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In Contradiction with Culture: A Study of French Vegetarians

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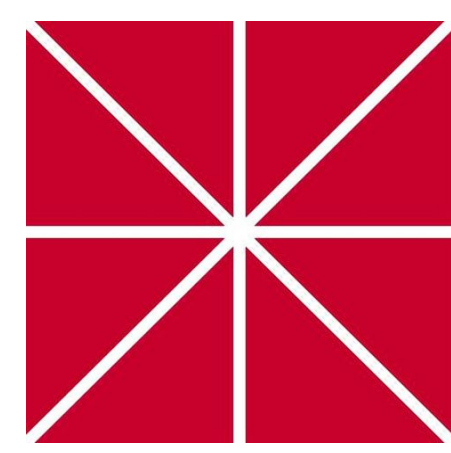
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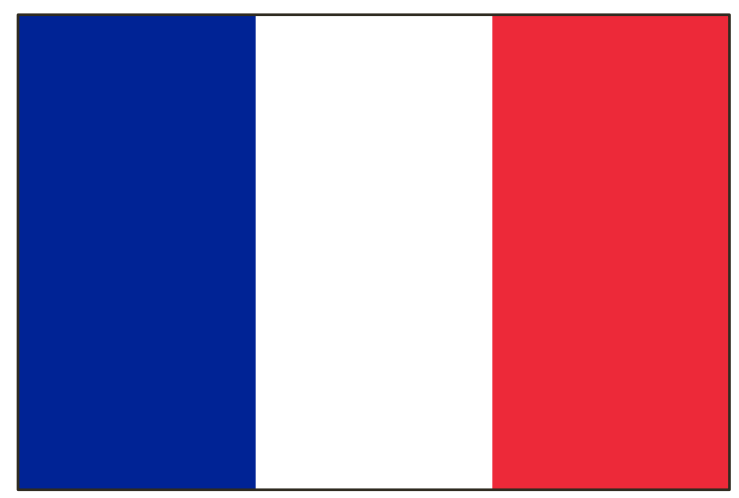
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In Contradiction with Culture: A Study of French Vegetarians

Schumaker, Robert J.



Introduction

This research examines the relationship between modern French vegetarians and the vast French culinary tradition. Historically composed of meat, dairy, and animal by-products, French cuisine is at odds with a growing trend to become vegetarian or vegan, a movement which embraces greener and more compassionate ethics. My interest in this research began in my French studies at Chapman University, particularly in one course about French cuisine. The purpose of this project is to highlight how French vegans and vegetarians are veering away from what has been popular cuisine and to show how French vegans and vegetarians may be creating new traditions and new forms of cuisine. I discovered that in France, there are three main reasons for an individual to become vegetarian: animal rights, ecology, and health. Often, these reasons overlap, but one may be favored over the other. My research methodology included examining studies of French vegetarians conducted in English and in French, comparing articles published in newspapers, analyzing statistics related to diet and health, and gathering information from French animal liberation organizations like PETA France and L214. In conclusion, I was surprised to discover that France's vegetarian population is very similar to that of the United States, and that despite culinary tradition, people are still choosing to go vegan or vegetarian for one or more of the reasons outlined in this project.



Animal Rights

Often, animal rights is at the core of why an individual decides to become vegan or vegetarian.

Veganism is on the rise. In 2006, 150,000 people in the UK opted for a plant-based diet. Today, 542,000 do. That's a 350% increase.

The statistics are also similar in the United States and in France. According to Elodie Vielle-Blanchard, the president of the Vegetarian Association of France, a transformation is taking place:

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We think there is a huge percentage of the population that is flexitarian, meaning they've really reduced their intake of animal meat and aspire to take on a vegetarian lifestyle. Ten percent of French people can see themselves becoming a vegetarian.

