working class.

Socially, White people would directly relate to the social power the bourgeois have; they are the racial class who have obtained their power through exploiting people of colour, and augmented this status by creating laws that restricted them as a collective to climb up the social ladder. As long as people of colour’s social growth is restricted, it leaves space for White people to control their collective growth, while controlling the lack thereof for racialized citizens. Relevantly, these same restrictions and laws are the cause for why most people of colour make

up a huge portion of the lower class. Laws that are racially targeted in the West stunted the possibility for people of colour to gradually succeed economically because they were forced to work labour jobs that otherwise paid them poorly [this directly relates to the fact that at the time, these jobs were the only ones attainable to them.] Moreover, I think it is also important to illustrate that these same groups that are being exploited, come from cultural backgrounds that otherwise have a deep appreciation for climate activism and Earthly restoration, however because their practices do not fit with the cultural structure of colonialism/Whiteness, they are deemed illogical to follow.

For centuries, Indigenous communities have had a deep, spiritual connection with the planet, treating its existence as another physical being like humans. In an interview with *Global News*, McMaster Indigenous Studies professor Dawn Martin-Hill stated that Indigeneity and the freshness of water is deeply rooted in the spirituality and cultural beliefs of Indigenous Canadians (00:00:00-00:00:15). Cultures of Indigenous, African, and Asian peoples have practised environmental sustainability, and an overall care for the planet for centuries. They consume all parts of animals to avoid waste, they were some of the first people to practise the process of composting, and they have reused their non-biodegradable resources for other purposes [ex., building houses out of plastic water bottles]. However, because they are people of colour, they subsequently ruled out as capable to have their practices run under a social structure such as the West because their practices do not conform to colonial expectation. In the US and Canada, Indigenous communities are some of the highest areas that suffer from the negative effects of climate change, despite having no direct responsibility for the destruction of the climate (Summers & Smith 722).

In relation to environmentalism and ethical veganism, a majority of factory and farming companies are made up of an employed team of people of colour and immigrants. And while there are no direct laws that state discrimination against people of colour is permissible, racism is far too embedded in institutions for these same workers to have a legislation that would protect them from exploitative abuse. In consideration of these factors, the desire to capitalise on the ethics of veganism and brand this lifestyle as a solution to climate change comes at the expense of people of colour. Sociologist, Lisa Sunhee Park and Environmentalist David Pellow have said that “in effect, the exploitation of people of [colour], immigrants, and the poor are presented as a redemptive or moral obligation of the racially and gender privileged to make into citizens (i.e. useful), a group of people otherwise seen as useless” (Racial Formation, Environmental Racism, and the Emergence of Silicon Valley 405). To add on, the moral ethics of ensuring environmental stability is prioritised over the mortality of black and brown people, which further develops the argument that there simply cannot be consumption shaped around moral ethics. Park and Pellow make note that historically people of colour have been put into a place of subordination as a result of colonialism, and highlight that people of colour and immigrants have been “concentrated and enslaved” the most environmentally through their exploitative labour that does not pay them properly for the work that they do, if they are even paid at all (Park & Pellow 407). Ultimately, Park and Pellow are stating that the labour they endure is not meant to service them at all, and that their pain and exploitation is justified in the eyes of environmentalism. Ethical vegans, who perpetuate that their activism is harmless are able to feed this narrative to society because the victims of their pain are hardly seen as people. Many of the migrant workers who farm and crop are told that they are fit for the environments they are occupying (404) compared

to and described as “primitive”, which ultimately dehumanises them. This then creates another justification for their slave labour (405). Marx and Engels referred to this as industrial capitalism (8); the proletariat [immigrant workers] are enslaved to their wages, which will only be granted if they work, which then enslaves them to the work itself. And because they are in need of the money they barely obtain, they cannot leave these conditions to find better ones, chaining them to their place until death.

