I'm a vegan! Student's perception of the Anthropocene and pedagogical challenges in a university "food" course

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Introduction

In 2017 Södertörn University established the course Food and Environment (15 ECTS) in the undergraduate program in Environmental Sciences. The course problematizes the relationship between production and consumption of food and environmental issues in the food system. The course was designed using Freire's progressive pedagogical ideas of empowering students with tools for taking charge of their own education (2017 1968) Theoretical and practical elements are integrated through literature studies, real life observations, sensory exercises and an excursion1.

Unanticipated conflicts and pedagogical challenges have arisen in the course due to the student's active critique against the subordinated role of animals in the Anthropocene. In society, such views are limited to a small share of the population (24 % vegetarians and 1 % vegans in Sweden in 2018) and there are few arenas where 'the vegan point of view' can be included in the efforts to improve sustainability in the food industry. The course offers an opportunity to understand veganism and how to overcome the lack of dialogue between vegans and non-vegans in society, especially since 30 percent of the students are vegans and the rest are sympathetic to vegan ideals.

Previous research

Ethical concerns related to animal husbandry under the Anthropocene are increasingly important (Bruckmeier, 2015; Cushing, 2019; Mazac & Tuomisto, 2020; McGregor & Houston, 2018) and literature about veganism shows two central themes: 1) The creation of a social movement through collective action, (a) based on solidarity, (b) emergence of conflict, (c) breaking with the system that the movements' critique targets (Cherry, 2006); 2) A normative set of organized actions based on a new moral and ideological standard (Sneijder and te Molder, 2009).

Students perceptions

We used reports, essays and discussions in the classroom documented in the course web.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT: Students analyze the role of animals in society departing from technical drivers (for example pasteurization) and cultural change (e.g. milk propaganda and the rise of vegetarian food consumption). Studies are often based on post productive theories. Assignments express solidarity with animals, environmental impact of food production, injustices in the global food system often using 'David vs. Goliath' arguments, and vegetarian food being superior to animal-based food.

NORMATIVITY: Students highlight conflict between meat-eaters and vegans, presenting 'damages' caused by animal production (deforestation, food scares including the Covid 19 pandemic and fraud), students reproduce arguments developed by vegan food producers. Organized coherent action is expressed by refusing to participate in sensory exercises based on animal products (milk, eggs, honey, fish). Vegan students demand alternative assignments that circumvent the course syllabus to avoid participating in the human exploitation of animals.

Conclusions

The study of vegan students' perceptions can help us understand how to overcome the societal lack of dialogue in a highly polarized discussion about the role of animals in the food system. The challenges experienced during the course, especially concerning the normative aspects of veganism can contribute to the development of better didactic and pedagogical approaches for a changing society in which a higher awareness of ethical and environmental aspects are needed.

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Web based sources

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