On Apples and Anarchy

Abstract: In the summer of 1843, eleven reformers in Massachusetts embarked upon a doomed utopian experiment called “Fruitlands.” Their object was to create a perfect society, devoid of the negative influences of capitalism, trade, and government. They planned on doing so through rigorous adherence to strict communal regulations, among which was strict veganism. This article argues that the Fruitlands experiment—though a failure—is instructive because it provides a detailed example of one particular articulation of the tie between veganism and anarchism. Unlike more modern reformers, the Fruitlanders stressed hierarchy (rather than equality) between humans and animals. Rejecting the animal world was crucial for them as they attempted to become perfect beings, eligible for utopia. Fruitlands thus showcases the way that the vegan-anarchic tie has been profoundly different in each of its incarnations, and therefore an illustrative lens into the political and social world of the nineteenth century.

Keywords: vegan, vegetarian, anarchism, Fruitlands, dietary reform, transcendentalism, utopia

Despite the tenacity of the connection between them, there is no inherent similarity between veganism and anarchism. That is, it is possible to give up animal food without radically critiquing human society, and it is possible to challenge capitalist values without abandoning animal products. Many of the key reformers in each area have had no relation to the other. The concepts have often been tied, but not because they are analogous or reliant upon one another. In this sense, the connection between them is fluid, and each activist I have spoken about alters it to suit their own unique understanding of both veganism and anti-capitalism. Singer focuses on defining equality in an age of rampant classism and sexism. Adams refuses to accept the increasing commodification of women’s bodies in consumer culture. And Torres seeks to showcase the immorality he believes is inherent in an industrialized society. While all three express a genuine concern for the welfare of animals, they also use the very concept of the “animal” to better explain their sociopolitical agendas. In this sense, the authors showcase both the resiliency of the vegan-anarchic connection and the flexibility inherent in that connection when both terms are so fluidly employed. They show, in other words, that while the vegan-anarchic connection remains remarkably salient, it has not been immutable. Veganism and anarchism may very well be the best of bedfellows. But the nature of their ideological connection has been far less consistent.
The shifting nature of this ideological tie is an interesting one, and poses a unique question for both the historian and the political activist: Why and how do humans use our relationship with animals as a barometer for our relationship with one another? And how is that connection historically situated?

This is certainly a question history can help us answer. Americans have long embraced a connection—sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit—between food and identity. Because of this, historians have often used dietary advice to better understand American politics. Stephen Nissenbaum’s 1980 Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America, for instance, articulates a connection between Sylvester Graham’s sexual and dietary restrictions and broader understandings of democratic and pro-capitalist thought in American society. In the past several decades, scholars have expanded what Nissenbaum meant by “politics” to include a range of intentions and moments. Kyla Wazana Tompkins, for example, argues that Grahamism was “imperial” in its intent, and examines the effect of Grahamite rhetoric on race and expansion. Similarly, a 2006 volume edited by Elta M. Madden and Martha L. Finch explores the use of dietary prescriptions in utopian experimentation, targeting how diet relates to human religious and social conceptions of “perfection.” And in 2013, Michelle C. Neely showed how Thoreau’s self-prescribed vegetarianism at Walden influenced and impacted his anti-capitalist sentiment.2 Collectively, these authors showcase the fact that dietary prescriptions have always been about more than the foods they prescribe. In her work Dangerous Digestion, E. Melanie DuPuis (2015: 6) calls this phenomenon “ingestive subjectivity,” or the idea that Americans see “both the self and society as a controlled and bounded body.”

It is clear, then, that American dietary politics are American politics. But these works also leave us with a much more confusing and contradictory legacy. That is, they collectively showcase the utter plasticity of the connections we make between food and ourselves. How can vegetarianism simultaneously be pro-capitalist (for Graham) and anti-capitalist (for Thoreau)? How can it simultaneously encourage racial equality (as it did for Angelina and Sarah Grimké) and form the roots of eugenics (as it does for John Harvey Kellogg)? Food may very well be central to our identities. But the meaning we ascribe to it leaves us with a fairly blank template. Particularly when we are speaking of animal food, it seems there is no clear consensus. Not just about what people should and should not eat, but about what those diets mean for humanity in general.

This is why the relationship between veganism and anarchism, in particular, can be so enlightening. This article takes a look at one such instance of that connection, in the form of a small utopian experiment in Massachusetts in the summer of 1843. That year, Bronson and Abigail Alcott made their family the nucleus for a utopian experiment that espoused both veganism and anarchism (though neither, importantly, were known by these terms at the time). Their project emerged out of a complex array of social movements and personal influences: the American and British vegetarian movements, the Transcendentalist thought of New England radical thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the transatlantic stirrings of the nascent anarchist movement. Their experiment was the first articulation that veganism and anarchism shared common roots, and like Singer, Torres, and Adams, it was unique unto itself. This example of the vegan-anarchic connection—so early in its employment and so uniquely situated in nineteenth-century religion and economics—allows us to more deeply interrogate the precise way that veganism and anarchism can be tied. And it shows that that connection can, itself, be as informative of American politics as dietary advice can be.

