



Becoming hegemony: The case for the (Italian) animal advocacy and veganwashing operations

Journal of Consumer Culture
2022, Vol. 22(1) 207–226
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DOI: 10.1177/1469540520926234
journals.sagepub.com/home/joc



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Abstract

Organized forms of animal advocacy date back to the final decades of the 20th century. Born in progressive political milieus, animal advocacy and especially the more radical positions of vegan and animal rights activists originally assumed anticapitalist and counter-hegemonic perspectives. More recently, however, the spreading of veganism among civil society has very often related to reasons of health or fashion, sometimes far from ethical or political motivations. In this article, this shift is analysed, based on an empirical study conducted among Italian animal advocates. Interest in non-human animals was originally located among more generic counter-hegemonic frames, but this recent shift gives more and more space to an a-political consumerist approach to veganism. In particular, adapting a Gramscian vocabulary, two different perspectives among Italian animal advocates are identified and described: passive revolution and war of position. They are presented both referring to general frames and in relation to a specific event, Expo2015 in Milan, which carried the caption ‘Feeding the planet, energy for life’, and was very much related to animal questions. In a similar way to greenwashing and pinkwashing operations, also veganwashing is assuming a central role within a capitalist hegemonic discourse.

Keywords

Animal rights movement, social movements, hegemony, veganism, veganwashing, Gramsci, consumer culture, counter-hegemony, animal advocacy, vegan movement

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Introduction

Hegemony, counter-hegemony and other concepts belonging to the Gramscian toolkit have been widely debated in the last decades, finding original applications in different domains of social sciences (Sassoon, 2002). In this article, I apply Gramscian categories to a specific issue: veganism. Though not often stated (with some remarkable exceptions: Freeman, 2010; Twine, 2012), Western contemporary veganism was initially born and theorized from a counter-hegemonic perspective. For example, its adoption in the punk subculture has been widely analysed (Cherry, 2006; Torres and Torres, 2005). However, veganism is always more frequently perceived and represented as a simple elitarian mode of consumption in the mainstream media, by conservative politicians and also by considerable sectors of other progressive social movements (Almiron et al., 2015). This is not only a matter of (mis)representation. Very often, veganism is effectively shifting towards a trendy or even a-political approach, due to macro-dynamics typical of contemporary societies – such as the processes of individualization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), de-politicization (Flinders and Buller, 2006) and mass consumption (Matsuyama, 2002), but also because the ‘political right’ is trying to appropriate an instance born in ‘leftist’ progressive milieus (Bertuzzi, 2018). Within this socio-political panorama, veganism has been supported and theorized with different viewpoints in recent years, not always in line with its counter-hegemonic legacy.

Based on these premises, this article proposes a positioned theoretical framework and some ‘new’ instruments to the so-called field of human-animal studies (HAS; for a review, see Marvin and McHugh, 2014). I advance two main claims, one analytical, the other ‘political’: analytically, I claim that using a Gramscian grid can be particularly effective to distinguish the various positions of animal advocates regarding veganism; politically, I claim that ‘counter-hegemony’ is the most correct label to summarize (some) relevant theories developed in HAS. To do this, I consider the Italian case, due to the specific direction that the debate on veganism is taking in this country (Bertuzzi and Losi, 2020; Righetti, 2019). I present data taken from a wider research project, on the Italian animal advocates, a broad field of activism that extends from facilities/shelters to grass-roots local mobilizations, passing through national NGOs. Is it possible to identify some macro-frames when referring to the specific issue of veganism? Is the counter-hegemonic nature that characterized the theoretical foundation of veganism still diffused, or is it leaving space for a-political consumerist approaches?

The structure of this article is as follows: in the next paragraph, I discuss what veganism is and how it has been differently defined; I proceed to present the theoretical framework and Gramscian vocabulary; after the methodological note, I briefly summarize the history and current situation of Italian animal advocacy; finally, I focus on the empirical analysis, first discussing the general frames of vegan activists, and later drawing on a specific event, the 2015 Universal Exposition held in Milan entitled ‘Feeding the planet: energy for life’.

Veganism: Defining the concept

Veganism is a philosophical current also pragmatically expressed in a lifestyle and form of consumption (Zamir, 2004). This lifestyle refuses any use (for food, clothing, entertainment or anything else) of non-human animals. Diet is central to the conduct of a vegan life, but it should not be considered the sole essence of the philosophical current. Not all animal advocates are vegans, and not all vegans are animal advocates (McDonald, 2000; Munro, 2001): the diffusion of veganism among civil society – very often due to reasons of health, fashion or diet, and far from ethical or political motivations – is not only related to the role of activism. At the same time, an omnivorous diet still remains hegemonic in Western societies (Freeman, 2010): this is true considering individual identity construction (Simonsen, 2012) but also on an economic level (Nibert, 2002), given the huge amount of revenue still produced by the meat-based food industry (Williams, 2000).

