The political dimension of consuming animal products in education: An analysis of upper-secondary student responses when school lunch turns green and vegan

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ABSTRACT
Addressing the consumption of animals as an educative and environmentally crucial question, this paper empirically examines the meaning of meat and animal consumption for learners in school settings. This study is based on focus groups with Swedish upper secondary students and is centred around their responses to a vegan month at their school as an initiative to emphasise the environmental consequences caused by human consumption of animal products. In order to make sense of the students’ responses in light of the disruption of animal products in the school restaurant, the school initiative is analysed as a dislocatory intervention. The analysis shows that ‘eating environmentally’ in education caused conflictual responses closely connected to political and gendered aspects of animal consumption. In conclusion, the author argues that a neutral or un-political position is not possible when animal consumption is on the educational table, and moreover, that there is a need to take political–conflictual responses seriously within education.

Introduction
While schools and educational settings are considered important environmental and political arenas in which discussions about environmental issues and sustainable living occur (Gough and Scott 2008; Huckle and Wals 2015), the consumption of animals1 in educational settings has traditionally been an overlooked environmental and political matter. Recognising school lunch as one of the least critiqued aspects of schooling, even as a ‘... mere accident to the so-called real learning that takes place in the classroom’, Rowe and Rocha (2015, 483) emphasise the biological, ecological and political bonds between human and nonhuman animals by describing the process of breeding, slaying and consuming animals for school food. Consequently, they enter the conversation on how human and nonhuman life connects in educative contexts (cf. Kahn 2010, 2011). As real-life encounters between human and nonhuman animals are not common in education or educational curricula, one way to encounter nonhumans in schools would be to meet them where they are—on the plate (Wright-Maley 2011; cf. Bruckner and Kowasch 2019). From an international perspective, the existence of school food programmes or free school lunches (free for all or based on income/age) differs markedly depending on the school system
in different countries (cf. Oostindjer et al. 2017). Sweden, Finland and Estonia (Persson Osowski 2012) are the only countries that offer free school lunches for all students in primary school, regardless of their caregivers’ income (Persson Osowski, Göranzon, and Fjellström 2010). The Swedish school food system is also unique since Swedish schools by law are obliged to serve ‘nutritious food’ (Education act 2010:800, ch.10; 10§). However other aspects of school food, such as teaching sustainability or cultural aspects are not mentioned by Swedish law (Oostindjer et al. 2017). Although Swedish upper secondary schools are not obliged by law to serve school food (this is decided by the commune/region or by the school board when it comes to a private school), most such schools offer free school lunches (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011).

**Main objective and structure of this study**

While there is a growing body of research that (often) theoretically highlights the nutritional, environmental, political and ethical dimensions of consuming animal products in school settings, there is a lack of empirical research connecting the eating of nonhuman others with ‘the subjective meaning and impact of… [different] pedagogic interventions for learners’ (Spannring and Grušovnik 2019, 7). The overall purpose of this paper is therefore to provide an explorative–empirical contribution regarding the meaning of meat and animal consumption for learners in school settings. Two research questions are asked 1) How is meaning with respect to meat and animal consumption collectively formed by upper secondary students? and 2) How are subject positions collectively formed by upper secondary students when the consumption of meat and animal products are disrupted? To do this, the paper uses an empirical starting point of an upper secondary schools initiative to only serve vegan food for one month to highlight the environmental consequences caused by human consumption of animal products. The study is based on thirteen focus groups and one single interview with upper secondary students (ages 16–18 years).

Viewing the school initiative as a dislocatory intervention (Howarth 2013; Laclau 1990) with the potential to disrupt and disturb ‘eating as usual’, this paper underlines the educational–pedagogical potential of allowing students to face authentic, already-present, real-life dilemmas of consuming animals in educational settings.

The paper is organised as follows. Section I presents a selection of previous studies, focusing on various perspectives on the question of animal consumption. First, a body of research on animal consumption in educational settings is presented. Then, the way researchers in environmental sustainability education (ESE) have approached the animal as the ‘edible other’ is examined. Next, descriptions of the study materials, method and methodological framework are provided.

In Section II the result is presented as four conflictual dimensions of animal/animal product consumption, and the analysis reveals that students exhibited political (gendered) responses in relation to the vegan month as a dislocatory intervention. In the concluding discussion, and in light of the empirical analysis, I argue that ESE needs to address and seriously consider the consumption of animals and livestock production as a relevant and highly political issue in education, as a neutral or non-political way of consuming animals is not possible.