Situating the Experiment

The terms “vegan” and “anarchic” are, of course, historically contingent. Given that neither was technically in use at the time, my decision to utilize them here bears some explanation. The word “vegan” was not coined until 1944, when it was adopted upon the creation of the United Kingdom’s Vegan Society (Cole 2010: 279). Nonetheless, the vegetarian movement in the United States from which Fruitlands emerged was vegan. Alternately called a “vegetarian,” “frugivorous,” or “farinaceous” diet, the prescriptions of American vegetarianism were varied and complex. But Sylvester Graham’s particular brand of vegetarianism did encourage abstinence from all “flesh food” on the basis that all animal products stimulated the body and therefore the “animal propensities” of man (Nissenbaum 1980: 19). Although other reformers were less strict, the Fruitlanders adopted only the most stringent of vegetarian dictates. The community at Fruitlands gave up flesh meat, eggs, fish, and dairy. They also extended their veganism beyond diet (as many vegans do today) by refusing to use animal labor or animal products (such as leather, whale oil, and wool). Hence, I use the term to indicate a complete abnegation of the animal world in a way that the Fruitlanders would themselves have certainly embraced, had the term existed.

The term “anarchism” did exist in 1843, though only barely. Rob Knowles pinpoints its origin in Prodhoun’s 1840 What Is Property?, in which Prodhoun proclaimed himself an “anarchist” and began to challenge the idea that ownership was either natural or desirable (Knowles 2004: 14). But even in 1840, the invention of the term did not necessarily signify the
beginning of the movement. In his meticulous intellectual history, Knowles also shows how Prodhoun’s thinking emerged directly from that of Charles Fourier (ibid.: 89). Fourier’s concept of communal living was certainly widely known in the United States prior to 1840, and in fact had already inspired dozens of cooperative enterprises that critiqued American economic and political life (Guarnieri 1994: 2). We know the Alcotts were exposed to these ideas because the latter found particular purchase among the New England transcendentalists who formed their closest friends and allies. And if that were not enough, we also know that Bronson Alcott’s personal library at Fruitlands contained numerous works addressing the theory and implementation of Fourierist principles. Their experiment was directly modeled from these ideas, and embraced many of the aspects that would cohere into “anarchist” political thought: a desire to abolish private property, a mistrust of governmental power, and an emphasis on voluntary association. Thus, despite the lack of actual terminology, Fruitlands was uniquely situated in both of these movements at the very moments they emerged.

Because of this, Fruitlands allows us an opportunity to examine the link between veganism and anarchism in a time profoundly different than our own. The early nature of this connection does more than prove its tenacity, though; it showcases how it was directly connected to nineteenth-century understandings of the body and the political self.

Fruitlands evinces this flexibility because its connection between anarchism and veganism is the opposite of what we, in the twentieth century, would expect. We tend to think that vegans eschew meat and dairy out of a respect for animal life. But at Fruitlands, the decision to do so was premised on an utter disregard—or more accurately, downright disgust—both in flesh and in concept. Fruitlanders believed, as did many vegetarians at the time, that abstinence from animal flesh would purify the human soul. In their logic, communal adherence to this principle would create perfectly good human beings, separated from all negative influences and able to behave in the most charitable, giving manner.

This, in turn, served as the premise for their anarchism. Anarchism required, in their minds, the utter perfection of each individual. In a world with perfect humans, property would be unneeded, labor exchanged freely and with good will. They acted accordingly, attempting to “liberate” their property rather than purchasing it, and doing as much as possible without hired labor or unfairly traded goods. Those who could make the right choices (to abstain) were eligible participants for a new, more radical world devoid of property, unfair exchange, governmental regulation, and hierarchy—thus answering the common critique of anarchism regarding whether or not human nature is up to the task. In this sense, Fruitlanders conceived of both the term “vegan” and “anarchy” in profoundly different ways than we typically think about them. To be vegan was to establish a clear hierarchy of being between humans and nonhuman animals. To create a communal utopia required a strict set of rules.

As the Fruitlanders discovered, at once forcefully and depressingly, these definitions would not support broader change. Its members rarely exceeded the mere nine permanent participants, six of whom were under the age of fifteen. It lasted less than a year and failed miserably from a combination of totalitarian leadership and starvation. In this sense, it indicates that the connection they made was logistically impossible to uphold, as well as dubiously sound theoretically. Ultimately, Fruitlands was a failure—but no more than other dietary movements. After all, Graham never succeeded in making a nation of Grahamites, and Kellogg lost the battle to abandon sugary cereal. The value of Fruitlands lives not in its lasting impact, but in the uniqueness of this connection. Therefore, as an intellectual endeavor, Fruitlands is still worthy of examination. The nationalities of its participants, geographic location of its attempt, and temporal bounds (short as they were) situated it uniquely in the budding worlds of global veganism and anarchism. And even though it failed, its failure is precisely what presents such a remarkable opportunity for the examination of the development of both vegan and anarchist principles. Fruitlands shows us with stunning clarity exactly why anarchy cannot be premised on totalitarianism, nor veganism on hierarchy. The very real behavior such a theoretical worldview requires is simply not compatible with either ideal.