As with other social movements, the broad archipelago of animal advocacy is characterized by different theoretical approaches to various aspects: forms of actions, relations with other social movements, relations with institutional and party politics, to name only a few. This variety, however, assumes a remarkable implication looking at the specific issue of veganism, to the extent that it would be better to speak of *veganisms* in the plural form (Jones, 2017). In recent years, this debate has been reignited. On the one hand, some scholars have favoured an approach that targets the individual based on strictly ethical (Wright, 2019) or psychological (Joy, 2011) arguments; on the other hand, more political approaches have been theorized: feminist (Wrenn, 2017), eco-feminist (Adams, 1990), queer (Simonsen, 2012), anticapitalist (Nibert, 2002), anarchist (Nocella et al., 2015), liberationist (Best, 2014) theories, among the others.

Beyond theoretical debate, the food consumption of animal advocates and the consistency of their veganism have been addressed as a specific issue in empirical studies, through structured surveys (Plous, 1991), detailed ethnographies (Turina, 2018) and auto-ethnographic accounts (Andreatta, 2015). Veganism has been interpreted as a strategy to promote animal rights (Cherry, 2006; Wrenn, 2011), as limited to ethical choices and individual lifestyles (Haenfler et al., 2012) and even as a form of religion (Johnson, 2015).

A Gramscian analytical grid is offered in this article to summarize, distinguish and simplify the various positions previously mentioned: this is a dichotomist grid, similar in some respects to the very widespread division in HAS between reformist (Garner, 1995) and radical approaches (Nibert, 2002). However, such a classic dichotomy does not adequately take into consideration the self perception of activists themselves and their possible ‘contradictions’. It is for this reason, among others, that it is necessary to insert Gramsci into the debate.

Gramsci and us

In recent years, interest in the work of Antonio Gramsci has rekindled in Italy (Filippini, 2017), following a longer process outside the national borders (Thomas,

2009). Gramsci developed numerous concepts that have become points of reference for the cultural studies and political activism of the 20th century. One of these concepts, probably the most relevant, is *hegemony*. Despite its antiquity, the wider epistemological field that this concept involves is currently useful, exactly as Stuart Hall (2002) discussed in his famous text – *Gramsci and us* – whose title I borrow for this brief theoretical premise.

Hegemony and the growing role of individual actors

Hegemony could be defined as a ‘dominant position of a particular set of ideas and their associated tendency to become commonsensical and intuitive, thereby inhibiting the dissemination or even the articulation of alternative ideas’.¹ Numerous interpretations of the concept have been proposed across the years. For the sake of this article, I limit to an endorsement of Loris Caruso’s (2010) dichotomous summary. According to Caruso, ‘hegemony’ is considered either following Gramsci in structural, political and economic terms, as a justifying principle operated by the dominant class through the ‘decontextualized reification’ of a given *status quo* and its imposition over the dominated class; or, on the contrary, referring to the concept of ‘derivations’ introduced by Pareto. In this second acception, hegemony is described as a psychological mechanism for which it would be an *a posteriori* justification for the attitudes assumed by single individuals.

The growing relevance of individual activism among progressive movements is a widely debated topic in contemporary social movements scholarship (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011; Jasper and Duyvendak, 2015), and it has been discussed by sociological (Giddens, 1991) and political theorists (Hardt and Negri, 2005). The importance of individual agency in the construction and development of (new or adapted) repertoires of contention essentially consists of the tendency ‘to engage with multiple causes by filtering those causes through individual lifestyles’ (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011: 771). A central element in this sense concerns the experiences of political consumerism and alternative economies, particularly diffused in Western societies in recent years (Micheletti and McFarland, 2015). In such a framework, political participation should be interpreted as a form of individual involvement increasingly less addressed to traditional political actors, and more and more (critically) oriented towards economic actors (Hardt and Negri, 2005; Klein, 2005). Political consumerism, however, involves different possible ‘dangers’, such as the subsumption of contentious voices into a reformist approach (Klein, 2005), or even the corporatization of activism (Dauvergne and LeBaron, 2014). In this context, new opportunities can develop alongside these ‘dangers’, leading to significant strategic innovations (Wirt, 2017).

A similar panorama also implied the central role – and legitimation – assumed by new players in social movements arenas (Jasper and Duyvendak, 2015): I refer in particular to big corporations, no longer relegated to the role of passive actors, but actively involved in social movements’ dynamics. Such structural change is recognized by Fligstein and McAdam (2012) who invite an analysis of

contemporary social movements as composite strategic action fields (SAFs). Within these fields, extremely diverse actors find their place: not only grass-roots groups, social movement organizations and individual activists, but also (some) institutions, companies and corporations. Their ability to get into movements' arenas is well summarized by David Harvey (2007) in his renowned volume *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*: 'If markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, healthcare, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created' (p. 2).

