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Searching for the 'politics of the possible' in flexitarianism

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Abstract

The paper builds on recent flexitarianism scholarship by approaching this heterogeneous dietary category as a socio-cultural and political economic, rather than just a psychological phenomenon. It does this by drawing on Harris's (2009) conceptualisation of alternative food provisioning activities and subject-making as a 'politics of the possible'. The paper addresses the following questions: does flexitarianism and the making of flexitarian subjectivities represent a 'politics of the possible' and if so how; what are the limits of these politics and how might these limits be overcome? Empirically, the paper undertakes a qualitative analysis of UK national print news media coverage of flexitarianism and semi-structured interviews with self-identified flexitarians. Data from these two sources are interwoven in discussion of themes that provide some evidence in support of flexitarianism as a politics of the possible, but which also draw attention to the limits of these politics. The paper concludes that only by addressing these limits can a full and critical assessment be made of flexitarianism's contribution to a food system less dependent on animal-based foods.

Key words

Flexitarianism; flexitarian; politics of the possible; dietary subject-making; United Kingdom

Introduction

The 'meatification' (Weis 2013) of diets across the western world, and increasingly in some non-western countries (Jakobsen and Hansen 2020), is associated with a suite of socio-ecological and ethical concerns (Godfray et al. 2018; IPCC 2019; Willett et al. 2019) articulated by an ever-widening array of actors from different social arenas. Amongst these concerned actors are social science and humanities scholars producing research on aspects of plant-centred[i] eating from a diversity of theoretical perspectives (Morris et al. 2021a). Studies of veganism and vegetarianism, diets which are entirely and largely plant-centred, are a particularly prominent feature of this multi discipline effort. Investigation of flexitarianism - a portmanteau of 'flexible' and 'vegetarianism' that describes a curtailment

but not a full abandonment of meat consumption - has attracted less research attention (Dagevos and Voordouw 2013) at least until very recently when there has been a notable 'blossoming' (Sijtsema et al. 2021) of scholarship on this topic (e.g. Graca et al. 2019; Rosenfeld et al. 2020a,b; Kemper 2020; Kemper and White 2021). Although flexitarianism has been shown to be a heterogeneous dietary practice, with variable moderation of meat eating (Dagevos 2021; Verain et al. 2022), it is a distinct and by no means a fringe dietary category (Dagevos 2021), practised by a much larger proportion of the populations of western countries than vegetarianism and veganism (Kemper 2020).

Interest has been directed to understanding the cognitive processes of individual flexitarian consumers, specifically their attitudes to and motivations for adopting this diet (De Backer and Hudders 2014; Raphaely & Marinova 2014; Dagevos 2016; De Boer et al. 2017; Mullee et al. 2017; de Gavelle et al. 2019; Kemper et al. 2020). This work has determined that the most common motives for restricting meat intake can be placed within three categories: health, animal welfare and the environment[ii], with 'meat disgust' also identified as a distinctive reason why individuals limit the amount of meat they eat (Fessler et al. 2003; Rothgerber 2013). There is a tendency within this research to adopt a normative approach to flexitarianism, conceptualising the diet as a pragmatic contribution to making food systems more sustainable and humane (Dagevos 2021; Sijtsema et al. 2021; Verain et al. 2022). In this way, flexitarian scholarship is often designed to contribute towards the social normalisation of meat, and other animal-based food reduction. While sympathising with this normative agenda we argue that its pursuit through research that focuses unduly on the cognitive attributes of flexitarian individuals, and the associated segmenting of flexitarian consumers, overlooks the wider context within which flexitarian subjectivities are made and contested. This context matters to how, and the degree to which flexitarianism might contribute to moving beyond animal-based food systems (Morris et al. 2021a). We note that some recent studies do begin to address the 'more than cognitive'. For example, Graca et al. (2019) and Sijtsema et al. (2021) observe an undue research focus on flexitarian motivations, arguing that the 'capability' and 'opportunity' (e.g., availability of plant-based options in supermarkets and on restaurant menus) dimensions of flexitarian behaviour also need investigation and modelling. Social support and connections, both in person and via social media, are revealed as important enablers of flexitarianism which is re-conceived not

only as an “individual issue” but as “a joint activity within a household, among family members or a group of friends” (Sijtsema et al. 2021: 15). Meanwhile wider discourses, including within the media, have been shown to inhibit meat reduction across different age groups (Kemper 2020) and for young adults in particular their continued meat eating is found to be “mainly driven by a need to compromise at social gatherings” (Kemper and White 2021: 7). Other studies examine meat reduction and social identity albeit within a psychological framing (e.g. Rosenfeld et al 2020a,b). Despite this ‘more than cognitive’ interest there remains scope for research to approach flexitarianism more directly as a socio-cultural and political-economic rather than as, primarily, a psychological phenomenon that is shaped by a variety of wider - social, cultural and political - ‘factors’.