The potential for analysis at Fruitlands has not escaped the attentions of historians, and the minute community has drawn historical investigation disproportionate to its size or success. The experiment appeals to historians mainly because it is a moment in which various cultural norms were at stake. Actually, most cultural norms, given that the Transcendentalism from which it emerged (referred to by many simply as the “newness”) derived much of its intellectual and social force from criticizing the status quo. As Richard Francis summed up in his 2010 book on Fruitlands, the community was interesting because “Everything has to be reexamined and redefined...For the Fruitlanders, nothing could be taken for granted” (Francis 2010: 9). And yet most of the scholarly interest in the community has looked at either their political or their dietetic views. Francis’s book situates the community within broader utopian experimentation. Similarly, Anne Rose’s interpretation of the experiment
places it within the context of transcendental social reform, arguing that it proved the incompatibility between transcendental beliefs (particularly the consociate family) and nineteenth-century cultural norms. Only one author has seriously investigated the community in relation to the broader vegetarian movement in the nineteenth century. Adam Shprintzen’s chapter on the subject in The Vegetarian Crusade concludes, and I agree, that the failure of Fruitlands presented a significant blow to vegetarianism as a movement and necessitated a dramatic change in its goals, shifting the movement to more national concerns (Shprintzen 2013: 54).

Fruitlands has been a popular moment of historical study, in part, because it drew its influences from so wide an array of social movements. And yet no scholar has looked seriously at the connection between the anti-capitalist and anti-animal beliefs the community held. This is a serious lack, given that the founders premised their work on precisely that connection. Rigidly enforced dietary rules not only informed daily life at Fruitlands, but were also supposed to serve as the basis for a new social order. Communal living was not about one or the other. It was about both. Charles Lane put it most succinctly when he stated that “Our other domestic habits are at harmony with those of diet.” The connections were so implicit to him that he hardly felt he needed to clarify what, exactly, that meant. We, however, can piece apart that obscure connection. Doing so is, in fact, can be illuminating.

This article argues that Fruitlanders linked diet and anti-capitalist thought through hierarchy rather than equality. Rather than breaking down the distinction between humans and animals in the ways that Singer, Adams, and Torres do, the vegan commune at Fruitlands sought to make that distinction ever clearer by dietary, habitation, and ecological segregation. They saw the human as an unproblematically superior animal, adopting a “live and let live” attitude that removed them from what they believed to be the gross and uncivilized animal world. Government would not be necessary — property, selfish — inequality, irrelevant — power, meaningless — if humans were only somehow better than animals. And in adopting this standpoint, Fruitlands spelled its own failure. Such a strict understanding of what it meant to be “human” actually led to an abundance of those very animal behaviors rather than the abnegation of them.

**Attempting Utopia**

It would take a man who was profoundly disconnected from reality to conceptualize something as broadly oriented — and naively planned — as the Fruitlands experiment. Bronson Alcott fit that bill precisely. A man who lacked any aptitude at feeding his family, Bronson Alcott had tried his hand at a variety of careers and philosophies before he found himself thinking of utopia in 1842. Alcott referred to himself as his own Prometheus: an example, he claimed, to those seeking the good life. His colleagues did not necessarily disagree, but they did consider his “promethean” qualities to border on insanity. Ralph Waldo Emerson admired Alcott’s nature, to be sure; but he was also profoundly irritated with the man throughout most of their friendship. With the utmost charity, he once described him to friends across the Atlantic as a man who “entertained in his spirit all vast and magnificent problems…whatever showed any impatience of custom and limits, any impulse to dare the solution of the total problem of man’s nature” (1909: 177). In this sense, Alcott embodied much of Transcendental thought, and he prided himself on his intolerance of modern society.

Unfortunately, he was also intolerable. Take, for instance, the process through which his family began abstaining from meat. Because Bronson edited his family’s journals, it is difficult to know exactly how the transition occurred. It is likely, though, that Bronson received his first information on vegetarianism from his cousin, William Alcott, who began abstaining from meat in the early 1830s. Once he developed his own commitments, he guilted his family into joining him. On February 5, 1839, he recorded a tense domestic situation with his wife. Abigail sent him to the butcher to buy a piece of meat. Dramatically, he describes the horror he faced in the “abode of skulls,” his term for the meat market. “Cruelty stares at me from the butcher’s face,” he recorded.

I tread amidst carcasses. I am in the presence of the slain. The death-set eyes of beasts peer at me and accuse me of belonging to the race of murderers. Quartered, disemboweled creatures on suspended hooks plead with me. I feel myself dispossessed of the divinity. I am a replenished of grave yards. I prowl, amidst other unclean spirits and voracious demons, for my prey (Alcott 1938: 115).

Bronson came home with the wrong piece of meat. When Abigail expressed her frustration, he read this passage (and more) aloud to her. An argument ensued, and the following ten pages of Abigail’s journal are missing. After 1839, the family’s diet was devoid of meat.

Alcott’s revulsion with meat was certainly virulent, but it also came out of a broader context. By 1839, the United States had experienced several decades of vegetarian activism. American vegetarianism traced its roots back to the emigration of the Bible Christians in 1817 (a tie that would be important when Alcott traveled to England). Sylvester Graham adopted the diet and intertwined it with his understanding of chastity and self-control, making it mainstream (or at least a kind of countercultural mainstream). William Alcott, Bronson’s first cousin, was
the primary author to take those ideas into the medical sphere, arguing for a coherent approach to vegetarianism that intertwined domesticity, health, and moral reform. The ideas of vegetarianism never became the dominant approach to eating in America, but they were nonetheless well circulated and fomenting in America, particularly in Boston and Philadelphia, where the Alcotts respectively lived and had family. Alcott was part of this emerging movement.