The opposition strategies, according to Gramsci

Using Gramscian categories, social movements could face the situation identified by Harvey in two principal ways. On the one hand, by implementing a *war of position*, namely 'a longer term strategy, coordinated across multiple bases of power, to gain influence in the cultural institutions of civil society, develop organizational capacity, and to win new allies' (Levy and Egan, 2003: 807). On the other hand, being involved in a *passive revolution* through which those 'groups challenging hegemonic coalitions from below might avoid a futile frontal assault against entrenched adversaries' (Levy and Egan, 2003: 807). In my empirical analysis, I focus on this contrast. I consider it a useful tool in distinguishing the various perspectives within the SAF of (Italian) animal advocacy, and it also offers the possibility to give adequate consideration to the self-representations of social actors.

Some preliminary remarks in the Gramscian vocabulary are useful. I consider it favourable to refer to a war of position rather than a *war of manoeuvre*. It is not my objective to dissect this dichotomy here. I limit to remind that Gramsci defines it as 'the most important question in political theory and the most difficult to be properly solved' (*my translation*). The basic difference was the application of the concept of a war of manoeuvre to the Eastern scenario and the shift to a war of position when referring to the West. According to Gramsci, in the West, the resistance could not remain physical and immediate, but had to become cultural with the time-consuming objective of transforming – somewhat radically – a societal structure, proposing 'alternative institutions and alternative intellectual resources within existing society' (Cox, 1983: 165). Political animal advocacy and political veganism also propose a long cultural challenge to the structure of (Western) contemporary societies.

Regarding passive revolution, the definitions used by Gramsci are conflicting. As Thomas (2006) reminds,

in the early phases of his research, Gramsci appropriated this concept from Vincenzo Cuoco, the historian of the failed Neapolitan revolution of 1799. He transformed it, in the first instance, in order to provide an analysis of the distinctive features of the Italian Risorgimento. (p. 72)

In that context, the definition given by Gramsci – that of a *revolution without revolution* developed in the absence of a *popular movement* and a *united front* – sounds

fitting for some sectors of Italian animal advocacy, less and less political but progressively more involved in politics, not interested in other critical discourses but focused only on vegan consumption. I am aware that this second category could be problematic. Gramsci uses the term passive revolution to refer to those who hold power and are able to subsume critical voices. However, considering the strong relations that some animal advocacy associations entertain with national governments, transnational institutions or big corporations, the use of this category seems appropriate.

Methodological note

The material discussed in this article is part of two waves of semi-structured interviews to Italian animal advocates. I conducted interviews with key activists from these groups, asking them both their personal opinions, and the collective positions assumed by their groups. I selected the single individuals to be interviewed with a rational choice criterion, considering their centrality and/or length of experience among the Italian animal advocacy archipelago. Considering both waves, the total number of interviews referring to the area of animal advocacy is 23. However, these interviewees were not all vegan, due to their belonging to reformist associations among other reasons (Bertuzzi, 2018). The total number of vegans among these 23 interviewees is 18. As a starting point to discuss their perspectives, I asked them to express their (and their group's) opinions on veganism as a new market niche. I also asked them what role the specific issue of veganism plays within their (and their group's) broader animal advocacy activity, if they (and their group) consider it 'sufficient' or at least 'paramount' to be vegan, and also more specifically if they (and their group) would prefer to have vegan capitalists or omnivorous anticapitalists as political allies.

Beyond the interviews, I also adopted other methods, such as a survey (704 respondents nationwide), a protest event analysis, the analysis of printed and digital material and the physical participation in debates and events (Bertuzzi, 2018, 2019). Here I consider the data collected in the interviews and not for example that of the survey, as my intention is to understand the different motivations and meanings supporting the vegan choice, its nature of strong opposition to capitalist hegemony or, on the contrary, an interpretation of veganism as adaptable to it. I would like to stress the importance of qualitative methods (and interviews, in particular) to an understanding of the meanings and motivations behind individual practices such as veganism. Limiting research to tallying the number of omnivores, vegetarians or vegans within a certain social territory (national, local, international) is insufficient from a sociological perspective and it can also prove to be inaccurate, due to sample and stigmatization bias.

The Italian context

In this paragraph, I very briefly present the (recent) evolution and current situation of Italian animal advocacy, useful for the subsequent empirical analysis. More

details on the first-half of the 20th century can be found in Guazzaloca (2017), and for the present day in Bertuzzi (2018, 2019). I also specifically refer to some groups analysed in my research, as they can be considered paradigmatic of different periods and approaches.

The variegated field of Italian animal advocacy has its first organizational structuration in the late 19th century, owing to figures as Garibaldi and Mussolini, among others (for more details, see Bertuzzi, 2018; Guazzaloca, 2017). However, Italian animal advocacy only assumed political and social relevance beginning in the 1960s, and increasing during the 1970s/1980s around themes such as hunting, circuses, fur and above all animal testing. The first large associations developed throughout those decades, for example *LAV* (*Lega Antivivisezione*), and the first explicitly vegetarian groups.