**Moving from nutritional to environmental, ethical and political dimensions of school food and animal consumption**

There is a considerable amount of research that emphasises the health and nutritional aspects of school food. School food research, commonly within US or UK contexts, is related to questions about ‘public health’ (de Sa and Lock 2008), ‘(child) obesity prevention’ (Story, Nanny, and Schwartz 2009; Nestle 2013) or the improvement of school performance (Grantham-McGregor 2005)². However, when the nutritional aspects of school food are the sole focus, there is a risk of
downplaying the environmental and political dimensions; such as questions regarding how the consumption of animal bodies/products affects environmental degradation (Weaver-Hightower 2011; Rice and Rud 2018; Rice 2013, 2017) and the life-and-death consequences for animals (Kahn 2010; Pedersen 2009). Researchers have also shown that when teachers educate students about food from a nutritional perspective they (often unintentionally) re-produce ideas of ‘acceptable’ or ‘unacceptable’ bodies (Leahy and Wright 2016; Pike and Kelly 2014; Russell and Semenko 2016). Collaborating with posthuman–pragmatist perspectives, Rowe (2016, 40) asserts that most of us, over a long time of years have established deep-seated patterns in the body that endorse the habit of meat eating. When meat eating is encoded and materialized in somatic norms, bodily habits get taken for granted and therefore escape critical consciousness.

According to Weaver-Hightower (2011), this can be regarded as problematic since ‘schools teach children – explicitly or implicitly – to ignore, accept or resist these environmental and speciesist realities’ (18; cf. Rice 2013, 2017). While there is an increasing interest in addressing the environmental and political dimensions of school food and animal product consumption, empirical studies on how schools work with and how students experience democratic aspects of consuming animal products have received little attention. Empirically, the consumption of animals/animal products in education has been addressed within the scope of critical education, such as in critical animal studies (CAS) (Corman and Vandrovcová 2014; Pedersen 2009), critical food literacy (Bohm et al. 2015) and critical food system education (CFSE) (Guthman 2008; Harper 2010). Pedersen (2009, 101) analyses schools’ regulation of food habits from a Foucauldian perspective, illustrating that eating habits are effects of power that produce rituals of truths. Based on classroom discussions concerning vegetarian or vegan diets within an upper secondary animal caretaker programme, Pedersen’s study shows that the dominant discourse is focused on the presumed health and nutritional deficiencies of these meat-free diets. Similarly, Bohm et al. (2015) show that students in home and consumer studies consider meat to be nutritionally indispensable, while the absence of meat is associated with a risk of nutritional deficiencies.

The consumption of animals in educational settings: A gap in the ESE research

While the scholarly attention given to human–animal relations has increased (see Lloro-Bidart and Banschbach (2019) and Spanning’s (2016) overview of human–animal relations in environmental education), the consumption of animals in educational settings has been a neglected topic in ESE research. However, there are some recent exceptions. Lloro-Bidart (2017) presents an intersectional perspective connecting ‘critical animal studies’, ‘critical food system education’ and ‘critical food studies’, showing that systematic oppression in food systems is often linked with animal, environmental and social concerns. By merging these fields, the author suggests an interspecies food justice pedagogy approach to guide environmental educators. The framing of educational content that addresses meat consumption/industrial agriculture has a crucial effect on how students engage with the topic. Darst and Dawson (2019, 228) have shown that, when the morality of meat consumption is outlined in terms of animal suffering and exploitation (even when it is not addressed from a moral perspective), the ‘meat paradox’ becomes visible, and communication becomes more polarised, with students ‘looking as if they were victims of a personal attack’. In EER, educators have elaborated educational approaches that, in different ways, distance themselves from moralising when considering meat consumption (Bruckner and Kowasch 2019; Lindgren and Öhman 2019) or human–animal relations (Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo 2017), although some authors seek to reclaim or restore moralising in human–animal education (Kopnina and Cherniak 2015; Pedersen 2019). Other researchers have connected ethical and/or moral dimensions with political dimensions when teaching about meat/animal consumption by allowing students to engage with graphic content related to food animals and
dissection; for example, through Russel’s (2019) use of graphic content as a ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ (Boler 1999) or allowing students in a critical food studies course to ‘meet their meat’ (Lloro-Bidart 2018, cf. 2017) in agricultural operations that allow visitors (cf. Corman 2017). In this way, education can challenge students to see the life and death of the animals that we eat to illuminate the (often) un-political ‘objectified, commodified and obscured’ animal, which is neatly wrapped in cellophane and plastic (Rowe 2011, 16) Starting from their own teaching experiences with meat consumption in an educational science bachelor seminar, Spannring and Grusovnik (2019) apply transformative learning theory (cf. Mezirow 2000). Stressing that meat consumption is still widely viewed as a private affair outside the domain of politics or education, the seminar examined the ‘social, ecological and ethical consequences of industrialized meat production’ (2018, 4). During the seminar, students struggled with strong emotions of shame and guilt, as their meat-rich diets were related to animal and environmental degradation, and meat consumption was displayed not ‘only [as] an individual problem but also a collective responsibility and matter of social and political action’ (2018, 5). Bruckner and Kwasch (2019) brought the concept of food geography to the ESE field through an empirical investigation of how meat and meat consumption is addressed in geography education in Austria and Germany. Their empirical data consisted of curricula analyses (eight curricula in geography/economics), a large-scale questionnaire and qualitative interviews involving students (ages 10–18), teachers and meat-producing farmers from ‘educational farms’ (farms open for school study visits). A key finding was that meat production and consumption were neglected in the curricula, and the ‘[I]nterviews with secondary school teachers and students indicate that ESE ignores the interpersonal, relational and more-than-human elements of food systems’ (1). Meanwhile, questions concerning meat consumption and animal welfare were ranked as vital components of sustainability by the students. From a more theoretical and concept-driven perspective, Lindgren and Ohman (2019) uses a posthuman-inspired ‘critical pluralist approach’ to address the power relations that are embedded in human–animal relationships. The authors recognise nonhuman agency (both living and dead/killed animals) and suggest a didactical stance of ‘staying in the conflicts’ that encompass the use of non-living animal bodies (e.g., food or dissection). Lindgren and Ohman (2019) proposes an ‘immanent critique’ which encourages a pedagogical shift from animal to human behaviour and the (educational) institutions that have made our appropriation of animals’ possible (cf. Pedersen 2019, 8).

