Vegetarianism and the Rhetoric of Masculinity in Britain and the United States, 1890-1910

Gary K. Jarvis, University of Iowa, 2008

On October 16, 1899, the Denver-based lightweight William "Kid" Parker defeated local favorite "Chicago" Jack Daly in a boxing match at the Park Theater in Chicago. It was Parker's Windy City debut, and after shrugging off an early cut to his eye the young fighter pounded Daly hard enough that the referee ended the bout and awarded Parker a fourth-round victory by TKO. An article in the Tribune the following morning praised Parker – a fighter who had "cut a wide swath" through Denver's rough and tumble professional boxing circuit – as a potential "candidate for championship honors," and Parker indeed went on to amass six more victories (and fight to two draws) before an eighteen-match undefeated streak was snapped the following June.¹

A few months after the Tribune's fight coverage Parker was prominently featured in another local publication – the April 15th, 1900 issue of The Vegetarian and Our Fellow Creatures, the combined journal of the American Vegetarian Society and its local branch, the Chicago Vegetarian Society. In the lead article, "The Conversion of a Noted Pugilist," Parker described how he had adopted a vegetarian diet the previous summer following a trip to England. After observing that many of the "strongest and most rugged" members of Britain's working class ate no meat out of sheer economic necessity, Parker became intrigued by the connections between diet and physical strength. He gradually reduced his intake of meat and eventually became a "strict vegetarian," which he claimed made him "a better man in every way – physically, mentally, and morally." Opposite the article was a photograph of a handsome and youthful-looking Parker, his hair neatly parted and his muscular arms folded over his bare chest.² The young fighter most likely did not consider his diet to be anything more than a personal choice, an attempt to gain an edge on his opponents. Yet the conspicuous placement of a sporting figure like Kid Parker in a national vegetarian publication speaks volumes about the ways in which issues of gender factored into the language and literature of the vegetarian movement then growing in the United States and Britain.


²”Kid” Parker, ”The Conversion of a Noted Pugilist,” The Vegetarian and Our Fellow Creatures 6 (April 15, 1902), pp. 146-147.
and how distinctly fin-de-siècle constructions of what it meant to be a man influenced the arguments and rhetoric employed by vegetarian reformers.

Historian Gail Bederman has shown how constructions of gender interacted with contemporary understandings of race and definitions of "civilization" in American culture during this period, arguing that "by 1890 a number of social, economic, and cultural changes were converging" in a way that strongly influenced "middle-class views of men's bodies, men's identities, and men's access to power." Pointing out that very different definitions were attached to words like "masculinity" and "manliness" a century ago, she explains that the former described attributes believed to be inherently male (like aggressiveness and the desire for power), while the latter expressed the worthy moral attributes to which middle class men should want to aspire (such as fairness, restraint, and sportsmanship). Moreover, since these qualities were entwined with cultural assumptions about class and race, Bederman also suggests that it was the characteristics of "masculinity" that informed the line separating all men (regardless of race or class) from their female counterparts, while it was the defining elements of "manliness" that separated white, middle-class men from other men.

Perhaps more importantly, though, Bederman argues that these various conceptions of race, gender, and civilization were fluid and were being actively contested throughout the period. Prominent figures like Ida B. Wells and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, she writes, deliberately altered, recast, or even inverted these dominant discourses in order to challenge their underlying tenets or to advance their own competing discourses. Likewise, vegetarian reformers at the turn of the century also attempted to rethink or even upend some of the established ways that Americans and Britons thought about the relationships between men and women, whites and those of other races, and even between human and non-human animals. They, too, saw how these cultural factors were related, and in their essays, books, and lectures, they also sought to challenge the dominant discourses of manhood and masculinity. And it is here where the Kid Parkers of the world entered the picture.