These vegetarians were known far more for their incendiary rhetoric than they were their compromising nature. Graham, in particular, was born out of the twin influences of medical reform and the Second Great Awakening, and his treatises on diet read more like a sermon than a cookbook. Indeed, the very terminology vegetarians used to describe meat—flesh, lust, and carnal—fit into the framework of religious abstinence. They were certainly not averse to exhibiting a flair for the dramatic or pointing a finger of accusation; and it is from this rhetorical and emotional world that Alcott emerged. His penchant for disagreement, in fact, ruined the only mild financial success he had.

In the early 1830s, Bronson Alcott ran a school for children in Boston that did well enough to support his family. The “Temple School,” as he called it, was run on the basis of Alcott’s belief that young people were uncorrupted by worldly beliefs and therefore had a far better understanding of moral dictates (including an interpretation of the Bible) than did adults. He published frequently on his experimentations in this regard, writing both Record of a School (1835) and Conversations with Children on the Gospels (1836). The two works circulated among the Boston community, drawing respect from a growing international community of transcendentalists. It was these works that connected him to the transcendentalist community, in fact, and led him to establish a friendship with Ralph Waldo Emerson that would provide both emotional and moral support for the rest of his life. Unfortunately for Alcott, that friendship was equally disastrous and beneficial. When members of the Bostonian elite launched a widespread crusade against the city’s transcendentalist activities, Alcott’s school became an easy target, leading him to lose his students and eventually his income entirely. Not only did the school encourage controversial and individual interpretations of the scriptures, but Alcott even permitted his students to tell him what the Bible meant. Such a reversal of the teacher-pupil relationship would have been unacceptable. Even more damning, Alcott’s Conversations suggested that he had informed his pupils “where babies come from” (Rose 1981: 80).

The loss of the Temple School was a significant moral and financial blow to the Alcott family. Feeling persecuted for his beliefs, Alcott fell into a spiral of depression. He failed to provide financially for his family, disassociated from the transcendentalist community, and largely ceased writing. As Alcott brooded over his loss in the spring of 1842, both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Abigail Alcott became alarmed by his diminished mental state. “He will not long survive this state of things,” Abigail worried. “He experiences at times the most dreadful nervous excitation his mind distorting every act however simple into the most complicated and adverse form. I am terror-stricken at this.”

It was this depression that compelled him to travel to England, where, fortuitously, his educational and dietetic ideas had taken deep root. English vegetarians had been theorizing about the nature of property and the purpose of vegetarianism for several years. Together, the two men...
imagined a community that articulated the connections between vegetarianism and anti-capitalist thought. After formulating a plan to move to America and establish Utopia, they managed to recruit one other English reformer, Charles Wright, to join them.

What they set about to accomplish was radical in a variety of ways. I call it anti-capitalist because Fruitlands was to be an economically different kind of community—one where the land for the venture was not “purchased,” but rather “liberated” from a faulty system of property. The progenitors also desired to live free of problematic trade relationships, favoring self-sustenance over reliance. “Our purposes,” the creators explained, were “to obtain the free use of a spot of land adequate by our own labor to our support,” upon which they would live “independently of foreign aids” and “under a regimen of healthful labor and recreation; with benignity toward all creatures” (Sears 1915: 13–14).

The fact that these economic goals and their health goals were related is a telling note—living outside of a state of property was the main goal, to be accomplished by becoming moral beings and abstaining from flesh.

Despite the fact that the reformers claimed to “not recognize the purchase of land; but its redemption from the debasing state of proprium, or property, to divine uses,” it was difficult to obtain a piece of land without actually purchasing it. In this, they nearly drove Abigail Alcott to frustration before the project actually began. Abigail remained in America during Bronson’s trip, and had only slowly come to accept the proposed experiment after her husband promised to bring Wright along as a teacher. His assurances seem to have pacified Abigail. “My children I am sure must be benefitted,” she wrote in her journal. “If they are, proof then am I not injured.” She invested herself in the experiment enough, in fact, to seek out and mention several available plots of land that she believed she could secure before their return.

The two men, however, pointedly avoided making a commitment. This is likely because they were hesitant to pay for it. Certainly, the Alcotts could not fund the experiment, and the English sojourners were, at least at the moment, unwilling to advance the money. Alcott had typically relied on Ralph Waldo Emerson for financial support, but despite his best efforts to solicit aid, Emerson refused. In an uncharacteristic show of frustration, Emerson (1909: 309) wrote in his journals that he would “sooner collect money for a madman,” criticizing that “This fatal fault in the logic of our friends still appears. Their whole doctrine is spiritual, but they always end with saying, Give us much land and money.”

In fact, the reformers were forced to move into the small house the Alcotts lived in at Concordia prior to embarking on any experiment at all, taxing both the patience and commitment of Abigail, who found so many uncompromising men under her roof to be an exasperating difficulty. As the months passed in the cramped Concordia residence, Abigail placed all her hopes on finding a place to live. “I urge myself on from the consideration that this secures but a state of transition, and that instead of rest I only need a different mode of action,” she wrote, “—and so I wait, or rather plod along rather doggishly—I hope the experiment will not bebreve me of my mind.”