A more substantial turning point happened from the late 1990s/early 2000s, when the first groups close to a radical animal rights perspective emerged (the so-called *antispeciesism* in Italian: namely, a complete opposition to the transformation of a species' difference into a species' hierarchy). These groups were particularly influenced by radical and anarchist ecology (Bertuzzi and Losi, 2020), and some of them by the punk subculture (Turina, 2010): in addition to radical repertoires of actions, intersections with other social movements and more consistent theoretical frames, they also introduced veganism as a central element of struggle. This was a political (counter-hegemonic) veganism, not limited to dietary and consumerist positions: one of the more relevant among these groups, considering the level of theoretical formulations and visibility, is *Oltre la Specie*.

Over the years, this radical approach – both in terms of frames and actions – has been progressively diminishing in its scope. After the peak of media visibility given by the last large-scale national collective campaign, against the breeding for beagle dogs called Green Hill (in Montichiari, Brescia), the movement has been increasingly characterized by the centrality of two phenomena strictly connected to the individual dimension: online activism and the insistence on veganism as a form of food consumption in favour of non-human animals but often separated from other political motivations (Bertuzzi, 2020).

Essere Animali and *Animal Equality* should be mentioned among the groups that most characterized this shift, contributing to the expanded audience reach of animal advocates due to their remarkable communication activity. Also their renewed approach indirectly contributed to the de-politicization of Italian animal advocacy, a phenomenon that has increased over the years and has gradually led to an evident dichotomy in the current panorama.

Two paradigmatic cases of this dichotomy are the following: *Farro & Fuoco* on the one hand, a group of anarchist inspiration, strongly linked to other liberation struggles and which pursues a political veganism; and *Cani Sciolti* on the other hand, an avowedly a-political group (and sometimes accused of being close to the far right), single-issue, exclusively interested in the animal question and strongly focused on veganism as an individual form of consumption and advocacy. Significantly, both *Farro & Fuoco* and *Cani Sciolti* no longer exist: they were

disbanded between the periods of data gathering and the article publication. This proves not only the internal division of Italian animal advocacy, but also the current volatile and ‘precarious’ situation of the movement.

In summary, Italian animal advocacy still maintains a multiform and variegated nature, due to the contemporary convergence of different political traditions and to a progressive differentiation between various tendencies occurring over the past decades. In the following paragraph, I first take into consideration the general frames adopted by different types of animal advocates regarding veganism. I proceed to focus on a specific event, namely the Universal Exposition, most recently held in Milan (2015), which was strictly related to veganism with the title ‘Feeding the planet, energy for life’.

Between passive revolution and war of position

Into the flow: A passive revolution

Certain groups of animal advocates explicitly view corporations as the main interlocutors, adopting a strategy inclined towards negotiations rather than product boycotts (Bertuzzi, 2018): from conflicting referents, corporations are becoming accepted actors within the SAF, as defined by Fligstein and McAdam (2012). Furthermore, the activists that look favourably to big corporations, often work hand in hand with institutional actors and have become woven into every aspect of the institutional *apparatus*. Their actions and frames confirm one of the main dynamics described by Fligstein and McAdam in their SAF theory, namely the production of specific competences useful for the actions. These new competences are not an output of the previous political socialization of the individuals, nor collective styles produced within an organization, but they are the spontaneous product of the field itself and of the interaction between different subjects.

Emblematic examples include campaigns conducted by relevant Italian groups such as Essere Animali, with their initiative #ViaDagliScaffali in which supermarket chains were asked to ban the sale of *foie gras*; or Animal Equality, by means of its general view on the role of corporations, well expressed in the next quote from its president:

The corporations themselves create the request and automatically you can manage to direct the consumer towards a product that is considered less cruel. (Animal Equality, Interview 1, M.C.)

The objective of such veganism is that of going mainstream: this is quite transformative if compared with previous decades, when veganism – particularly, in Italy but also elsewhere – was framed as an alternative to the main trends of contemporary society, especially the contemporary market economy (Bertuzzi, 2020; Turina, 2010). Such a new wave approach, previously often silenced or perhaps hidden, is now explicitly claimed: on the website of Essere Animali, for example,

there is a link that literally says, ‘Vegan food is a mainstream trend’ with an article that endorses this new context hoping that ‘numerous important firms will consider veganism an irresistible trend and suggest that producers and investors from the food and catering sectors should bet on this trend’ (*my translation*).

This perspective is accompanied by a decrease in the political spirit typical of some groups and activists (Essere Animali and Animal Equality are classic examples, but many more exist), that progressively shifted their frames and actions towards the objective of making veganism widespread and transversal among civil society without giving great importance to the motivations for this diffusion but rather focusing on the creation of a vegan critical mass.

When you get to the mass, the mainstream becomes something unpredictable.
(Animal Equality, Interview 1, M.C.)