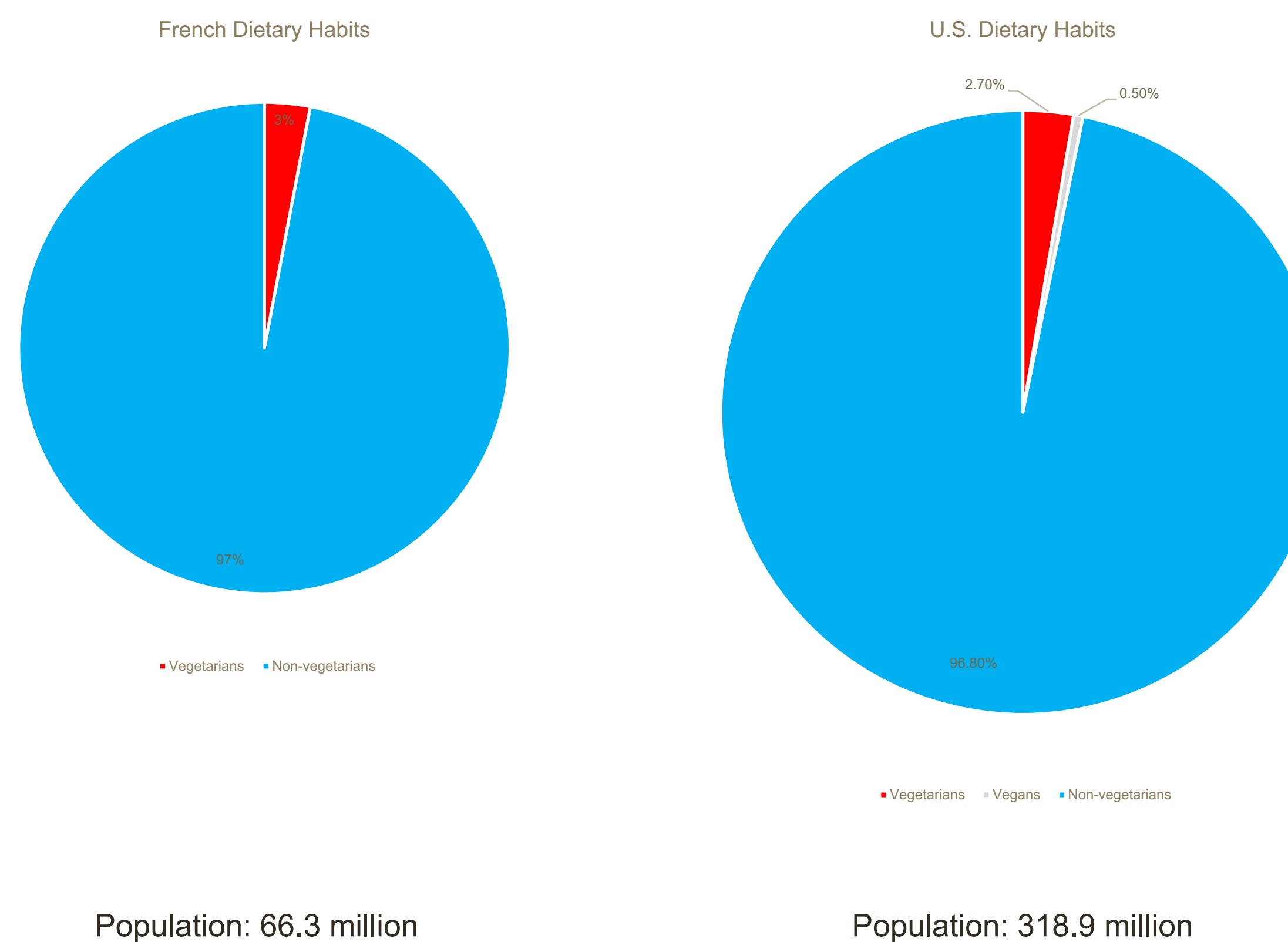
—Elodie Vielle-Blanchard

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When a horrific video depicting the interior of a French slaughterhouse, the agricultural minister of France ordered inspections of all French slaughterhouses. This prompted much of the nation to think about food choices.

Similar to the United States, animal rights groups exist in France. One such organization, L214, believes in the cause for animal liberation, citing that, “Now is the time to ditch the meat. We want people to be aware, to think about their own responsibility, and of course, to think about stopping eating meat. These animals are sentient beings after all, just like cats and dogs.”

Dietary Habits



Despite France's strong culinary tradition, the amount of people who follow a vegetarian diet is about the same as those in the United States. However, it is more common in the United States to make the distinction between vegan or vegetarian, whereas in France, this distinction is only recently becoming understood by the public.

Ecology

On an individual scale, shifting to a plant-based diet can help ease the burden humans put on the environment.

Despite the need for action, one opinion expressed in *The Local* states: “It [the vegetarian movement] will never revolutionize French food.”

In the public eye, France is frequently seen as avant-garde when it comes to green technology. For example, France recently passed a law banning the waste of food in supermarkets. This, along with rooftops and sides of buildings sprawling with greenery, would make one thing of France as a green nation.

However, as Michael Bess argues in his book, *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000*, France is more “light-green” than “green.”

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The shade of light green is meant to connote not only moderation, compromise, and half-measures, but also the profound ambiguity that has characterized the reception of ecological ideas among the French citizenry. What is perhaps most striking about the story of French environmentalism is that it can be plausibly read in two sharply divergent ways—as a narrative of success, in which green ideas gradually came to permeate the mainstream culture and economy of this nation; and as a narrative of defeat, in which virtually all the more radical aspects of the original green vision were trimmed down, ignored, or jettisoned by a tenaciously consumerist population.

—Michael Bess

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Still, I found myself critical of Bess's book because there was no mention of animal agriculture – a topic that is frequently blacklisted when it comes to talking about climate change and protecting the environment.



Especially in France's larger, more urban environments, vegetarian and vegan options are appearing more frequently. One can easily find vegan and vegetarian options in Paris when dining out.

Health

A vegan or vegetarian diet has been proven to reduce cardiovascular disease. This is hardly surprising, considering that healthy plant-based diets are rich in whole foods like grains, legumes, fruits, and vegetables.

A commonly held belief is that of the French paradox. Many question how the French are able to consume high amounts of saturated fats in the form of cheese, creams, and other dairy products. Some have theorized the properties in red wine protects the French against cardiovascular disease.

The real answer? There is likely no French paradox. Cardiovascular disease takes a long time to develop and studies examined by Dr. Michael Greger have shown that heart disease is on the rise in France. Soon, it will be just as common as it is in other Western cultures.

For many French people, a study conducted by Mathieu and Dorard that was published in the *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* discovered that health was often the key motivating factor in their decision to choose a vegetarian diet. In fact, many vegetarians were divided. Some opted in for health reasons, others for animal rights. Little was mentioned by way of environmentalism.

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