This paper contributes to this task by drawing theoretical inspiration from Harris’s (2009) geographical work on so-called alternative approaches to food provisioning and the making of alternative food subjectivities conceptualised as a ‘politics of the possible’. Working with this framing the paper addresses the following questions: does flexitarianism and the making of flexitarian subjectivities represent a ‘politics of the possible’ and if so how; what are the limits of these politics; and how might these limits be overcome? We also seek to assess the applicability of Harris’ preliminary insights within the flexitarian case. A qualitative, multi-method approach is adopted to the gathering of empirical material. The reporting of flexitarianism in the UK’s national print news media affords insight into societal level framings of this mode of eating and how the media, as one influential institution, plays a role in flexitarian subject making. Semi-structured interviews with 16 self-identified flexitarians, access how flexitarian individuals make sense of processes of dietary subjectification. Data from these two sources are interwoven into thematic discussion that provides some evidence in support of flexitarianism as a politics of the possible, but which also draw attention to the limits of these politics. Only by addressing these limits, the paper concludes, can a full and critical assessment be made of flexitarianism’s contribution to a food system less dependent on animal-based foods.

Conceptualising ‘alternative’ diets as a politics of the possible

This section situates theoretically our approach to flexitarianism. Harris's (2009) work is provocative because of its empirical interest in the 100 mile diet, a type of alternative diet and dietary subjectivity. This framing aligns with flexitarianism as a newly identified, heterogeneous diet, that appears in some respects to be 'alternative' to 'conventional' omnivorous diets in the UK and other western nations. In Harris's study the dietary practitioners and activists of interest seek to resist the spatially extended supply chains of the mainstream food system by only eating foods produced within a 100 mile radius of their domicile. In developing his analysis Harris draws on the critique of so-called 'alternative food networks' (AFN) as reproducing the neoliberal food provisioning structures and subjectivities that they seek to oppose (e.g. Guthman 2008). Neoliberalism, Harris outlines, is a political economic project which celebrates private property rights, individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills, market freedom and free trade, but also one that instills particular ideas about subjectivity to produce hegemony for the political economic project i.e. it is subjectifying. Choice, individual success and self-improvement, personal responsibility and being a consumer are all features of neoliberal subjectivities. The 100 mile diet can be 'read' as reproducing neoliberal subjectivities through, for example, its focus on the choices of individual consumers to 'vote with their dollar' by eating locally (within 100 miles) rather than buying from global supply chains and are inspired to make these choices by seeking out knowledge that enables normative assessments of local food as 'better' than global food.

This reading of the 100 mile diet, and other localised, place-specific AFNs is judged by Harris to be unsatisfactory (see also Coles 2016). This is because when academics engage with neoliberal discourse, including critical analyses of neoliberalism, they enact and perpetuate that discourse seeing it in all that they investigate. In an attempt to 'de-stabilise' the hegemonic story of neoliberalism Harris draws on the work of Gibson-Graham (2006) who challenge the singular representation of the economy, as neoliberal capitalism, and instead recognise the possibility of multiple, more emergent economic institutions and practices mediated by diverse arrangements of power including the power of individuals to act. Through this lens reading AFNs as reproducing neoliberal subjectivities provides only one among many other possible readings of alternative food activism and provisioning. In short, Gibson-Graham encourage a reading for difference rather than dominance within food

politics. Applied, by Harris, to the case of the 100 mile diet its activists are recast as subjects trying to consciously enact a different negotiation of the ethical dilemmas posed by the contemporary food system, whose 'self work' is focused on education for the greater good rather than acquiring knowledge simply for self improvement. Understood through this reading as a case of 'the politics of the possible' the 100 mile diet is not a finalised alternative but a tentative step towards constructive socio-environmental change in the food system. In other words, its potential – and that of other food alternatives - lies in the possibilities it opens up for change as much as what the specific initiative realises through its current practices.

Building on Harris's approach we ask if flexitarianism can be similarly understood as a case of the politics of the possible. We do this by attending to the neoliberal characteristics of flexitarianism and flexitarian subject-making but exploring as well how it may also be more than this i.e. when, where and how flexitarianism escapes the neoliberal sensibilities of market rationales and individualised food politics to offer instead a different, more empowering, progressive and collective form of intervention in efforts to move beyond animal-based food systems (Taylor 2010; Morris et al. 2021b). In doing so we flesh out Harris's somewhat skeletal, preliminary reading of (alternative) dietary subject-making in terms of the politics of the possible.