While previous research has shown that there are multiple ways of framing and teaching about animal consumption, this paper contributes to a gap in previous research by presenting an empirical case which seeks to provide a deeper understanding of upper secondary students’ subjective meanings and the impact of an environmental school food intervention.

Material and method

In what follows I describe the Swedish school system, the school context, participant characteristics, data collection and how the analysis was conducted.

The Swedish school system, school context and participant characteristics

During the early 1990s, upper secondary education in Sweden undertook comprehensive market-based reforms. These reforms moved parts of education to more market-based policies which stressed the ‘competition between existing municipality schools and new, publicly funded though privately run schools’ (Erixon Arreman and Holm 2011, 225–6; Pierre and Peters 2000). Today, Swedish upper secondary schools can be distinguished as either ‘public schools’, where the money ‘saved’ by the introduction of student vouchers remains within the municipality, or ‘private/independent schools’, where the schools are entitled to keep and use the profits gained.
The upper secondary school is located in a large urban municipality and has approximately 800 students. It is a profit-driven private school in a high-income district, and since it has a high number of applicants, the average student could, generally speaking, be described as a ‘high-performing student’ with a ‘middle-class background’. Overall, the majority of participants were female (49 females/18 males), which could be explained by the majority of girls in each of the classes I visited. Further, the female students seemed generally more eager to participate in the interviews. One possible reason for this could be that many of the female participants identified/described themselves as either vegans or vegetarians, whereas none of the male participants did so. At the introductory meeting with the school chef, a teacher and the school’s CEO, it became clear that the school initiative started as an idea introduced by the chef. The main reason for this, according to the chef, was to do something for the environment and elucidate the environmental harm caused by the process around meat and animal production.

**Collected data, focus groups and ethical considerations**

This study is primarily based upon focus groups. A motive for choosing focus groups was to study how upper secondary students’ meanings with respect to meat and animal consumption were collectively formed. According to Barbour and Kitzinger (1999, 4), ‘focus groups’ are group discussions which explore different issues and which in different ways involve some collective activity, such as watching a video or debating a specific set of issues. One thing which distinguishes focus groups from group interviews is that the focus group researcher more clearly encourages ‘…research participants to explore issues, identify common problems and suggest potential solutions through sharing and comparing experiences’ (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999, 18). In that way, focus groups can moderate the authority of the researcher, giving participants the possibility to ‘own’ the interview; this can change (or at least flatten) the power dynamics in favour of the participants (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999, 18). This ‘…usually results in richer, deeper understandings of whatever is being studied’ (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2013, 40). In this paper, the ‘focus’ of the group conversations mainly centred around the participants’ responses to and opinions about the school initiative to impose a vegan month. The focus groups also centred around the participants’ opinions about eating ‘climate-friendly’ and ‘ethically’ when it came to the consumption of animals as well as whether animals had been part of their educational experiences.

When creating the interview guide, efforts were made that the questions encouraged the participants to discuss the ‘experiences and events from their own lives and to offer personal reflections about them’ (Magnusson and Marecek 2015, 50). Accordingly, the focus groups took place during the school initiative to capture the students’ responses and reactions in situ. At the beginning of the interviews, I encouraged the participants to talk freely and openly. As moderator, I participated minimally in order to let the participants control the content and take the directions that they found important (Fern 2001, 85). Sometimes I took the role of what Fern (2001, 81) calls a ‘reflective listener’ by expressing summarizing and clarifying responses (e.g.’Do I have it right in saying that you think…’). When it came to group constellations, the participants were allowed to create their own groups. The motive for that was to make the participants more comfortable during the focus groups. The focus groups lasted for about 25–45 min, and were piloted during a period of three weeks. Since the focus groups were conducted during students’ class hours, the length of the focus groups varied, depending on the number of groups/participants and the length of the class. The number of participants in the interviews varied from three to seven in each group, with one exception of a conversation with a single student. The focus groups were audio-recorded and in addition to the recordings, I kept a journal during the conversations, taking notes on different topics and recording expressions and reactions of the
Methodological approach: The school initiative to exclude animal products as a dislocatory intervention

In this study, the school's initiative to exclude animal products is seen as a dislocatory intervention. This perspective allows analysing and making sense of the students' responses in light of the disruption of animal products in the refectory.