This was because one of the most intractable obstacles for ethical vegetarian reformers was the need to demonstrate to a skeptical public that vegetarian men could indeed be both masculine

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4 Bederman, pp. 10-19.
and manly – appropriate exemplars of both their gender and their race – even as they forswore the slaughterhouse, the hunting trip, and even traditionally military solutions to political problems. Historically, the practice of vegetarianism had often been associated with weakness, effeminacy, and debility, and as cultural assumptions about the nature of what, exactly, constituted manhood evolved in ways that privileged physical strength and robust masculinity, most male vegetarians were all but assured of increasing and ongoing marginalization from the centers of influence and authority. The image of the bare-chested Kid Parker alongside his testimonial to the benefits of a meat-free diet thus provides an informative example of the types of rhetorical strategies employed by vegetarian reformers during this period, as they worked to reshape the constructions of gender and civilization so prevalent among their middle-class peers. If the thoroughly virile, undeniably athletic, and uncompromisingly masculine Parker – he was the Western Lightweight Champion, after all! – could proudly endorse vegetarianism, reformers suggested, then perhaps other dominant assumptions about what makes a man a man were also wrong. When it became clear that contemporary gender discourse would not allow for ethical vegetarians to be "true men" around the turn of the century, in other words, perhaps it was time for reformers to subvert and ultimately rewrite the discourse itself. And this is exactly what they set out to do.

Kid Parker was never a national celebrity and probably not even very well known outside of midwestern pugilistic circles. But his naked torso and his advocacy of a flesh-free diet became a

5 Of course, the rhetoric of vegetarianism also had to demonstrate that vegetarian women were both feminine and womanly. Because simply connecting a vegetarian diet to traditional women's roles would do nothing to help the image of male vegetarians (and indeed, would most likely make it worse), reformers often legitimized women's vegetarianism by presenting examples of vegetarian women who had achieved prominent levels of achievement and public success in fields that would not undermine their fundamental femininity or womanhood. Thus well-known women like Wagnerian soprano Lilli Lehman and poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox (whose poem "Solitude" featured the line "Laugh and the world laughs with you; weep, and you weep alone") were often featured in the literature as models of the female vegetarian ideal.

6 The cultural assumptions which linked vegetarianism to male weakness (and, conversely, carnivorism with male strength) were widespread by the late nineteenth century. Many were attached to the rhetoric of imperialism – Mrinalini Sinha, for instance, has demonstrated how British stereotypes of the "effeminate Bengali" (which were partially rooted in observations about the typically vegetarian Hindu diet) were utilized to restrain political power among many British imperial subjects in India. Other historians have also noted these connections embedded within American culture. James Whorton, for instance, points out that Sylvester Graham's 1840s followers were described as "lean-visaged cadaverous disciples." Significantly, the literature produced by the ethical vegetarians themselves often evinces a deep awareness of (and frustration with) the persistent stereotypes they faced: Henry Salt, writing in his autobiography, relates the story of the skeptical woman who asked F. W. Newman, then president of the Vegetarian Society, "don't you feel weak?" (Newman responded, "Madam, feel my calves.") See Mrinalini Sinha, Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century (New York: Manchester UP, 1995); James Whorton, "Tempest in a Fleshpot: The Formulation of a Physiological Rationale for Vegetarianism," Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences 32 (1977), pp. 121-122; "A Progressive Young Vegetarian," The Vegetarian Magazine 4 (November 15, 1899); and Henry Salt, Seventy Years Among Savages (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1921), p. 68.
representative part of a broader rhetorical project employed throughout the humanitarian and ethical vegetarian movements on both sides of the Atlantic. Using a two-part rhetorical strategy, reformers sought to fundamentally reshape cultural norms and expectations related to gender. This required something of a balancing act, since reformers needed to elevate the status of male vegetarians as individual exemplars of their gender, while simultaneously attempting to undermine the very cultural constructions of manliness that helped to define the nature of manhood in the first place.

To frame it in terms of Bederman's analysis, vegetarian reformers worked to recast male vegetarians themselves (and their bodies in particular) as inherently masculine, thus negating the stereotype of the weak, sickly, or effeminate vegetarian man. At the same time, they also wanted to redefine manliness itself in a way that necessarily included the qualities of compassion, kindness, and non-violence that were at the core of their ethical vegetarian philosophy. Male vegetarians could be just as masculine as any other men, in other words, but for men to be truly manly they would, by definition, also have to be vegetarian.

