Transitioning Away from Animal Exploitation

written by Spencer Roberts, Dan Fischer | November 6, 2021

An ecologist, engineer, and science writer, Spencer Roberts exposes corporate science propaganda and greenwashing. His degrees from University of Colorado Boulder are in Ecology & Evolution and Atmospheric & Ocean Science. Several of his essays for *Wired*, *Jacobin*, *Current Affairs*, and *The Ecologist* scrutinize the animal agriculture and seafood industries. In this interview, I asked Roberts about the connections between veganism, decolonization, and socialism. Even if you disagree with certain points (for example, I take a more precautionary approach toward biotechnology and am more hopeful about scaling up veganic agroecology), you may find much value, as I did, in Roberts's arguments for a socially just transition away from animal agriculture and wildlife extraction.

Daniel Fischer: You sometimes publish as "Unpopular Science." Explain.

Spencer Roberts: Unpopular Science is what I call my blog and twitter. It's sort of like an antidote to pop science, which in my opinion has done a lot of damage to science communication. Pop science is all about inside jokes, reprimanding skeptics, sometimes even promoting products. I like to write about unpopular truths, science corruption, greenwashing.

DF: Abolishing animal agriculture would liberate some three-quarters of agricultural land, which could then be returned to Indigenous peoples and used for carbon sequestration and ecological restoration. Why, then, do many leftists push back against veganism and animal liberation?

SR: Cognitive dissonance, of course. It's not as if all of those solutions would take shape simply by virtue of transitioning away from animal agriculture, but it's also not as if they could occur at meaningful scale without doing so. It's important to understand that animal agriculture exists in a context of many other intertwined systems of oppression. While animal rights advocates may oversimplify this at times, deflecting or attacking them for such is a coping mechanism to avoid examining our behavior toward other animals. I don't think it needs to be psychoanalyzed beyond that.

DF: What are some of the social reasons for the spread of zoonotic disease, and what's the role of animal agriculture specifically?

SR: Zoonotic disease emergence is driven by two main factors: habitat destruction and intensive animal breeding. Given that animal farming is a primary driver of global habitat destruction (occupying more than three quarters of agricultural land), it is safe to say that animal agriculture is the primary root cause of zoonotic epidemics. A lot of attention was given to wildlife markets after

the emergence of SARS-CoV-2, but when we consider the fact that the proximity to capture bats and pangolins was made in large part by burning or clear-cutting forests for pasture or feed crops, we understand the bigger picture. We invest all this money in pandemic preparedness and we should invest more, but ultimately it's self-defeating unless we stop investing money in subsidizing animal agriculture.

DF: How can leftists support animal agriculture's human victims such as slaughterhouse workers and communities directly suffering from the industry's pollution and land grabs?

SR: Campaign and vote for policies that protect migrant workers, reform land ownership, and reallocate agricultural subsidies. Donate to litigation and direct action campaigns against agricultural development and labor exploitation. Follow your local UFCW or other meatpacker union chapter and pay attention to the struggles slaughterhouse workers are facing so you can step up when there's an opportunity. Support projects like Transfarmation and Rancher Advocacy Program that help people transition from animal to plant farming. And of course, you get a choice whether to financially support the industries that exploit them every day. Choose to take collective action and join the boycott. The profits these companies make off your purchases do not affect workers' wages. If anything, the lower the line speeds, the safer their job is.

DF: How widespread is support for veganism and animal liberation in the Global South and in the North's communities of color?