The concept dislocatory intervention draws inspiration from the concept ‘moments of dislocation’, which stems from political discourse analysis (Howarth 2013; Laclau 1990). The use of the concept of dislocatory intervention in this paper rests on a poststructuralist understanding of subject positions as located, contingent and constituted in different discursive and material practices (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). It follows a subject positioning himself (e.g. as a student, a feminist, a conservative, a vegan, a meat-eater etc.) in relation to other subjects and in relation to different social practices. Subject positions are, in this sense, not viewed as fixed and essential positions. From an ESE perspective, the concept of ‘dislocatory moments’ has been elaborated by Andersson (2018). While Andersson (2018) uses Laclau's concept of dislocation to capture the ‘small and seemingly insignificant moments that could open up for a change of logic…(650)’, the vegan month initiative is here understood as a dislocatory intervention with the potential to dissolve or disrupt ‘eating as usual’ in educational settings. Following Laclau's (1990) use of the concept, a dislocatory moment occurs in situations where it is not clear how to move on or how to engage in routine educational practices. In the face of such uncertainties, ‘a void’ occurs that could be traumatic and affective since it can deprive a subject of certain beliefs about how things are or ought to be (Andersson 2018, 650). When a guiding principle is lost (here displayed as the loss of meat and animal products), the next step is to examine how subjects ‘fill the void’ by investing in a new principle to ‘close the dislocation’ (cf. Laclau 1990). When subjects experience a loss of something the investment in a new guiding principle can become strongly affective (Howarth 2013). The way that a subject affectively identifies or dis-identifies with the dislocatory intervention (the vegan month) is a central focus for analysis in this study.

The methodological approach were used to analyse the empirical material in the following steps. First, I identified how the ‘dislocation of animal products’ gave rise to affective responses (both objecting and affirming) by the students. This was understood in terms of how students identified or dis-identified with the dislocatory intervention (the vegan month). Second, these responses were connected to how students invest in new guiding principle(s) to make sense of/ fill the voids caused by the exclusion of animal products from the refectory. Lastly, I categorised what the responses consisted of.

Results: Political–conflictual responses to the exclusion of animal products

A key result from the study is that students politicised the practice of consuming animal products but also the plant-based food. In terms of the methodological vocabulary, students invested in a new guiding principle (‘filled the void’, caused by the school initiative) by politicising the practice of eating. The students’ political responses were also displayed as conflictual dimensions of consuming animal products in education. These responses will be presented as four themes,
which display the exclusion of animal products as a (i) political left/right conflict, (ii) gendered political conflict, (iii) embodied political conflict and (iv) conflict about the school’s expected (political) neutrality. Next, I will present examples of how the students handled the dislocatory intervention caused by the vegan month by setting the initiative as various forms of political conflict (i–iv). In doing this, the students often expressed conflictual opinions: affirmative (identified with the school initiative) or objecting (dis-identified with the school initiative).

(i) Excluding animal products as a political left–right conflict

Eating vegan or vegetarian food seemed to be viewed as interconnected with the students or the school’s (presumed) political agenda. In terms of a left–right political spectrum, the school initiative was seen as a leftist statement by a majority of the students. However, some students seemed confused by the fact that eating vegan or vegetarian food was seen as politically to the left and/or that their school might be regarded as a leftist school from the outside. One main reason for this confusion was that the school is a profit-driven private school, which appears to be in conflict with leftist ideals regarding how schools should be organised. With that said, the identification of vegan food as a leftist position was one of the main reasons that it caused such emotional and conflictual responses among the students:

Patrick: Maybe it has something to do with this being kind of a leftist thing to do.

[The rest of the group agrees, making short verbal expressions like ‘yeah’]

Patrick: But it is really strange that you should confuse this with politics

Peter [interrupts Patrick]: But it feels like, that it is very, it is people from green parties and VPK, yeah, people on the left that does these, these kinds of things

Kim [female]: I can see people from other schools that just, that there is an image of this school as a leftist kind of school, however it is…

Carla: … it is like we are out of touch with reality that we are sitting here “in our idealistic world”

Kim: mm, very politically correct, I guess it is what other people say about this school; I don’t know

Patrick: Maybe it is in that way and then people would, like [uses a disparaging voice], ‘no, I am not PC [politically correct], I’m an Economy student, and I’m cool, and I love meat’.

[LAUGHS]

Kim: Yeah, but there was a comment on a debate, when someone ‘tagged’ his friend and then said something like ‘do you see now that the XX-School is a left school’, so I think that for some people, it is important to signal that we are not on the left.

As exemplified by the excerpt, the students expressed how the identification of veganism as a leftist position reinforced the picture of the school as “a leftist kind of school”. Identifying the school as “to the left” appears to be a main reason why some people dis-identified with the vegan initiative. Describing a person who dis-identified with the school decision as someone that have a contempt for political correctness and who “loves meat”, meat and vegan food was made as a political issue by the students.