Methods

The investigation draws upon two distinct sources of empirical material for qualitative analysis, an approach that remains relatively unusual in flexitarianism focused research (Graca et al. 2019; Kemper 2020, Kemper and White 2021; Sijtsema et al. 2021). The first source is the UK national print news media. There is ongoing debate around whether the mainstream news media works to promote or contest the consumption of animal-based foods (Cole and Morgan 2011; Fitzgerald and Taylor, 2014; Chiles 2017; Morris 2019; Kemper 2020). There is, nevertheless, agreement that the media is influential in shaping beliefs about different ways of food provisioning and eating. Applied to the case of interest the media is conceptualised as a key site within which societal meanings of flexitarianism are produced, circulated and contested (Burgess 1990; Morris 2019) which contributes to

the making of flexitarian subjectivities. The media produces and circulates discourses, both positive and negative, about flexitarianism and is a site for discussion of strategies for how this dietary practice might be encouraged but also contested.

Using the database LexisNexis, a time-unlimited search was conducted in April 2020 for articles containing the terms ‘flexitarian’ and ‘flexitarianism’ within all national newspapers in the UK. This search generated 441 articles once duplicates and irrelevant articles had been removed. To produce a manageable number of articles for qualitative analysis, the first (published in January 2004 in the Independent on Sunday) and every third subsequent article was selected generating a total of 132 articles. Articles were of varying lengths and types, including reader letters, opinion pieces and longer, more analytical essays[iii] published in different sections of newspapers with no one journalist dominant. Table 1 lists the newspapers included in the sample and the abbreviations used when citing articles (full details of which are provided as supplemental material). Building on Cole and Morgan’s (2011) media analysis of veganism and Morris’ (2019) analysis of Meat Free Monday in the national print news media all articles were initially categorised for their dominant ‘tone’ as positive, negative, or neutral towards flexitarianism. A second stage of qualitative analysis entailed a close reading of all articles and manual ‘descriptive’ line by line coding that formed the basis of more conceptually oriented or ‘analytical’ codes (Boyatzis 1998). These higher-level codes enabled identification of a series of thematic subcategories, the most prominent of which and those most pertinent to the theoretical framework, are elaborated in the following section with examples, including quoted text, from particular articles.

Table 1 here

The second source was primary data generated through 16 semi-structured interviews with self-identifying ‘flexitarians’ who were recruited through several means (Table 2). Six participants were recruited through word of mouth, a further three through snowballing, and the final seven via three flexitarian Facebook groups. The latter recruitment method led to three non-UK based flexitarians being interviewed. It is recognised that some cultures might allow flexitarianism to be practised more easily or present barriers to a reduced meat diet, for example when livestock agriculture plays a particularly significant role within the

national economy and imagination (Kemper 2020). However, strong similarities within the data from UK and non-UK interviewees led to a decision to include the latter and it is noted that Dagevos (2021) also found cross-cultural consistencies in flexitarianism, particularly across affluent countries. The interviewees were mostly female from a wide range of life stages. A gender imbalance has been encountered in the respondent profiles / samples of other qualitative and quantitative studies of low meat or meat free diets (e.g. Kemper and White 2021). This may be partly accounted for by women being more likely to practice such diets (e.g., Graça et al., 2019) while meat has had greater centrality to certain forms of masculine identity meaning that they may be less likely to volunteer to participate in flexitarian research (Fidolini, 2021). The dominance of female interviewees is acknowledged as a potential limitation of the study which could lead to the wrongful impression that flexitarianism's politics of the possible is a feminised phenomenon.

In terms of ethics, the research passed institutional ethical review. Participants were given an Information Sheet providing details of the research and signed a Consent Form. With interviewee consent, all interviews were audio-recorded. In-person interviews were conducted wherever possible and practical and online video interviews occurred as a second resort.

Table 2 here

The use of semi-structured interviews allowed interviewer directed themes to be included, whilst also giving interviewees the autonomy to expand on areas they felt were significant (Longhurst 2010). Interviews briefly explored the interviewee's background before more detailed discussion of their personal experiences of flexitarianism addressing motivations, likes, dislikes, challenges, and opportunities of flexitarianism and what practising this diet means for them. Interviews were fully transcribed. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms are used. Transcripts underwent qualitative thematic analysis via a coding process mirroring that employed in the analysis of news articles.

Data from the media and interviews are woven together to explore whether and how (much) flexitarianism can be understood as the politics of the possible. It is acknowledged

that this methodological approach is not without its challenges, since it accesses flexitarianism through the different ontological sites of the print news media and the reported experiences of individual flexitarian subjects. There are, however, precedents in food studies that justify the approach herein, notably Chiles' (2017) examination of animal food controversies in the US which draws on analysis of national news media and focus group discussions with consumers.