A similar approach to the animal question is increasingly disconnected from other social issues. Those who endorse such viewpoints often consider animal advocacy a separate and transversal aspect, for this reason not only potentially adaptable to, but also favoured by modern capitalism. I, specifically, refer to those activists and groups (e.g. in my empirical research, Cani Sciolti) that conceive of their veganism as an identity testimony. They are not interested in a political discourse and frame, and for this reason, they do not have any problem in consuming vegan products from mainstream corporations notoriously criticized by other social movements for reasons unrelated to animal exploitation:

The fact that Granarolo has made vegan milk is a victory, because it means that they realized that a slice of society is becoming vegan. (Cani Sciolti, Interview 3, A.V.)

This trend has been growing in recent years, due to two reasons that are simultaneously similar and opposite in nature. On the one hand, the partial ‘radicalization’ of some welfarist associations (e.g. LAV), which are welcoming a shift towards veganism. On the other hand, a contemporary moderation, professionalization and institutionalization of groups from the ‘radical’ animal rights galaxy (such as the afore-mentioned Essere Animali), which have changed their communication and action strategies in more ecumenical terms (Bertuzzi, 2018). This is explicitly illustrated in the following excerpt: as admitted by the interviewee himself, such a situation was completely unimaginable some years ago:

Now, after so many years, we are starting to collaborate with LAV, we started a backstage dialogue functional to some campaigns....

There was a mutual convergence, because both of us have changed: LAV, from static monolith, started to open up to the vegan discourse... we also evolved and we understood that, even with some differences, it is absurd to have a conflict if it is not really marked. (Essere Animali, Interview 1, C.P.)

These processes are reminiscent of corporatization described by Dauvergne and LeBaron (2014) in relation to environmental activism. The objective is no longer to subvert hegemony and not even to challenge it, but to be included in the current political and economic hegemonic structure, and become one of its possible elements. In fact, these groups either explicitly accept their capitalist compromises (as in the case of Essere Animali or Animal Equality) or they do not even recognize them as such (as in the case of Cani Sciolti). They ‘only’ want to save and protect non-human animals and they consider it possible (and often better) to do it within the capitalist system. Such a perspective, mainly (or only) focused on animal exploitation, has proven to be effective in the base enlargement of vegan audiences. However, from a Gramscian perspective, it ‘reduces’ a political counter-hegemonic instance to a veganism only interested in being included in the mainstream market and modes of consumption:

I do not even use the expression ‘animal rights activism’ anymore. The young people do. I, right now, don’t see it as a priority to declare myself as an animal rights activist: society is not ready to consider that all animals are equal and must be treated like humans... Sometimes it is even better to say vegetarian rather than vegan; in other environments, vegan is cool. (Essere Animali, Interview 4, F.C.)²

Based on the data presented in this paragraph, this type of veganism can effectively be defined as a passive revolution. The attempt is to explicitly become part of the mainstream without striving for structural change. Although some of these activists are aware of the moderate, reformist and, in effect, hegemonic nature of this approach, others are not: they define themselves as revolutionary even when, for example, they look for alliances with big corporations extremely characterized as capitalist symbols and also as heavy producers of meat-based products.

Against the machine: A war of position

On the contrary, other activists look for a change in society at large, proposing to be counter-hegemonic and to contrast the neoliberal economic structure. This tradition has its deepest roots in the history of Italian animal rights activism, especially linked to the anarchist and radical ecological groups that acquired great visibility at the beginning of the 2000s (Bertuzzi and Losi, 2020). This second type of activism embraces veganism as a counter-hegemonic project, not attempting to make it acceptable as a form of consumption or niche-market, but asking for a completely different social alternative. This involves, at least for the moment, its marginal role and its numeric under-representation. The strategies, in fact, are often contentious and the objective particularly ambitious: to re-discuss the conditions based on which the contemporary socio-economic system is constructed, without accepting top-down concessions and compromises. This is summarized in the next excerpt:

A discourse emerged: we were asked if we could make a contribution as cooks, once each on Sunday, with three other associations, to feed the migrants who are in Porta

Venezia (a suburb of Milan, ed.)... first of all, if the migrants are in those conditions it is not our fault, but it is the institutions'... the problem is to interact with the institutions that create these problems, because the institutions could very well solve them, but do not want to. (Farro & Fuoco, Interview 1, F.L.)

For this reason, this kind of activism (and veganism) is not directed at institutions or private companies and corporations, and at the same time is not reduced to a personal choice or to a form of consumption. It is rather the consequence of a more general political perspective: along with various other forms of acting outside the shared rules of market economy and contrasting its current modes of production, one of them (certainly a very important one) is represented by the refusal to consume animal products.