In another conversation, Henry (female), Emily and Frances also mentioned the connection between eating vegan/vegetarian food and ‘being to the left’ when they were asked if veganism or vegetarianism was something that they discussed with other students. Underlining the high number of conservative students at their school as one potential reason that so many students responded negatively to the school initiative, the following conversation took place:

Henry: But it is like, like an underlying assumption when you say: ‘yeah I’m a vegetarian’, then people…

Emily [continues]: ‘mm, so you are to the left’
Henry: Yes, ‘then I know what you are like’ [LAUGHS]
Moderator: Do you think that it signals that you are to the left?
Henry and Frances: Yeah
Emily: Indeed (emphasising the word)
Frances: … and I think that’s one reason why people are afraid to say or to eat vegetarian; it agrees with that principle

In this excerpt, Emily, Frances and Henry identify vegetarianism as a leftist position, which, due to the high number of conservative students, appears to be an inconvenient position to identify with at their school.

(ii) Excluding animal products as a gendered political conflict

Some students connected the exclusion of animal products to gender and politics. Eating vegan or non-meat alternatives was generally connected with femininity (being a girl/female), which was sometimes also described as more to the left, greener and environmentally friendly. Identifying yourself as a pro-vegan/vegetarian was thus described as a ‘feminine-political action’, which might be a ‘risky position’ to take, especially as a male student. Oskar, who is critical of the school initiative, indicated that the school’s decision to solely serve vegan-based meals appeal to a specific group of students (girls) was as much an ‘ideological’ issue as an ‘environmental’ one:

Oskar: You can really say that this school, and I guess that every gymnasia school have some kind of hallmark students that, roughly speaking, have some kind of opinions and I believe that vegan-based food appeals to this group of students more than anything else had done.

Moderator: Which target group would you say is appealed by this initiative?
Oskar: The target group that the school turns to is especially girls, who probably are interested in civics. There is a majority of students with a civic and aesthetic interest here. This group is perhaps more to the left when it comes to politics, more feminist, green-friendly, and then veganism fits well if you have these kinds of opinions … on the other hand, meat eaters may have a more conservative way of thinking … I believe that this is an ideological question.

In contrast with the conversation between Henry, Emily and Frances – who address the high number of conservative students as a reason for the objecting responses – Oskar proposes that the school initiated the vegan month because of a large group of students who are identified as feminist, green-friendly and to the left.

Moreover, the decision to exclude animal products/eating vegan also appeared to evoke gender stereotypes, disrupting ‘the masculine way of eating’. This is displayed in the excerpt below during a discussion between Henry, Frances and Emily:

Henry: I think that you must have noticed it as well, that it is mostly guys that are EXTREMELY [strong emphasis] negative to this, and they want to resist/revolt against it; it is some kind of macho-mark, that ‘eating meat, is a male thing’ [using a disparaging voice]
Frances: Yeah, really/it is true [with emphasis]
Henry: Vegan is only for ‘PC’ [politically correct] …
Emily: [lowers her voice] … cunts
Henry: … sissies/wimps, sissy boys
Frances: … Yeah, really/it is true …
Henry: … from my experience
Frances: I believe that it is more accepted for girls to be vegan, if a guy is it, then it is really …
Henry [fills in] … then you become an outcast, I guess.

Eating vegan/meat-free meals is seen as an ‘undesired political correctness’ which relates to femininity in a negative way. This is displayed by how the female students speak ironically about how politically correct people are seen as ‘cunts’ or ‘sissies’. Also, identifying yourself as a male vegan appears to be a position which disrupts how you should eat in a masculine manner, with the risk of ‘becoming an outcast’.

(iii) Excluding animal products as an embodied political conflict

The exclusion of animal products made students counteract, and they did so in various ways both before and during the vegan month. They reacted in text, by writing debate articles (both for and against the initiative), which were published online in the local newspaper, and by e-mailing a survey to all pupils in school to see if anyone was against the decision (aiming to mobilise a group against it). The day before the vegan month started, some students hung posters around the school, encouraging students to wear red (the topic of the posters was ‘Red Friday’) to protest the exclusion of animal products. I asked Aurora what the posters looked like:

Aurora: It was like an A4 paper; they were black with red typing

Elsa: … with a protest hand you know

[LAUGHS]

Aurora: A clenched fist …

Bella: I don’t how many that they put up

Elsa: There were some people that were very angry about it, so they just wanted to show their anger, so the posters were a bit aggressive …

Connecting the use of a clinched fist on the posters (recognised as a “protest hand” by Elsa) with the emailed surveys and the written articles in the local newspaper, this illustrates how the vegan initiative led to political and embodied counteracts by the students. Furthermore, describing some people as “very angry about it” (the school decision) and the posters as “a bit aggressive”, the dislocation of animal products appeared to cause affective-emotional responses among the students.

