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Robert Long Foreman

The Road to Leeks and Pears

In the last few chapters of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, a study of the British working-class, George Orwell offers a defense of Socialism which, he admits, is in fact an attack on Socialists. He writes, “One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words ‘Socialism’ and ‘Communism’ draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, ‘Nature Cure’ quack, pacifist and feminist in England.” Lest the fruit-juice drinkers be mistaken for those who are, innocently, fond of the contents of an orange, he goes on:

I have here a prospectus from another summer school which states its terms per week and then asks me to say ‘whether my diet is ordinary or vegetarian.’ They take it for granted, you see, that it is necessary to ask this question. This kind of thing is by itself sufficient to alienate plenty of decent people. (174)

Incidentally, this morning I filled out a sheet of paper that asked if I would prefer, at a dinner function, to eat a meal of meat or vegetables. I opted for the latter. The question did not come from a Socialist organization, or even a moderately liberal one, so it is clear that refusal to consume dead animals has become, despite Orwell, acceptable to non-Socialists since *Wigan Pier*’s publication in 1937.

Even before then, despite what Orwell would have us believe, a vegetable diet was not confined to fringe Socialists. In the 1915 novel *Herland*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman portrays a utopian society governed exclusively by vegetarian women. J. S. Bach, as Stanley Godman mentioned in a letter to the editor of *The Musical Times* in 1955, “almost certainly ate sausages,” but Richard Wagner, a vegetarian, did not. The International Vegetarian Union lists among its famous politicians Sir Thomas More and Thomas Paine—though Paine wasn’t really a politician.

In a press release from November 1, 2000, the Vegetarian Society in England announced it had approved a brand of imitation caviar; it states, “for the first time, vegetarians will have the opportunity to try a luxury product that has the appearance, taste and smell of Beluga Caviar.” The release then states that “The Vegetarian Society created the word vegetarian from the

Latin '*vegetus*' meaning 'lively' (which is how these early vegetarians claimed their diet made them feel) in 1847 and it has always excluded fish and fish products such as caviar." I cannot determine if this is a joke. I have always assumed the word "vegetarian" came from the word "vegetables," and so has the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It also claims that the word was in use before the Society was founded, and it is at moments like these that I'm glad not to be a member of a vegetarian league, not only because of their apparent capacity for weird and pointless disinformation, but also because I am sometimes guilty of eating fish or of watching someone cook fish on television and thinking it might be nice to try some. The Society, apparently, forbids this.

The Society would not have approved of my actions if its executive board could have seen me eat salmon when I visited my parents at Christmas, and they would not likely understand if I explained to them that I ate the salmon merely to make my mother happy, as she is convinced that I love salmon when in fact it makes my face itch after I eat it and tastes to me too close to something that would walk on land.

I do not share Orwell's distaste for vegetarians, but while he preferred Socialism to Socialists, I prefer vegetarians to vegetarianism; they are more forgiving, they admit their occasional cravings for shrimp, and none of the herbivores I know have websites that establish rigid guidelines for a dietary preference that feel more or less arbitrary to me, when I have enough trouble keeping my stomach clear of soups and other dishes that contain chicken broth.