The first of these two strategies was generally easier to realize, since it only had to demonstrate that not all vegetarian men embodied the cultural stereotype of the effete weakling, and that there existed concrete evidence to the contrary. Not surprisingly, an ongoing theme underlying the late-Victorian vegetarian movement was the conscious effort by reformers to dissociate the practice of vegetarianism from common perceptions of weakness and asceticism and instead portray its practitioners as vital, healthy, and thoroughly modern. The most common tactic was the obvious and direct presentation of individual virile and athletic vegetarian bodies themselves, including photographs of muscular, shirtless men and detailed descriptions of remarkable athletic prowess. In an 1897 book published to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the British Vegetarian Society, an entire chapter titled "Muscular Vegetarianism" is devoted to showing that vegetarian men were not merely equal in strength and endurance to meat-eaters, but in fact superior. Author Charles Forward notes in the opening paragraphs that "public prejudice in this country has run high in favour of the idea that flesh food is essential to health and strength," explaining that traditionally, men pursuing rowing, wrestling, boxing, and running "were fed almost entirely upon beef." This began to change in 1880, Forward explains, when 17 year-old Austrian vegetarian Gaston de Benet

beat out "eleven flesh-eaters, most of them full-grown men" during a swimming contest in Shropshire.⁸

Vegetarian athletes seem to have particularly excelled at the relatively new sport of competitive bicycling, and many joined the Vegetarian Cycling Club (VCC), which was organized in 1888 and began actively competing with other (non-vegetarian) bicycling clubs by the early 1890s. Vegetarian cyclists were successful enough that the VCC initiated its Club Challenge Shield competition in 1893, in which the vegetarians took on a variety of carnivorous athletes. Standout vegetarian cyclists included the aptly-named James Parsley, who won five-mile, 50-mile, and hill-climbing competitions in 1895 and 1896; E. Parker Walker, who rode 161 miles in twelve hours (on "very bad" roads and "against a strong wind") in September, 1896; and C. Goddard Watts, the honorary secretary of the Northern Heights Vegetarian Society, who won the VCC's 100-mile championship in the quite remarkable time of 4:30:50.⁹ Vegetarians also made names for themselves as swimmers, as in the case of one Mr. Gandy, a member of the Birmingham Swimming Club's Life-Saving Team who amassed an impressive collection of "prizes, medals and diplomas" for winning competitions over distances ranging from 40 yards to a half-mile.¹⁰ They excelled at running, too, and an 1896 Vegetarian Review article reported, for example, that John Barclay, the Secretary of the Scottish Vegetarian Society, was enjoying "brilliant successes" in that winter's cross-country running competitions, even taking home three gold medals on three consecutive Saturdays. An accompanying photograph showed the fit-looking Barclay in his running outfit as he prepared for a race.¹¹

If details of athletes' exploits and glimpses of their fit bodies was not proof enough of the virility of vegetarian men, reformers sometimes pointed to individual vegetarians engaged in particularly physically demanding occupations of the era, including farmers, electricians, and especially ironworkers. The president of the Vegetarian Cycling club, Arnold Hill, also owned the

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⁸ de Benet may actually have been not only vegetarian but vegan (almost seventy years before the term was invented) – Forward describes him as a vegetarian "of the straightest sect, using neither eggs nor milk." (p. 152.)

⁹ Forward, p. 154.

¹⁰ Forward, p. 158.

¹¹ H. Light, "Vegetarian Athletics," The Vegetarian Review (March 1896), p. 120.
Thames Iron Works, and preached the virtues of a meat-free diet to his workers. Occasionally, he encouraged his vegetarian employees to provide testimonials at events he organized, putting a sturdy and masculine public face on a lifestyle that much of the public believed to be potentially harmful. In his book, Charles Forward included engravings of some of Hill's sturdy and muscular men (including one without a shirt) engaged in masculine endeavors like iron puddling and steam hammering. He also pointed out that the West Ham Vegetarian Society, comprised largely of working class men, issued a standing challenge to any group of men who would take them on in an old-fashioned tug-of-war. They remained undefeated.

Even as their publications featured illustrations of strapping athletes and sturdy ironworkers as part of a concerted effort to demonstrate that men who did not eat meat could indeed embody contemporary ideals of masculinity, vegetarian reformers and organizations also sought to redefine the very nature of civilized manliness in ways that not only allowed men to be vegetarian, but were in fact dependent upon its adoption. One of the more common approaches taken by reformers throughout this period was simply to point to the handful of vegetarian men who had achieved positions of power or prestige, and offer them as "proof" that manliness and vegetarianism were not necessarily incompatible. A definitive example of this type of humane manliness was Wisconsin senator Robert La Follette. While he might not have exhibited the physical and bodily strength of some of the more prominent vegetarian athletes, "Fighting Bob" certainly exemplified the era's cultural definition of manliness, including the ability to rein in one's "primitive" or violent nature and channel those impulses toward more productive ends. La Follette and others like him thus represented a form of modern, enlightened, and inherently civilized manhood, especially when contrasted to leaders who obviously reveled in more old-fashioned ideals of manliness. The real challenge for reformers, of course, was to highlight the links between these men's manliness and their vegetarian diet.