However, institutions and corporations contrast these positions, though adopting apparently friendly approaches. This contrast is performed in different ways: one, as previously stated, by forging alliances with subjects more inclined to accept political compromises, with the double purpose of preventing radicalism and making veganism more acceptable (and 'monetizable') to the general public. In Italy, a similar dynamic has also occurred with other radical instances in the recent past, such as the co-optation of some reformist components of the Italian LGBT movement in order to support a moderate law proposal for same-sex marriage (Zambelli et al., 2018). This could also be observed in the anticapitalist milieu: a good example is represented by the Global Justice Movement (Della Porta, 2007), as also reported by an activist who compares the current situation of veganism with the no-global protests in the early 2000s:

Veganism is a matter of fashion nowadays, this is also because a series of instances were depoliticized and became fashionable: as it happened after the G8 in Genova 2001, when the no-global protests were gradually reframed to become acceptable to anyone. (Eat The Rich, Interview 1, D.S.)

This sector of animal advocacy pursues alliances with other liberation movements and also deals with other issues that do not directly (or at least explicitly) concern non-human animals (Simonsen, 2012; Wrenn, 2014). According to this type of activists, only such veganism can really be considered as a true counter-hegemonic position, since it involves a total re-discussion of the current capitalist expansion. Veganism is neither the *primus movens*, nor a consequence of this struggle; it is one of the several compositional elements. In addition, according to some interviewees, this would distinguish a 'simple' vegan from a true animal rights activist (an 'antispeciesist' in Italian) who looks for total liberation (Best, 2014): it would not be sufficient to abstain from meat consumption, the activists should also seriously consider relations between various forms of exploitation in order to build alliances with other social movements and construct a 'united front':

Veganism and animal rights must be framed within a context of broader struggles in order to have a radical sense of liberation... a real change such as liberationism (namely

the end of the exploitation of all animal beings) requires a radical change of organization, culture and habits of human beings. (Farro & Fuoco, Interview 2, L.C.)

Considering what has been discussed in this paragraph, the other parallelism that I propose, between this second type of veganism and a war of position, is effective. This approach does not want to be included in mainstream culture (and mainstream consumption), but proposes a radical alternative with the objective of gaining influence in society by replacing the *status quo*.

Expo 2015: An example

In the following, I consider the two positions previously identified – war of position and passive revolution – in relation to a specific mega event (Roche, 2002): the 2015 Universal Exposition held in Milan, strictly connected to the animal question and to veganism in particular, being entitled with the caption ‘Feeding the planet, energy for life’.

Expo-sceptics: A war of position

The intersectional counter-hegemonic nature of a veganism intended as a war of position and described in the last part of the previous section, has been demonstrated by the participation of some relevant groups in actions conducted alongside other Italian social movements over the past years (Bertuzzi, 2018), currently coinciding largely with the LGBTQ galaxy, militant anti-fascism and the main Italian territorial and anticapitalist movements (*No-Tav*, *No-Muos*, *Stop Ttip*, and so on).

Specifically, I analysed the involvement of some of these groups and activists within the *No Expo* mobilization, a variegated network of activists opposing the 2015 *Universal Exposition* held in Milan (Bertuzzi, 2017; Casaglia, 2018). On that occasion, animal rights groups such as Farro & Fuoco and Oltre la Specie produced both general reflections on the different oppression devices typical of modern capitalism and a specific critique towards the concept of ‘happy meat’ (Cole, 2011), promoted by Expo through some of its main sponsors, including big corporations with a green-economy attitude such as *Slow Food*, *Coop Italia* and *Eataly*. These corporations were able to clean up the façade with which Expo presented itself to those consumers more sensitive to the living conditions of non-human animals.

This idea(l) of ‘sweet’ exploitation characterized by an attention to animal welfare has grown significantly over recent years. At the same time, some Italian animal rights groups have long developed critical perspectives towards similar dynamics. An example is the critical work of deconstruction promoted by the *BioViolenza Project* in relation to some vegan-friendly marketing operations (Bertuzzi and Losi, 2020).³ This work has been further developed with reference to Expo 2015, in particular, through the Farro & Fuoco dossier, widely circulated among the No Expo activists (Bertuzzi, 2017).⁴ These animal rights groups contrasted the Expo strategy of using topics related to the vegan diet as a magnet for

including individuals and groups close to the animal question in the role of passive audience, through what can be defined as *veganwashing* operations (namely those attempts to hide other relevant social issues such as labour rights, territorial exploitations and neo-colonial capitalism, with an insistence on the ethical values and the dietetic virtues of the vegan diet⁵).

Those vegan groups and activists that considered the mega event as a typical hegemonic dispositive of modern capitalism particularly stressed the significance of the world-wide occasion that it provided to construct a positive and progressive narrative, and to minimize, embrace and include critical voices. This perspective addressed not only the exploitation of non-human animals but several different aspects, as evident in the next two excerpts:

Expo, like all the big fairs, is based on the extermination of billions of animals, it could be criticized in itself... it is a symbolically important event for the Capital, the 'purification' of a series of subjects linked to capitalism and neoliberalism: since one of the functioning mechanisms of capitalism is animal bodies, I think it is very significant that even those who are interested in these bodies are particularly critical towards such events. (Oltre la Specie, Interview 1, M.R.)