SR: In the United States, surveys indicate that people of color are three times more likely to be vegan or vegetarian than white people and that meat consumption rates are steeply correlated with income. On a global scale, the rift between meat consumption rates in low and high-income countries is vast. There is this myth in the Global North that boycotting animal products is expensive and it doesn't help that food corporations price gauge new meat substitutes. The reality, however, is that meat and dairy are luxury commodities. There are hundreds of millions of people in the world who don't eat animals, the vast majority of them in the Global South. In many cultures, in addition to health, environmental, and animal rights concerns, veganism also has a decolonial aspect. Haiti, for instance, is the place where Columbus brought the first cattle to the Western Hemisphere. The use of traditional crops like yams and maize instead of steak and dairy is a very intentional facet of Caribbean and Mayan practices of veganism. White vegans get a lot of media coverage due to the dominance of US media, but the truth is that the animal rights movement was started by Jain monks more than 25 centuries ago.

DF: What is "regenerative ranching," and why do you consider it a false solution to climate change?

SR: Regenerative ranching is the idea that cattle farming can be conducted in a way that results in negative emissions. The overwhelming majority of ecologists and soil scientists does not believe this. There are many reasons (soil variability, microbial decomposition, etc.), but the bottom line is that soil systems have a carbon capacity. So while there are cases where degraded land can recover soil carbon for a time while being ranched, this cannot occur indefinitely. The sequestration of atmospheric carbon by the soil slows and eventually stops, typically within a decade or two. After that gas exchange equilibrium is achieved between the atmosphere and soil, there is effectively no carbon drawdown and the farm continues to generate emissions. What's worse about regenerative ranching is that it draws focus off the ecosystem as a whole, posturing soil carbon gains as regeneration, whereas actually regenerating intact ecosystems has the potential to draw down more carbon by orders of magnitude.

DF: The *Ecologist* removed your article "Regenerative Ranching Racket" after pressure

from ranching supporters. Please describe the article, the reactions, and your response.

SR: Essentially what happened is that I wrote this article with a focus on the professional histories of a selection of celebrity regenerative ranchers (which involved wage theft, worker abuse, and war crimes), but the thing that upset people more than anything was that my wife and I made a fake farm and got it on a regenerative farm map curated by an NGO called Regeneration International. We did this because I asked them during a press launch for the map what the criteria were to get on it and they dismissed my question, so this gave us an honest answer (there are none).

The NGO was furious. They wrote the publisher, rallied supporters to do the same, and filed a complaint with the media regulator. Obviously nothing came of that because everything in the article is 100% true, but based on the editor's communication with me, it sounded like they threatened to sue him. Considering *The Ecologist* is a publication with 1.5 staff members that doesn't even pay writers and Regeneration International is an enormous well-connected nonprofit corporation, the pressure was apparently too much to bear and he caved, which was extremely disappointing, to put it lightly. So now it's on Medium—just search "The Regenerative Ranching Racket".

DF: What is veganic agroecology, and do you see it as a feasible climate solution?

SR: Well, I don't know if I've used those words, but I'd generally agree. As I understand, veganic essentially distinguishes crop farming using plant or fungus fertilizer as opposed to manure and agroecology refers to farming techniques that mitigate environmental impacts and incorporate ecological functions. Agroecology has very different connotations depending who you're talking to, however, as it's originally a campesino village-scale food system that incorporates coevolutionary relationships between native flora and fauna, yet it's often co-opted by commercial interests and carnists in general into this ideology that replaces those native fauna with domestic species and then calls the farm an ecosystem simply because it has animals.

I wouldn't say agroecology is a climate solution so much as a means of mitigating the environmental impact of agriculture, which of course includes climate implications. However, I'm not convinced it can or should be scaled to meet our total agricultural demand. I think it should be supplemented with the types of centrally-planned organic hydroponic systems used in the Netherlands, which is among the world's top food exporters, despite having hardly any land. In my opinion, an ecological approach to agriculture should involve manipulating or sacrificing as few ecosystems as possible. Concentrating agriculture, which can be done without the waste and toxicity inherent to the US model, leaves more room for ecosystems.

DF: In "Red Vegans against Green Peasants," Max Ajl and Rob Wallace warned that abolishing animal agriculture would amount to a mass dispossession of peasants. What would a socially just transition look like for small farmers and communities that rely on livestock for food and income?