In June of 1843, Charles Lane finally offered to resolve the problem by backing the venture with money he had remaining from his days as a businessman in England. In the end, then, it was he that purchased the plot of land outside Harvard, Massachusetts, that the reformers called “Fruitlands.” A large farm, Fruitlands consisted of at least seventy acres of useable farmland and came with several animals (which, contradictory to their principles, the reformers begrudgingly used for labor the first few weeks they were there). The property was roughly thirty miles from Boston and twelve from Concord, well situated for a community that wanted both rural isolation and urban communication. Charles wrote excitedly to a friend in England that the land consisted of “90 acres, 14 of them wood, a few apple and other fruit trees, plenty of nuts and berries, much of the land very good; the prospect from the highest part very sublime” (Sears 1915: 28). He openly admitted that he had sunk his entire life savings into the venture. But he also greatly appreciated this fact with happiness, as he believed it would remove him permanently from a world of trade. After spending “every farthing” he had on the venture, he informed an old friend that “I think I am now out of the money world. Let my privation be ever so great, I will never make any property claim on this effort. It is an offering to the Eternal Spirit, and I consider that I have no more right than any other person; and I have arranged the title deeds, as well as I could, to meet that end” (ibid.). They called the new land “Fruitlands” in honor of the apple orchards they envisioned creating.

Lane was not alone in his excitement. It may not have been such a harsh transition for Alcott, who was only spottily able to support his own family throughout his tumultuous and patchwork career. But both understood property as a root evil in mankind. “The notion of property is the prolific seed of so many evils that there seems little hope for humanity so long as it is made a leading consideration, or is harbored in the human bosom.” They did their best to live up to their word, although they recognized that actually embarking on a venture would require some compromise on their beliefs and practices. For this reason, they wrote that “Trade, we hope, entirely to avoid at an early day,” instead focusing on supporting themselves. “Such needful articles as we cannot yet raise by our own
hand-labor from the soil, thus redeemed from human ownership,” they added, “we shall endeavor to obtain by friendly exchanges, and, as nearly as possible, without the intervention of money.”

Alcott and Lane’s beliefs regarding property aroused the curiosity of the Boston intellectual community. It was, after all, a movement against authoritarianism and largely in rejection to the world, and this appealed to transcendentalists. One of his admirers, Sophia Dobson, desired such clarification on his stance that she asked him in the fall of 1842, “Do you intend to do altogether without government? Have you no other idea of government but that of an association to protect the rights of property?” The abandonment of property may not be an issue, she explained, but

Surely a central point of action is indispensable. There is a heart to everybody, & surely there should be one to Society—at least so it seems to me. I should like much to know what Mr. Emerson thinks on this subject—I cannot but think that without some such centre of guidance & organization, a community would soon fall to pieces.19

Propertylessness also posed logistical problems, and she challenged him on his plans for finding clothing and the efficacy of a labor system built on self-sustenance. Although Alcott’s response to this inquiry is, unfortunately, missing, we can imagine that he would have been enthusiastic about the concept of a lack of government. He and his consociate Lane had gone through a great deal of trouble to be imprisoned for refusing to pay taxes—remaining there despite the fact that numerous members of the Boston community offered to bail them out (Francis 2010: 121). They seem, in fact, to have sought martyrdom for the anarchist cause even when none was required. Such martyrdom no doubt appealed to Bronson’s sense of the importance of his work. Wholesale rejection of government, of trade, of property, and even of social norms was the backbone of his experiment, and he wanted those ideas to be public.

But Alcott’s correspondent also questioned him on something far more elemental—whether or not people were fundamentally moral enough to “live and work on the principle of Love and not fear.” This was an elemental question at the beginning of Fourierism, and a central problem in utopian experimentation. It was also a question Alcott had taken a great deal of time in previous writings to think through. Were people good enough in society as it was? Certainly not. Based on property, greed, selfishness, and lust, society was not ready for the kind of utopia he wanted to create. It would be with men, rather than with outward circumstances, that the real change in society would occur. “To us it appears not so much that improved circumstances are to meliorate mankind, as that improved men will originate the superior conditions for themselves and others,” he clarified. “Upon the human will, and not upon circumstance, as some philosophers assert, rest the function, power, and duty of generating a better social state. The human beings in whom the Eternal Spirit has ascended from low animal delights of mere humane affections, to a state of spiritual chastity and intuition are in themselves a divine atmosphere, they are superior circumstances” (Lane 1843: 165–20).20

Creating utopia, for him, was not about creating a perfect world. It was about creating perfect humans, who were the backbone of that perfect world.

In order to form this new kind of human, ready for utopia, the reformers instituted a strict set of rules about behavior and moral interactions—the most pressing of which were about diet. Forming a community at Fruitlands was a rejection of the world around him, but also an imperative for forming a better one. Choices about diet, they believed, were at the very center of forming new humans and hence a new world. “Assured that the most potent hindrance to goodness abides in the soul itself,” they wrote, “next in the body; thirdly in the house and family; and, in the fourth degree, only in our neighbors, or in society at large, I have daily found less and less reason to complain of public institutions, or of the dilatoriness of reformers and genetic minds.”21

Instead the only proper thing was to start the project, to adhere to vegan rules and attempt to form a utopia based on perfect human nature. Veganism, in this sense, was not about animals at all. It was about re-creating humans.

The Farm at Fruitlands was so beautiful that it instilled a sense of optimism and opportunity in the reformers. Even Abigail Alcott, who had expressed such frustration at the experiment before, proclaimed to her brother that “The true life ought to be lived here if anywhere on earth.”22 Louisa May Alcott, ten at the time, was so affected by her first sight of their new house that she would remember it fondly in her memoir Transcendental Wild Oats, as she recalled driving up to the “old red house with a hospitable glimmer at its windows” (Sears 1915: 120). This one particular memory is even more striking, given that Louisa May was impressively aware of her mother’s burden and her memoir makes no effort to conceal her bitterness about her (forced) participation at Fruitlands.