The students also reacted physically in different ways. Some (male) students left the classroom in protest when teachers explained the school initiative. During one of my fieldwork observations in the refectory, I saw students wearing specific clothes as a form of protest. One student (Göran) sat in the chair next to me, and, after some conversation about the school initiative, pulled off his sweater to reveal the t-shirt he wore underneath, which had an illustration of a hot dog. There were also descriptions of students that went for lunch outside the school to have meat, or ‘sneaked in’ meat products to the school. During the interviews, the dislocation of animal products sometimes caused strong affective and physical responses among students. While Thor indicated that he could manage if the school replaced meat with quorn (quorn has meat-like characteristics), Ragnar reacted more emotionally (and physically) to the loss of meat products:

Thor: It could have been okay if they replaced meat with quorn, but we should still have our traditional sauces that we recognise and …

[The group speak simultaneously, raising their voices]: MILK!

Thor: But now you do not really know what you put away/stuff yourself with

Ragnar: [in a raised and upset voice] I mean, I have eaten meat my whole life and now [slams his fist hard on the table], it comes to a stop, it is like, if you had been smoking for twenty years and then [slams his fist again], they are dying!
Jack: [LAUGHS] You know, it has been two days [LAUGHS]

Ragnar: But, you know … it is not like I am … I will survive, but I am trying to explain what is going on, what they do [referring to the school initiative]. Comparing it to cigarettes was maybe an exaggeration, but it is about the whole picture!

Here, the dislocation of meat evokes Ragnar’s deeply seated habit of consuming meat (‘I have eaten meat my whole life’) and results in an emotional embodied reaction, as he slams his fist on the table and compares meat eating to lifelong cigarette smoking.

(iv) Excluding animal products as a conflict about the school’s (political) neutrality

Asked whether they thought that schools (in general) should take a particular position regarding what food is served in the refectory, many students were critical of the decision to exclude animal products. A main reason for this appeared to be the feeling of being forced to eat a specific kind of food. The critical students claimed that what one eats should be a personal decision. Being able to choose what to eat was often referred to as a democratic right. This contrasted with the political viewpoint that the students felt the school had taken. They argued that schools should be as neutral as possible regarding school food. In his interview, Oskar connected veganism to gender and being politically to the left. Therefore, schools should ‘definitely not’ take a stance on what students should eat

Oskar: No, I definitely [do] not think so. I think that a school should be as neutral as possible in every question. Of course, a school can take a stand, saying something like, ‘we want to be environmentally friendly’. But if you think that a school, it does not have to be here, it could be in another city, say that from now on, we support our Swedish farmers and we will only serve Swedish meat or only serve Swedish milk and not import from other countries, then there had been a giant outcry. I guess that this shows the double standards in these questions, that veganism gets a preferential position …

While Oskar felt that schools could take a stand by saying ‘we want to be environmentally friendly’, the decision to exclude animal products goes beyond an environmental concern. There is an ideological aspect, which might explain why Oskar said schools should not take a political stance. Meanwhile, Elsa wondered whether what has been served in the refectory has always been a political question:

Elsa: You know I think that schools should be politically neutral, but at the same time it is good, like a good debate to take, and if one school does this, this initiative will spread.

[The group makes agreeing noises, e.g. ‘um’, ‘mmh’]

Elsa: Yeah, but everything about taking a stand and that … I don’t know, everything is in some way to take a stand, not taking a stand is as well to take a stand … You can think that, to serve oat milk instead of serving regular milk, they [the school] take a standpoint against milk, that it is a political standpoint. But serving milk is also a political standpoint, but you don’t think of it in that way because you are used to it [italics added]. By that I think that different schools have to take a stand … because the other way around is not possible.

Here, Elsa points out that ‘regular milk’ (cow milk) is considered the un-politicised beverage in school because ‘you are used to it’. It is only when something disrupts/dislocates this routine, here the presentation of oat milk, that it is considered political. In another interview, some students discussed the replacement of milk with oat milk, recalling their educational experiences of visiting Arla-farms. When Emma, Eleanor and Maria were asked if questions concerning animals arose in educational settings, the conversation took off:

Emma: I think that Arla has something, it is during the age of six years or something, then everybody has the opportunity to visit an Arla farm and see where the milk comes from … But I guess this is the only time [that they have talked about animals in school, author’s comm.], and then it is Arla which is … you know, a company that sees profit in doing this.
Maria: But it does not feel like the school, or schools are that, [to] teach people or students about...

Eleanor: [interrupts] It is too sensitive/controversial maybe

Maria: Yeah, it is like, then they take a stand in these kinds of questions, and it feels like they are...

Eleanor: [interrupts]... and it has to do with children...

Maria: [continues]... and they want to be more neutral ...

Eleanor: [at the same time as Maria]... and it has to do with animals that suffer, so maybe they avoid to talk about this...

Here, the students discussed that the school is connected to an industry that has an economic interest in selling animal products, which involves ‘animals that suffer’. At the same time, to raise this issue in school is considered controversial, and the way to remain neutral is to avoid discussing it.