This is best executed in the 2019 environmental documentary *Honeyland* directed by Macedonian filmmakers Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov, on the effects of overconsumption. In the documentary, a family of eight are beekeepers who do not follow the Macedonian cultures of beekeeping. The Sam family’s practices towards beekeeping and farming were by no means ethical, as they overworked the bees and did not properly care for their domesticated farm animals. However the labour they as people performed and the way they are overworked and not considered either. Fifty minutes into the documentary, their employer bribes the Sam’s with food in order to guilt them into saying they will overwork the bees for his next sale. Their financial and social situation was manipulated and controlled to the point that ethics and moral decision making was not a priority. It is important to note that capitalism is not personal, but it is powerful (14). Those who seek capital control do not do so for the desires of individual freedoms, but to strip others from the possibility of obtaining it themselves. The Sam family were stripped of their individual freedoms to choose when they were offered food to feed their hungry children, free of charge. Their freedoms were also taken when they constantly were given expectations of delivery, with no proper compensation, poor beekeeping equipment and unrealistic deadlines. While the Sam’s did harvest animal byproducts that vegans otherwise



would not consume, the exploitation of the Sam's experience is not mutually exclusive to their experience. This form of manipulation illustrates the mistreatment millions of marginalised labour workers endure to create the lifestyle that is branded as equal and ethical for all. However, this is all done at the labour workers expense.

Environmentalists and climate change activists have the right idea in cultivating the general public on the importance of climate activism and restoring the natural world. I too believe that in order to ensure damages are reversed before the decade is over, corporations and global governments need to begin creating an action plan on how to combat this crisis, as well as upper class citizens need to be pushed into redistributing their wealth towards the cause. Ethical veganism is a practice that sounds promising in theory, but ultimately cannot exist in an economic structure like ours in the modern age. The prioritisation of animal life [while an important form of life], over the lower class and people of colour perpetuates the concept that environmental security is attainable at the expense of their rights and freedoms. Which ultimately, is unethical to say the least. Once society, more specifically the West, begins to acknowledge that the lives of people of colour do matter and should be protected, real change towards climate security can happen and we as a collective unit can move forward into a world where racism is not excused at the cost of depleting the actions of animal cruelty.

## Works Cited

- Berwyn, Bob, et al. "What Does '12 Years to Act on Climate Change' (Now 11 Years) Really Mean?" *InsideClimate News*, 30 Aug. 2019, [insideclimatenews.org/news/27082019/12-years-climate-change-explained-ipcc-science-solutions](https://insideclimatenews.org/news/27082019/12-years-climate-change-explained-ipcc-science-solutions).
- Jenkins, Stephanie, and Vasile Stănescu. "One Struggle." *Counterpoints*, vol. 448, 2014, pp. 74–85., [www.jstor.org/stable/42982378](https://www.jstor.org/stable/42982378). Accessed 15 Apr. 2020.
- Kristahessey, Thejaneg And. "Why Some First Nations Still Don't Have Clean Drinking Water - despite Trudeau's Promise." *Global News*, Global News, 3 Oct. 2019, [globalnews.ca/news/5887716/first-nations-boil-water-advisories/](https://globalnews.ca/news/5887716/first-nations-boil-water-advisories/).
- Kotevska, Tamara and Ljubomir Stefanov, directors. *Honeyland*. Neon Dogwoof, 2019.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Translated by Samuel Moore, 1888. *Marx/Engels Internet Archive*, [marxists.org](https://marxists.org).
- PARK, LISA SUN-HEE, and DAVID N. PELLOW. "Racial Formation, Environmental Racism, and the Emergence of Silicon Valley." *Ethnicities*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2004, pp. 403–424. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/23889372](https://www.jstor.org/stable/23889372). Accessed 15 Apr. 2020.
- Russo, Anthony and Russo, Joseph, directors. Jacobs, Gillian, performer. *Community*. "Advanced Gay." CBC Studio Centre and Paramount Studios. *Netflix*, [Netflix.ca](https://www.netflix.ca)
- Sentient Media, Sentient Media editorial. "The Ethical Vegan Versus a Plant-Based Diet: What Is the Difference." *Reporting on Animals, Animal Rights, and Human Choices* -, 17 Dec. 2019, [sentientmedia.org/ethical-vegan/](https://sentientmedia.org/ethical-vegan/).

Summers, J. K., and L. M. Smith. "The Role of Social and Intergenerational Equity in Making Changes in Human Well-Being Sustainable." *Ambio*, vol. 43, no. 6, 2014, pp. 718–728., [www.jstor.org/stable/24709065](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24709065). Accessed 15 Apr. 2020.