Optimism spurred on action, and the community looked like a model of labor-based spiritual development. Abigail estimated that the two men had planted about 500 bushels of potatoes by June 14. For her part, she took comfort in the gender-segregated workplace. “Mr. Lane seems very happy and Mr. A. is in his element fidgets about the dirty house but as that is my element I am quite comfortable in it.”23 Abigail herself was a model of industry, and cleaned and organized the
little house within a week. Although Lane would complain about blistered hands and Alcott would find himself amazed at the amount of labor required, they agreed with other transcendentalists that labor was a key part of spiritual perfection. Thinking themselves properly spiritual, the men both settled into their labor with a kind of martyred resignation. That is, at this point in their spiritual and communal idealism, they relished having their fingers in the soil.

But with the move into Fruitlands came an enforcement of the community’s central tenet: veganism. “The kingdom of peace is entered only through the gates of self-denial and abandonment,” the reformers wrote to The Dial, “and felicity is the best and the reward of obedience to the unwavering law of Love.” Self-denial meant curbing the appetites first and foremost, since the body was seen at the center of the reformative project. “To mould this statue of flesh,” wrote Alcott, “from chaste materials, kneading it into comeliness and strength, this is Promethean; and this we practice, well or ill, in all our thoughts, acts, desires. But specially in the exercise of the appetites.” Perfect behavior was to make perfect bodies, perfect bodies made perfect souls, perfect souls made a perfect community, and the perfect community was the guideline for the perfect world.

Diet was central to the spiritual project at Fruitlands. Even years later, Louisa May Alcott remembered the short vegetarian catchphrases her father always impressed upon the children:

Vegetable diet and sweet repose, Animal food and nightmare.

Pluck your body from the orchard; do not snatch it from the shamble.

Without flesh diet there could be no blood-shedding war (Sears 1915: 120).

The prescribed diet at Fruitlands thus represented a clean break from the animal world. When reformers referred to a “flesh diet,” they meant the gamut of materials produced by animals. “No animal substance, neither flesh, butter, cheese, eggs, nor milk, pollute our tables, or corrupt our bodies.” Lane clarified, “The fields, the orchard, the garden, in their bounteous products of wheat, rye, barley, maize, oats, buckwheat, apples, pears, peaches, plums, cherries, currants, berries, potatoes, peas, beans, beets, carrots, melons and other vines, yield an ample store for human nutrition, without dependence on foreign climes, or the degradations of shipping and trade” (Alcott 1842: 427). Accordingly, the reformers ate only what they could produce (or, failing that, beg from neighbors) without relying on animal materials. They adhered to this diet despite the fact that self-sustenance in New England without a crop to harvest was rather more limited than the world Lane envisioned. The self-denial of Fruitlanders was thus made stricter by circumstance. Louisa May Alcott’s bitter memoir of her time spent at Fruitlands recalls only “Unleavened bread, porridge, and water for breakfast; bread, vegetables, and water for dinner; bread, fruit, and water for supper was the bill of fare ordained by the elders” (Sears 1915: 109).

Like many vegans today, Fruitlanders did not limit their restrictions to food alone. They also wore no clothing made from animals, avoided using animal labor whenever possible, and refused to use manure when fertilizing soil. Instead, they cultivated clover and then turned it back into the soil as fertilizer. Such breaks with the animal world were symbolic, but they were also understood biologically—the animal, in substance or in presence, was to have nothing to do with the new kind of man created at Fruitlands. “This Beast, named Man, has yet most costly tastes,” wrote Alcott, “and must first be transformed into a very man, regenerate in appetite and desire, before the earth shall be restored to fruitfulness, and redeemed from the curse of his cupidity” (Alcott 1842: 426). These regulations were not mere restrictions on diet; they were about differentiating what was “human” about the inhabitants of Fruitlands and what was “bestial” in their natures.

The distinction between the “human” and the “animal” worlds was so important that the children were often forced to sit through extensive lectures on the subject. They were even required to write on the subject. When assigned an essay on animal life, twelve-year-old Anna Alcott summed up the goals of the community quite succinctly. “We enjoy the beautiful sights and thoughts God has given us in peace,” she writes. “Why not let them [animals] do the same? We have souls to feel and think with, and as they have not the same power of thinking, they should be allowed to live in peace and not made to labor so hard and be beaten so much” (Sears 1915: 88–89). Simply put from a child’s perspective: we should let well enough alone.

But they were also taught that humans were fundamentally better than animals. To be human was to have a soul. To be animal was to lack one. The human conscience dictated that the Fruitlanders were sympathetic to animals, inasmuch as they refused to eat them. In a lesson Louisa May Alcott remembered, Lane asked the children what “man” was, and they responded accordingly. “A human being,” wrote Louisa, “an animal with a mind; a creature; a body; a soul and a mind” (Sears 1915: 109). All members—even adults—were consistently reminded of the subjugation of bodily desires to the transformation of the soul. Alcott himself taught a lecture on July second which every member of the community was asked to attend. “Mr. Alcott most beautifully and forcibly illustrated on the blackboard the sacrifices and utter subjection of the body to the soul,” Abigail wrote, “showing the cross on which
the lusts of the flesh are to be sacrificed.”\textsuperscript{25} Reminding his charges that the body was sacrificed so the soul could be purified, Alcott led the charge in devout abstemiousness.