The discourse of Farro & Fuoco was completely political, and the big event obviously requires a fairly radical critique, because it is an international event, because it involved big corporations from all over the world, because it is a symbolic event for capitalism, for a certain capitalist rhetoric that tries to always pose itself in new ways, with new images, to adapt itself in a very hypocritical way. (Farro & Fuoco, interview 2, L.C.)

One of the peculiar characteristics of this area of Italian animal advocacy is the strong opposition to the work of 'decontextualized reification' of the *status quo*, namely the way in which capitalism tries to impose its gospel without an explicit claim of its hegemony. It is by denouncing the supposedly neutral rhetoric of Expo that these groups made visible the structural underlying assumptions useful to justify the contemporary juncture, in this case coinciding with a consumerist, modernist and globalist attitude to the food market. Such an attitude involves both the 'informed' consumption of non-human animals and other different soft variations of the capitalist gospel, presented within the international *kermesse* as adaptable to some ethical standards, among which veganism. This is exactly the difference between a war of position and a passive revolution that contrastingly does not question in depth the *status quo* and its decontextualized reification but focuses solely on a single aspect, in this case animal exploitation.

Expo-critical: A passive revolution

Interestingly, other animal advocacy groups responded to the mega event, though from a less oppositional standpoint. Their support was limited to the implementation of more visible, spectacular and mediatic actions. For example, I refer to the

projection by Essere Animali of the text ‘To feed the planet, the future is vegan’ on some of the main buildings and monuments in Milan (Duomo, Castello Sforzesco, Pirellone) on 19 June 2015:

We conducted an action against Expo by projecting on the monuments of Milan with a very powerful projector the phrase ‘To feed the planet the future is vegan’, and this was our way to share our opinion of this event; otherwise, we have not committed too much to this campaign. (Essere Animali, Interview 2, R.S.)

They evaluated the Exposition as negative, only – or at least explicitly – referring to the animal question. This does not automatically mean that these groups and activists are supporters of similar mega events, but they did not examine Expo’s various critical nodes. Some of these groups even initially considered the hypothesis of exploiting the Universal Exposition to spread veganism as culture, diet or lifestyle, going so far as to start conversations and possible alliances with the organizing committee of the *kermesse*. Such contacts were then abandoned due to time constraints rather than political conscience. (Bertuzzi, 2018)

The only public demonstration to be organized by this second type of animal advocates during the 6 months of the mega event, was characterized by some interesting aspects.⁶ First of all, the marginality of criticisms elaborated during previous years by the No Expo Network, such as the use of precarious or even voluntary work, the gentrification of the Milan hinterland areas and the political-economic aspects connected to the management of big infrastructures (Bertuzzi, 2017; Casaglia, 2018; Leonardi and Secchi, 2016). Second and strictly related, the attempt to maintain and promote an a-political ecumenical vision was sustained by claims such as ‘animals do not care about your political opinion’ or ‘animal rights are neither right-wing nor left-wing’. Finally, notwithstanding the slogan of the demonstration – *AgainstExpoAnimalAdvocates* (in Italian, *ControExpoAnimalisti*), no particular interest in the No Expo mobilization was shown: the focus was only on the fact that during the 6 months of the event a lot of animals would be killed and that the meat-based diet would not be questioned. This is an argument that can be extended to practically any event involving food, such as the extremely numerous local fairs diffused throughout the Italian territory every year.

For this sector of animal advocacy, it would have been sufficient (or even better) to *veganize* the Expo, without questioning the general vision of society and development it involves. Such a strategy is configurable as a ‘revolution without revolution’: any *veganwashing* operation, even when effectively recognized, is not considered a political problem.

Conclusion

As Stuart Hall (2002) has written the following: ‘I do not claim that, in any simple way, Gramsci “has the answers” or “holds the key” to our present troubles. I do

believe that we must “think” our problems in a Gramscian way’ (p. 227). In this article, I have applied this suggestion to (Italian) animal advocacy and veganism, adopting and adapting two opposite Gramscian concepts: war of position and passive revolution. Hopefully, HAS scholars will continue to use Gramsci, developing some of the many other concepts he theorized.

Summarizing the analysis here presented, animal advocates have reacted (and are still reacting) in different ways to the more and more frequent *veganwashing* operations developed by big corporations and more generally by contemporary capitalism. Only seldom do they perform a real war of position against the attempts to *veganize* the mainstream, and claim the historical antagonistic and counter-hegemonic nature of veganism. On the contrary, the priority of improving the living conditions of non-human animals, the considerations for an immediate decrease in the number of their deaths, or even a greater possibility of choice for human consumers, has induced other players in the arena to evaluate conciliatory positions (or also explicit endorsement) towards actors highly characterized by their capitalist (hegemonic) nature.