Though careful to remind readers that theirs was not a political journal, the editors of Chicago's Vegetable Magazine sometimes entertained the idea of a vegetarian U.S. president, and actively encouraged LaFollette to run for that office as early as 1907. The senator, identified in the magazine's pages as a vegetarian whose whole family also followed "humane methods of living,"

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13 Forward, p. 160.
thoroughly exemplified the ideal of enlightened humanitarian manhood that vegetarian reformers valued, especially when compared to the sitting president, Theodore Roosevelt. According to the article, La Follette would make an especially good president because he

is a man who hunts – but not with a gun or other life destroying weapons. He is a man of intense activity, of marvelous capacity for work, so that those who have admired those traits in the present executive, would lose little or nothing in that respect. A man of the Roosevelt temper, but controlled or rather able to control himself because of a natural system of living, makes an admirable combination.  

Here was a potential candidate, in other words, who had the same passion and fire that motivated Roosevelt but who was able to use these qualities to achieve civilized rather barbaric purposes – a true man for the twentieth century, as far as the vegetarians were concerned.

Young attorney Clarence Darrow was another favorite subject in the publications of the Chicago Vegetarian Society and was likewise presented as an example of the enlightened vegetarian male ideal. Despite the "whirl of cyclonic political forces" that seemed to constantly envelop him, vegetarian reformers wrote that Darrow remained steadfast in his humanitarian beliefs and did "not believe in eating his fellow creatures." He even served a term as president of the Chicago Vegetarian Society in 1900. A 1903 issue of the society's journal congratulated him on his recent election to the Illinois state legislature and praised the "sense of justice" that informed his advocacy of both women's suffrage and "the rights of every sentient creature." The article went on to describe a bill Darrow introduced to outlaw the raising of pigeons and other birds for the purposes of sport shooting, and noted that all animals "had gained an eloquent friend and an uncompromising advocate in the halls of legislation." Years later, British Humanitarian leader Henry Salt recalled meeting Darrow for the first time and being impressed with the way he seemed to embody both the traditional and modern, the masculine and the manly: "I looked into a face," Salt wrote, "in which strength and tenderness were wonderfully mingled."  

In addition to their attempts to connect the ethical vegetarian philosophy with success in the civilized and manly worlds of law or politics, vegetarian reformers specifically endeavored to undermine and reshape popular conceptions of what, exactly, constituted respectable manliness by

14 “For a Vegetarian President,” Vegetarian Magazine 11 (July 1907), p. 5.


disconnecting it from other particularly male activities like hunting and other bloodsports. They did this in part by arguing that any type of sport hunting was inherently uncivilized and thus fundamentally unmanly, especially when engaged in by public figures whose actions and words seemed antithetical to the vegetarian ideal of manliness. Hunting, the reformers believed, was more than just a barbaric anachronism that threatened the ongoing progress of the human race – it was also a stark illustration of the essential injustice found within contemporary constructions that linked manliness to masculinity, and that privileged imperialism, conquest, and a dominating, violent physicality over the compassion, empathy for living things, and the brand of gentle civility they saw as crucial to both the betterment of all of humankind and the spread of their own ethical principles. The critique of contemporary manliness as expressed through the actions of important political leaders was similarly important to reformers' arguments, since it stressed these individual's responsibility in setting positive examples for other men (in other words, their very role in creating and defining the discourse of manliness) while underscoring their apparent hypocrisy.

Henry Salt, for instance, devoted an entire chapter of his 1892 treatise *Animals' Rights* to a sharp critique of sport hunting, and clearly understood the gendered components of the issue. Citing one of the most common arguments in favor of hunting, Salt observes that "it is often said that the manliness of our national character would be injuriously affected by the discontinuance of these sports," but strongly rejects this "strange argument" since the conditions of the hunt are predicated on entirely unequal balances of power, resources, and technology between the hunter and his prey – something that would seemingly contradict the widely understood cultural value placed on manly fair play and "sportsmanship."¹⁷