### Failure at Fruitlands

Despite such careful cultivation, Fruitlands was ultimately a failure. This was in no small part due to the fact that the “community” rarely exceeded the Lane and Alcott families. Lane himself accurately predicted the problem when he proclaimed that “Mr. Alcott makes such high requirements of all persons that few are likely to stay, even of his own family, unless he can become more tolerant of defect,” he lamented, “He is an artist in human character requiring every painter to be a Michael Angelo” (Sears 1915: 117). The prescriptions laid down for community members were meant to liberate the human soul from its carnal captivity; but in practice, this “liberation” looked a lot more like totalitarianism.

This is reflected in the participants at Fruitlands, which (to the poor fortune of Abigail) functioned more like a hotel than a utopia. Henry Wright, who had come from England to be part of the organization, had left in December under a storm of disagreements over Alcott’s overbearing control and his own dietary needs (Wright preferred milk with his oatmeal). Amidst great controversy, he instead took up residence with his new paramour, Mary Gove (later Mary Gove Nichols, an esteemed reformer in her own right). Others either left or were asked to leave (the line between voluntary and involuntary expulsion seems to have been rather thin) for similar reasons. Although the community housed off and on more than eleven other ancillary characters, they all left in a matter of weeks for small infractions on the vegan agenda. Anne Page, for instance (a great comfort to Abigail Alcott as the only other woman at the Boston community over whether or not she was a Michael Angelo) (Sears 1915: 117). The prescriptions laid down for community members were meant to liberate the human soul from its carnal captivity; but in practice, this “liberation” looked a lot more like totalitarianism.

But money problems also plagued the community. Although it seemed they had solved the issue of finding land when Lane offered to pay for the venture, the problem of finances continued because they needed to pay rent and the crops on the property were insufficient. Lane wrote to Oldham, “I hoped I had done with pecuniary affairs, but it seems I am not to be let off. The crops, I believe, will not discharge all the obligations they were expected to liquidate, and against going further into debt I am most determinately settled” (Sears 1915: 120). Creditors claiming small sums continued to come to the house and harass Abigail Alcott, whose husband was frequently away on lecture tours. These issues reached a head when Samuel May refused to pay the debt on the location, frustrated with Bronson Alcott’s inability to actually feed himself or his family.

His frustration was warranted. It seems that turning clover back into the earth for fertilizer was not nearly as productive as using manure, or at least, their inconsistent methods of planting did not procure the kinds of crops they needed to survive. Fruitlands required a significant amount of labor—particularly because things had to be planted more than once when you worked seedlings back into the earth for fertilizer. Although such labor enchanted the men in the first few weeks of the experiment, they quickly tired of it. Suddenly deeming it more prudent to lecture and write than to labor in the fields, both Alcott and Lane spent more time at Fruitlands writing than they did working. They were also prone to take long absences to engage the intellectual community of Boston and the surrounding areas (even going as far as New York on one trip).

More often, they expected Abigail would take care of the work that needed to be done. Both Bronson Alcott and Lane showed a distinct disregard (or at least misunderstanding) of the amount of work Abigail actually performed. She felt, at times, close to losing her mind with the stress of maintaining her home, her children, and the rotating bands of guests that Fruitlands housed. “I hope,” she wrote desperately, “the experiment will not bereave me of my mind.”\textsuperscript{26} Their intrusion onto her home life and the enjoyments of her children was no small matter either. Given that Lane (and Bronson Alcott to an extent) desired to practice an emotionally restrictive kind of lifestyle, she felt her “rights as a woman and a mother” had been violated.\textsuperscript{27} Conversations plagued the Boston community over whether or not “family” and “consociate life” were compatible, but the issue was not an ideological one to a family on the verge of collapse.

Gender differences threatened the community so greatly that Abigail, typically reserved in her account of the experiment, wrote bitterly on the circumstances of vegan womanhood: “Miss Page made a good remark and true as good,” she wrote, “that a woman may live a whole life of sacrifice and at her death meekly says I die a woman—a man passes a few years in experiments on self-denial and simple life and he says ‘behold a God.’”\textsuperscript{28} A fair resentment against the philosophers who had taken her labor for granted in a utopian project they described as their own.

It is not surprising, then, that Fruitlands failed. In addition to tensions over the meaning of the family, more pressing logistical concerns plagued them. Veganism, it turned out, did not create healthy bodies (at least, not with the pitiful variety of food Fruitlanders scavenged up). Bronson Alcott nearly died of fever, forcing Abigail to resort to more traditional medicines (rum and camphor) that their ideology strictly forbade. Louisa May Alcott suffered “a dreadful
cough-pain in her side and headache,” and was joined in her illness by William Lane. Abigail herself suffered from chronic dental and eyesight problems, remarking that the central problem was that the diet allowed her was “obviously not eno” diversified, having been almost exclusively coarse bread and water,” since apples hurt her teeth and she had little else to supplement her diet.29

It appeared that the ultimate diet, designed for both bodily and spiritual perfection, was creating bodies that were sick, tired, and agitated. The Fruitlanders did not find equality in labor. They had not found health in abstention. And they had not found harmony in communal living. The equation they had set up between abstention, health, and happiness simply could not hold. In fact, they quickly realized that their community was founded upon a deep paradox: perfect beings could live in harmony, but producing those perfect beings was inherently an inharmonious task. As a result, the community dissolved at Christmastime.