Summary

The school initiative to exclude animal products has been analysed as a dislocatory intervention (cf. Howarth 2013; Laclau 1990), where the consumption of meat and animal products in education is dislocated. As the serving/eating of animal products is dislocated, students responded with political (gendered) and often conflictual responses. The school’s decision to only serve vegan-based food was (repeatedly) referred to as a leftist statement, displaying a conflict between left- and right-wing politics. The choice of eating or not eating animal products was connected to the student’s personal political identity, with veganism (and sometimes vegetarianism) indicating being ‘to the left’ and meat eating indicating ‘to the right’. The decision to exclude meat or other animal products was considered a feminist position (often with negative connotations) and further as being politically correct (also with negative connotations). This was described as a risky position for a male student to adopt.

The exclusion of meat led students to take different actions of resistance both before and during the vegan month. Lastly, the school initiative to exclude animal products gave rise to conflictual opinions regarding whether schools should strive to be as neutral as possible and whether such a neutral position had ever been the case in terms of consuming animals in education/school settings.

Discussion: Taking the (political) conflicts of consuming animals into educational practice

While the school in this study did not use the vegan month to specifically educate students about environmental and/or political dimensions of eating animals in education, I will use the empirical result in a pedagogical conversation on how these political gendered conflicts surrounding the question of animal consumption can be put into educational practice.

A key result is that ‘eating environmentally’ in school settings (here by excluding animal products) cannot be separated from political (and gendered) contexts of animal consumption. A conclusion drawn from the interviews is that school food became politicised when the serving of animal products was dislocated. ‘Eating as usual’, which in this case means eating meat or animal products, was rarely described or seen as a political position taken by the school. Therefore, eating animal products was considered as unpolitical or as the neutral position to take, both from a school and personal perspective. However, a few students recognised meat eaters ‘as much likely to be conservative’, and one student realised that the serving of animal products in school settings was a political position schools had already taken. When meat and animal products are at the table for discussions in ESE—and in the
light of the massive environmental impact caused by livestock production (Bailey, Froggatt, and Wellesley 2014, 2)—this issue becomes increasingly difficult to ignore. Thus, educators/or schools find themselves in a situation where a neutral or non-political way of consuming animals (or teaching about it) is not possible. One reason educators might find it hard to navigate sustainability issues concerning animal consumption is that such questions tend to overlap the ‘private’ (individual food preferences) and ‘public’ spheres (how ‘we’ as educators should teach about food as a sustainability issue). When such content is put into educational practice, both the teacher’s and the student’s political subjects can become visible, and in this case conflictual. This might seem like an obstacle to overcome when ‘teaching about food/meat’, but if knowledge and politics are viewed as situated (Haraway 1988; Braidotti 2013; see also Sjögren’s [2017] critique of the politics of disembodied knowledge when teaching in environmental education), educators could stay (and participate) in the conflicts (Lindgren and Öhman 2019; Haraway 2016; Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo 2017) related to the dilemmas of eating environmentally. Moreover, seeing the consumption of animals in education as a real-life (ethical, political and environmental) dilemma with the potential to affect students deeply (Sund and Öhman 2014, 654), the predicament of consuming animals in education is presented as political–conflictual and cannot solely be solved ‘through rational planning or cognitive processes’ (Håkansson, Östman, and Van Poeck 2018; Van Poeck and Vandenabeele 2012). Accordingly, the question of eating environmentally in school settings is not only about finding rational arguments for a meat-free lifestyle but also about how students position themselves (or their school) politically and/or gender–politically. Previous research indicates that the interpersonal politics of meat are gendered (Darst and Dawson 2019; Russell and Semenko 2016), as young women are more likely to decrease their meat consumption and less likely to like meat compared to young men (Pohjolainen et al. 2016; Sanchez-Sabate and Sabaté 2019). Men are more likely to ridicule vegetarians and associate meat with masculinity (Elliot 2014) and less likely to reduce their meat consumption and/or buy local or organic food to reduce their ecological footprint (Elliot 2014; Rothgerber 2013; Ruby et al. 2016). Thus, it seems that the political and gendered identities connected to vegetarian and/or vegan food makes it hard for some people (often males) to identify with plant-based alternatives. There is no easy answer for how educators, when teaching about food, should address and unravel the interconnection between political, gendered and environmental identities, but a first step would be to bring these conflictual positions to the classroom table more openly. During the focus groups, many participants (both those who were positive toward or critical of the school decision) expressed that they wanted to discuss (and in some cases get a better explanation of) the school initiative. The school initiative could therefore be seen as a top-down process, lacking a deliberating process with the students but also any clarified pedagogic intentions. One potential reason could be that the students’ politicising of the school initiative came as a surprise to the school CEO and the school chef who started the initiative. This indicates that the school were not aware of the often conflicting political aspects which are embedded within the consumption of animals.