The application to animal advocacy (and to the issue of veganism, in particular) of the dichotomy, *war of position versus passive revolution*, proved to be correct. For example, I consider the label ‘passive revolution’ more appropriate than ‘reformist politics’: numerous vegans belonging to this area perceive themselves as conducting a real revolution and not just a step-by-step approach. However, quoting Gramsci, they are acting out ‘a revolution without revolution’, as they challenge (and change, of course, at least at an individual level) a single aspect, without questioning the general socio-economic structure, attempting, on the contrary, to be accepted and involved in the hegemonic political juncture. Their ‘inability’ to perceive such dynamics can be seen as evidence of the capitalist capacity to develop a decontextualized reification of current socio-economic dynamics and impose it on civil society, including those who were (and still could/should be) its main opponents.

Neoliberal hegemony was able to depoliticize veganism, insisting on a classic element of Western modern societies, namely the prominence of the individual (the consumer in this case) over the collective (the activists united in a common struggle of liberation). This is not only true of veganism, but also other social movements, that have progressively softened their position and have been included in the mainstream market dynamics (Dauvergne and LeBaron, 2014). In the case of veganism, it is particularly evident because this type of activism also involves a daily practice and lifestyle. As explained in the first part of the article, this practice and lifestyle should not completely overlap with activism: following the roots of vegan movements, other forms of advocacy (direct actions, public demonstrations, the involvement in alternative subcultures) and especially engagement in other social issues, are unavoidable elements.

At the same time, the term *war of position* accurately expresses the characteristics of a veganism that proposes to change the cultural background and assumptions of neoliberal social structure. This sector of animal advocacy interprets

veganism as an element that is absolutely irreconcilable with capitalist modernity and its various forms of exploitation, often being involved in other instances and alliances with other social movements, as for example in the case of the No Expo mobilization. A similar approach results in a laborious deconstructive activity, which, based on various arguments, proposes to question an entire hegemonic structure. One of these arguments (though not in itself sufficient) is the exploitation of non-human animals and the consumption of animal-based products. This is what Gramsci meant when speaking of a long generalized war of position, able to build alliances and to construct a 'united front'. Starting common discourses with other social movements that share (at least) some of the same political visions can foster the possibility to overcome the consumerist approach that increasingly characterizes contemporary veganism. This is a typical trend of Western modernity, which is reflected in the erosion of collective struggles through the insistence on the individual attitudes, tastes and behaviours of single consumer citizens. Such consistency, however, does not translate, at least for the moment, to a base enlargement or even to its favourable reception among other social movements. The attempt to isolate this sector of animal advocacy conducted by political and economic elites, as well as by other moderate sectors of animal advocacy itself, is proving effective.

Thus, the following two main claims exposed in the introduction have been achieved: (1) to offer a grid for the analysis of animal advocacy (and veganism in particular) that goes beyond the classic dichotomy reformism versus radicalism and (2) to argue that Gramscian counter-hegemony (and in particular, war of position) can be a correct and strategically useful label to summarize the main political theories (feminist, eco-feminist, anticapitalist, but also queer, anarchist and liberationist) developed in the HAS field.

To conclude, the boundary between a practice willing to challenge the capitalist economic system (strongly based, as it is, on the production and commercialization of animal-based products) and a simple alternative diet is sometimes difficult to identify. The reasons behind the increasing number of vegan alternatives at the supermarket, or of vegan restaurants and vegan festivals in Western cities, are not only related to the ability of contemporary capitalism to monetize its possible opponents. Healthy, environmental, social motivations are important as well. However, the normalization of veganism within a precise (and hegemonic) market scheme has been performed also thanks to a strong insistence on the possibilities offered to contemporary individual consumers' agency, a phenomenon that characterizes so-called consumer societies. As the readers of this *Journal* are aware of, consumption is never a matter of simple individual choice; it is an act to always be contextualized in a specific cultural setting, and especially to be analysed considering the meaning and recognition that specific social groups assign to it. On the one hand, consumption is a social action provided with sense; on the other hand, is also – at least to some extent – something other-directed and context-based. The process that veganism is going through in contemporary Western societies, is often characterized by the willingness to increase recognition among large

publics (conquering a specific position in the market arena), at the expense of recognition and political identity within the arena of animal advocacy: the preminence of the individual choice over collective action strongly contributed to the diffusion of such dynamic.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hegemony>
2. I here translated with the English term ‘animal rights’, but the respondent used the term ‘antispeciesism’ (‘antispecismo’ in Italian).
3. <https://bioviolenza.blogspot.com/>
4. <https://boccaccio.noblogs.org/files/2014/05/dossier-A5-con-pagina-bianca.pdf>
5. The term *veganwashing* resonates with the more known and diffused *greenwashing* and *pinkwashing*: it has been popularized by the Palestinian Animal League criticizing the rhetoric adopted by the Israeli government to neglect the responsibilities in the Arab–Israeli conflict, presenting Israel (and the Israeli army, in particular) as vegan-friendly in order to attract the sympathy of vegan audiences.
6. I refer to the demonstration held on 23 May 2015 and organized by *Associazione Animalisti Onlus*, <http://www.animalisti.org/corteo-nazionale-controexpoanimalisti/>.

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