The connection Fruitlands reformers made between veganism and anarchism was not tenable. But it is nonetheless instructive. Unlike more modern vegetarians, their vegetarism was based in rejection and hierarchy. They were not afraid that animals were slaves to humans. Actually, quite the opposite. “So long as cattle are used in agriculture,” claimed Lane, “it is very evident that man will remain a slave, whether he be proprietor or hireling.” Men took care of animals in domestication so much, he argued, that women were kept in “the servitudes of the dairy and the flesh-pots.”30 The reformers connected veganism and anarchism; but they flipped the inherent problem that modern reformers see in eating fleshmeat.

For historians, Fruitlands showcases the persistent ability of humans to rely on hierarchy; even when their goals supposedly seek to abolish it. Animals were nothing more to the Fruitlanders than a barometer for human engagement. The Fruitlanders certainly did have radical ideas about economics and communal living; but they exude an almost desperate plea to determine “humanity” as meaning something more than bestial. They were unable to define that without relying on the counterpart of the bestial, even as they became it. A reaffirmation of this boundary was less a necessary one for utopia than it was a necessary one for the nineteenth century. In an age of religious revival, women’s activism, and anti-slavery, the very meaning of what it meant to be “human” was very much in question. Fruitlands exhibits less a desire to showcase radical equality than it does a desire to draw, with clarity, finality, and proof, a hierarchy that could accommodate this change by separating the “animal” from the “human.” Only through this complete rejection could humans become something else—somehow better—and cope with the demands of a changing world.

But of course, they could not. While their goals may have been admirable, their personal identities were far too wrapped up in their own social and cultural milieu to be self-critical enough to make utopia work. Of the reformers, only Abigail seemed to understand that personal relations were also crucial to maintaining the lasting harmony and success of the community. When the male reformers she supported were unable (or unwilling) to see that—and she saw her husband and her children suffer for that blindness—she lost patience. Bronson and Charles Lane may have wanted to rid themselves of animal influences. But they certainly found no inconsistencies in treating Abigail like a workhorse.

Fruitlands shows, then, that anarchism and veganism cannot be tied through hierarchy. Perhaps this is a redundant lesson; after all, later works emphasizing that tie do so in the name of radical equality, not hierarchy. Yet it also encourages us to remember that hierarchy is not merely theoretical. Real, radical change depends on our ability to carefully examine our interpersonal relationships alongside our theoretical ones. Without this examination, broad scale reform (anarchic or vegan) is relatively meaningless. It was an interesting theory. But the “divine lotus eaters” that attempted utopia at Fruitlands could hardly find it through theory alone.31 Finding meaningful and lasting political critique through diet would take more than a few “promethean” men.

Food and food politics may take us there. Ralph Waldo Emerson and the observers of Fruitlands, though, pessimistically concluded that it would not. In a very characteristic moment of intellectual snarkiness, Emerson mused, “O, worthy Mr. Graham, poet of bran-bread and pumpkins, there is a limit to the revolutions of a pumpkin, project it along the ground with what force soever. It is not a winged orb like the Egyptian symbol of dominion, but an unfeathered, rigid, yellow pumpkin, and will quickly come to a standstill” (Emerson 1909: 102). Perhaps this may have been true for the Fruitlanders—but if we can more fully (and more morally) understand the link between ourselves and our food, then perhaps not.

Acknowledgments

This article evolved from a conference presentation at the 2018 American Historical Association, which I delivered as part of a panel on “The Body Politic.” I would like to thank the chair of that panel, Joyce E. Chaplin, for her insightful comments. I am indebted to my co-panelists, Paul Michael Warden and Johnathan D. Riddle, as well. At various points,
Lori D. Ginzberg and Anne Rose also provided helpful assistance in framing these ideas. This paper has also benefited from the assistance of the staff at the Houghton Library and the excellent advice of the reviewers at Gastronomica.

NOTES

2. These include Hugh Doherty, False Association and its remedy; or, a critical introduction to the Late Charles Fourier’s Theory... (London: 1841); and Abel Transon, Charles Fourier’s Theory of Attractive Industry, to which is prefixed, a memoir of Fourier by Hugh Doherty (London: 1841). The Houghton Library at Harvard has collected the personal books of Amos Bronson Alcott. Some of those books are explicitly marked as part of the “Fruitlands collection,” meaning that they were present at Fruitlands during the utopian experiment. The finding aid for this collection can be found at https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/24/resources/2718.

3. It is also likely appealing for many scholars because of the presence of Louisa May Alcott. Although she was only a child at the time, the poverty and interpersonal discord her family experienced no doubt had a significant impact on her later work.


5. Lane’s “Consociate Family Life” was written, and likely published, in 1843. Different historians have referred to various versions of Lane’s work. Anne Rose claims that it was published through The Dial in 1843, Francis claims it was published in The New Age (it may very well have been both). I myself encountered the article as a published work that had been cut-and-pasted into Abigail Alcott’s diary, housed in the Houghton Library. It was thus devoid of publisher’s context or note. For the purposes of this work, therefore, I refer to Abigail Alcott’s Diary in the Houghton Library.

6. For a history of the Bible Christian Church, see Metcalfe 1872; Maintenance Committee of the Bible Christian Church 1922.


8. This is yet another nickname for the Fruitlanders, both affectionately and mockingly bestowed upon them by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his journals (Emerson 1909: 386).

REFERENCES