Four years later, a 1896 article on a fox hunt in the British journal *Humanity* reiterated this theme. The author reserves particular criticism for the "last part of the chase" in which the fox, exhausted after an hour or more of pursuit by dogs and horsemen, its "tongue hanging out and its brush drogled," is seized upon and its head, feet, and tail cut off before the body is tossed to a cheering crowd. "Blood-sports," he scornfully observes, "are supposed to make their devotees manly," but he reminds his readers instead that the "leading qualities of manhood must ever be justice, compassion, courage, and self-sacrifice," none of which are developed through fox hunting. Indeed, he contends, the opposite occurs – due to the fundamental inequalities between hunter and

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quarry and the complete lack of any "sport," hunting encourages only "hard-heartedness, tyranny, and selfishness."\textsuperscript{18}

Ethical vegetarians seeking to emphasize the dichotomy between "civilization" and "barbarity," and the hypocrisy they saw in those men who claimed to believe in the former while openly demonstrating their manhood through the latter, sometimes singled out American political leaders for special criticism. One 1894 article, for instance, condemned the hunting activities of U.S. presidents Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland, arguing that these men set a terrible example for the nation's children by "leaving their duties to wound and kill harmless creatures simply for fun."\textsuperscript{19} Not long after this, Theodore Roosevelt – who became Vice President in 1901 and soon assumed the presidency after William McKinley was assassinated – became the vegetarians' greatest target yet. Partly this was due to his visibility as one of the most powerful political leaders at the time, but mostly it was because reformers understood that he was widely regarded as a paragon of manly virtue. Thin and sickly as a child, Roosevelt famously interrupted his political career for two years to pursue the manly pastimes of ranching and hunting in the then still-wild frontier of Dakota Territory during the 1880s, and later became a national figure as the leader of the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry (the Rough Riders) during the Spanish-American War, leading the well-known charge of Kettle Hill in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Although during his first several years in office the vegetarian societies seemed to give Roosevelt the benefit of the doubt, by the end of his second term they seemed much more comfortable with criticizing him as hypocritical, barbaric, and most certainly unmanly, in ways both subtle and overt. One article from 1909, written in response to one of Roosevelt's heavily-publicized African hunting expeditions less than a year after he left office, illustrates this turn well. The piece begins by conceding some of the good that resulted from his more progressive policies, and suggests that Roosevelt should be concerned with expanding his legacy and leveraging his fame and political influence to continue working for the greater good. Instead, the author despairs that "the sight and smell of blood is incense to his nostrils" and argues that his big-game excursion was the result of a bloodlust born of both personal and political insecurity. Roosevelt traveled to Africa, the writer suggests, "to slay dumb, helpless beasts because he has no Rome to rule, no arena wherein he can witness human flesh torn." Watching the "cruel hands of trusts tearing at the hearts

\textsuperscript{18} J. Stratton, "Fox-Hunting," \textit{Humanity} 1 (October, 1896), p. 156.

\textsuperscript{19} "Our Presidents Killing for Fun," reprinted in \textit{Food, Home and Garden} 6 (Nov. 1894), p. 135. Italics are in the original.
of the laboring class” was "evidently not sufficiently blood thirsty for the head of the nation," the author continues, and so Roosevelt went abroad to satisfy his primal and barbaric appetites. A year later, Henry Salt echoed this stinging critique with a satirical poem ridiculing Roosevelt's alleged manliness:

Hail, blustering statesman, butcher of big game,
Less president than prince in pride of will,
Whose pastime is the princely sport, to kill,
Whose murderous feats unnumbered fools acclaim!

Despite their differences in geography, religious beliefs, and outlook, vegetarian reformers and organizations on both sides of the Atlantic worked diligently during these years to rewrite popular conceptions of what it meant to be a man. By showcasing vegetarian athletes on the one hand and attempting to undermine the connections between hunting and manhood on the other, reformers evinced a fundamental understanding of the ways in which diet, civilization, manliness, and masculinity interacted in the popular cultural arena. More significantly, their rhetoric demonstrated that they also understood these cultural constructions could indeed be subverted or reshaped in ways that favored their own specific message. The 140-pound "Kid" Parker, originally from Boston, thus in some small way served as the vegetarian movement's answer to Roosevelt – a slight northerner who headed west to the frontier to prove himself, entering a rough, inherently male world at its margins yet later successfully emerging as an exemplar of that very same milieu. The only real difference – at least in the minds and words of reformers – was that Parker believed that his status as a man could be maintained through a bloodless and civilized vegetarian diet rather than the barbarism demonstrated by big-game hunting and the expansion of America's imperial designs.

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