Emphasising school food as an often-neglected educational issue that entangles political (gendered) and environmental dimensions could be a good way to bridge the local with the global, recognising students’ real-life experiences while addressing major global sustainability issues that affect them deeply. However, discussing, deconstructing or confronting these identities or habits would not automatically lead to behavioural change or a change in students’ negative emotions resulting from the vegan month school initiative. While educators could help students make educated decisions regarding the consumption of animals (Rice 2013), educators are, as emphasised by Spanningring and Grušovnik (2019, 6), ‘participants in complex environments and processes beyond the classroom and can only inspire and support but not impose transformative change’ (cf. Cranton 2006, 135; Linné and Pedersen 2014).
Concluding remarks: Unmasking the practice of ‘eating as usual’ and the need to politicise animal consumption

Previous research has shown that there are multiple ways of framing and teaching about food, or more specifically, about animal consumption. The present paper has contributed to this body of research, providing a deeper understanding of how students make sense of an environmental school intervention by addressing the consumption of animals as political. Furthermore, this paper has contributed by ‘unmasking’ the idea of ‘eating as usual’—in this case, eating animal products—as a neutral or un-political position to take. Rowe (2011) calls this a ‘bodily habit taken for granted and therefore escaping critical consciousness’ (40). Finally, in addition to the main result, I want to emphasise the importance of addressing animal consumption as an urgent socio-political issue and not solely as a question of identity, individual lifestyle or moral choice. Thus, creating educational content aimed at helping students understand and critically examine the cultural and political economic forces behind agricultural businesses (Corman 2017; Lloro-Bidart 2019, 2018; Spannring and Grušovnik 2019) and the role of these companies as tangible actors in educational institutions (Linné and Pedersen 2016) could be useful in politically and critically addressing questions regarding meat and animal consumption in school settings.

Notes

1. Animals are entangled in the causes and effects of environmental problems in numerous ways. The greenhouse gas emissions related to livestock production are predicted to account for over 14.5 per cent of the world’s total emissions (Bailey, Froggatt, and Wellesley 2014). This is more than the emissions produced from powering all of the world’s road vehicles, trains, ships and aircraft combined.

2. The intention is not to downplay research that stresses nutritional aspects of school food or to separate nutritional aspects from environmental or political dimensions. There are researchers who connect nutritional aspects of eating with socio-political dimensions, for example, addressing school food programmes that work to ensure proper nutritional intake for children from low-income households (cf. Bartfeld and Ahn 2011; Stevens and Nelson 2011).

3. In studies concerning the psychology of meat consumption, the term ‘meat paradox’ has been used to describe the psychological conflict between a person’s preference for meat and their moral responses when it comes to animal suffering (Bastian and Loughnan 2017). Since most people who like to eat meat find animal suffering morally unacceptable, the questioning of the negative effects of meat consumption becomes a questioning of that person’s own morality. This could lead to strategies of justifying meat consumption, such as claiming its necessity (Graça, Calheiros, and Oliviera 2015) or denial of its negative effects, such as dismissing cognitive and emotional capacities of livestock animals (Rothgerber 2015) or being skeptical of the link between climate change and livestock agriculture (Macdiarmid, Douglas, and Campbell 2016).

4. In this paper, the use of “meaning” is informed by a pragmatic understanding of meaning-making, discourse and language (cf. Dewey and Bentley 1949/1991; Biesta and Burbules 2003). Viewing a discourse as regularities in the use of language, a discourse describes … ‘patterns of meaning which organize the various symbolic systems human beings inhabit, and which are necessary for us to make sense to each other’ (Parker 1999, 3).

5. The use of the concept dislocatory intervention bears some resemblance to Judith Butler’s (1993) ‘political disidentification’. With political disidentification, Butler points at the necessary failure of gathering under a unifying category (e.g. ‘queer’, or in this case ‘vegan’). Just as the dislocatory intervention could be considered as a traumatic experience for the subject, a political disidentification ‘can [potentially] leave the person with an uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong’ (Butler 1993, 19).

6. Refers to an old name of a Swedish leftist/communist party, ‘left party-communists’ (Vänsterpartiet Kommunisterna).

7. In many places in Sweden, there is a tradition of taking school classes (in first, second and third grade, called Arla Minior) to Arla farms, either to see pasture releases (Arla 2019) or to learn about the milking procedure (Arla Minior 2019). The (often) unproblematised collaboration between Swedish schools and Arla has been under critical examination from a critical animal studies perspective (Linné and Pedersen 2016). Authors have criticised these ‘educational events’ for presenting a romanticised narrative about the happy cow while downplaying both the environmental problems related to dairy production and the (often) harmful conditions that industrialised milking cows are living under.

8. From a Swedish context, this is not the first time that the exclusion of meat in education resulted in a political reaction. In 2010, schools (albeit a few) in Sweden raised awareness of the environmental impacts of livestock industries and meat consumption by introducing ‘meat-free school days’. These meat-free days received public attention and were criticised as political propaganda and retrenchment of the individual democratic right to
choose what to eat (cf. Sjögren 2014). Moreover, negative (re)actions from political organisations (Swedish Young Conservatives (MUF)) and economical-agricultural organisations (Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF) [cf. Thomsen 2014]) were addressed in public newspapers.

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