SR: To draw from an essay:

> "Visions of future food systems must articulate pathways for the reintegration of working class people who have been edged out of the agricultural economy by consolidation and automation. They must include reparations to Black farmers and First Nations. They must establish equitable models, such as co-operatives and land trusts, that can be scaled up to meet the challenge of ending hunger. They must envision a Green New Deal of careers in public service for rural folk, including not only building housing, health care, education, and clean energy infrastructure, but also reseeding endangered flora,

> reintroducing endemic grazers, and regenerating wildlife habitat on formerly farmed land."

To achieve this future, it's imperative to respect the sovereignty of native nations. This requires liberating land and water from the animal agricultural complex. By industry, animal agriculture is the single greatest occupier of land in the world. Commercial fishing is the single greatest killer of wildlife. When an argument casts vegans and conservationists as the great global threat to tribal sovereignty and glosses over the genocidal nature of animal agriculture and wildlife extraction industries, it runs cover for them. It's one thing to write a critique of first-world veganism from the perspective of pastoral peoples, but to misrepresent so many people so egregiously and to recite meat industry talking points—downplaying methane, regenerative ranching, this idea that cattle mimic the ecological role of bison—is tokenizing. I encourage anyone looking for a critical perspective on white veganism and animal rights from the perspective of someone from an Indigenous pastoral culture to follow Abdourahamane @fulanivegan.

DF: Why do you also support boycotting seafood? Should vegans ally with small fishers against industrial fishing?

SR: Seafood is just a euphemism for practices that we call wildlife trafficking when they target terrestrial species. Marine wildlife trafficking has become a system of industrial ecocide conducted by modern armadas and human trafficking syndicates. Thousands of species are threatened with extinction by fishing, surpassing all other threats to marine life. Up to a quarter of the global fishing fleet has enslaved workers on its decks. Millions of people whose subsistence relies on fishing are threatened with starvation by industrial marine life extraction. The animal liberation and conservation movements absolutely must ally with these people to succeed. They are the human voices of these ecosystems. We are not strong enough without them. We must not allow apologists for industries that commit genocide against Indigenous peoples to posture as their allies against the animal rights movement.

DF: You criticize biotechnology and specifically genetically modified organisms. As a scientist and socialist, what is your take on these technologies? What is your position on lab-grown meat?

SR: It's not genetic engineering technology itself that we should be concerned with, but rather how it's used. As far as we understand, GE does not have inherent side-effects, but it could have potential for purposes like fortification, adaptation, and even albedo engineering using reflective trichomes. However, what it's overwhelmingly used for today is selling pesticide. Whether it's programming plants to build pesticidal proteins or imbuing them with herbicide resistance so fields can be sprayed indiscriminately, major agrochemical giants like Bayer and Dupont are as much chemical manufacturers as they are agricultural producers (if not more). They're also extremely socially and politically organized, with lobbyists essentially running the EPA, ghost-writers publishing articles and legislation, and even lawyers using GE as a pretext to patent and privatize genetic material itself. I'm not religious, but that strikes me as blasphemy.

Cellular agriculture has enormous potential to feed more people using less resources. Popular discourse is extremely polarized around the question of lab meat without even realizing how deeply this technology has already disrupted the production of things like medicine, dairy, and ironically, animal feed. It can also be used to make things like palm oil, which could have a remarkably positive global environmental and climate impact. My biggest concern with cellular agriculture is that we've almost entirely neglected to fund it, essentially surrendering the development trajectory of this technology to the private sector. As with any technology, if we want to develop it quickly and use it

for public good, we have to invest public funds in research and development.

DF: How long have you been a vegan, and how does your diet relate to your overall politics?

SR: I've been vegan for around five years now, was vegetarian for five before that. I see it as a reflection of my political beliefs rather than the other way around—same thing with science. Sometimes people accuse me of selectively interpreting the science because I'm vegan. It's the opposite. I began to stop eating animals when I began to study the science.