Searching for the politics of the possible in flexitarianism

This empirical section is organised into a series of thematic sub-sections, each of which speaks to a particular dimension of Harris's (2009) framework. Evidence is provided of flexitarianism's neoliberal characteristics (sub-sections entitled: Flexitarianism as a route to improving one's health; Flexitarians as consumers and good for business; Avoiding drama at the dinner table – the 'anti-politics' of flexitarianism) but also that flexitarianism can be more than neoliberal and a form of eating that can be explicitly political (sub-sections entitled: Flexitarianism: it's not just about me; Flexitarianism as a 'gateway' diet; Challenging and questioning flexitarianism).

Flexitarianism as a route to improving one's health

Becoming a neoliberal dietary subject is focused on improving the largely autonomous self through diet. In the context of flexitarianism, improving one's own health through a more plant-centred diet features prominently with this theme, being the most numerous within the positively coded news media articles . Initial illustration is provided here:

> "Amongst the list of 'new fads' for 2017 is flexitarianism - or part-time vegetarianism ... *One of the main benefits of flexitarianism is that it has a whole host of health positives*. Eating less meat has been proven to *lower your risk* of getting diabetes, cancer and heart disease, while flexitarianism by nature ensures people are eating more vegetables" (Bannon, 3.1.2017, Sun).

Articles addressing this theme often cite UK market research into diet and eating trends which finds that a large proportion of those surveyed are adopting a flexitarian diet and dominant among the reasons for this is to benefit personal health. For example, "Around

nine in 10 (91 per cent) of Britons are now adopting a "flexitarian" diet *in a bid to improve their health* and help the environment, according to … Mintel" (Morley, 31.12.2018, TeSu). The claimed health improvements of flexitarianism are mostly taken as commonly accepted fact although specific research studies and other expert reports are sometimes cited as evidence in support of the healthiness of flexitarianism. For example, a reduction in the amount of recommended meat in the UK government's National Nutrition Guidance is cited by several articles (e.g. Mintz, 6.9.2019, DTe), a change that is attributed to a 2011 study linking red meat consumption to cancer (Kelner, 23.1.2013, In).

A desire to improve their own health also featured in the majority of interviewees' motivations for becoming and / or maintaining a flexitarian diet with health being the most important factor in at least four of these cases. For example, Claire, described how her flexitarianism was driven by desire for health improvements after experiencing health and weight problems related to poor diet. The adoption of a flexitarian diet had observably beneficial effects. Although primarily motivated to reduce her animal food consumption, for reasons other than health Audrey also claimed that since becoming flexitarian she feels "a bit healthier, less sluggish and more energetic".

Flexitarians as consumers and good for business

Within the print news media the flexitarian subject is constructed as a consuming subject who is good for business. This was the second most prominent sub-theme in the positively coded articles. A neoliberal dietary subject is, primarily, a consumer i.e. someone who buys food to satisfy their own needs and desires (Johnston 2008). This implies that the appropriate goods are available, through the already existing presence of or creation of new markets, to meet these needs and desires. In the context of flexitarianism the media materials in particular reveal how flexitarian subject making is taking place almost exclusively through the construction of flexitarians as consumers enjoying enhanced food choices through an ever-increasing range of new, often highly processed plant-based meat and milk substitutes[iv]. One example, which received widespread media coverage following its launch in January 2019, is the Vegan Sausage Roll produced by Gregg's, a British bakery chain. Company representatives quoted in the media are keen to point out that despite its name the roll is more likely to be purchased by flexitarians rather than vegans (Uttley and

Braddick, 14.10.2019, Te). Similarly, a plant-based food company based in County Durham identifies that "The big market is flexitarian - people who eat meat, fish and dairy but who want to cut back or … the chance to try vegan or veggie food"(Leake, 20.1.2019, TiSu).

Flexitarian subjects are therefore central to the making of new business opportunities for these types of products, a process that is widely endorsed and celebrated in the media reporting (e.g. Hosie, 18.4.2018, In). The profits generated by the Greggs' vegan sausage roll, are reported as having attracted the attention of other food producers (Uttley and Braddick, 14.10.2019, Te). Other articles on this theme provide data that reveal the scale of the commercial benefits and opportunities for investors associated with the rise of the flexitarian. For example:

> "So-called "flexitarianism" has fuelled demand for meat-free products as consumers choose to cut down on meat rather than go fully vegetarian. Sales of items such as vegetarian sausages, burgers and other meat substitutes rose by 6.4per cent in the past year to £284 million. …Vegetarian sausages are the biggest individual sellers, worth £47million a year, followed by vegetarian burgers worth £32million. Analysts say it is a result of the estimated quarter of British people who decided to cut down on meat" (Anon, 15.5.2017, Te)

Further reports are of major food retailers responding to an expansion in demand for more plant-based products (e.g. Smithers, 8.12.2018, Gu). The making of neoliberal flexitarian subjects in large part through their positioning as consumers of an expanding range of meat and milk substitutes was recognised by most interviewees. They explained that this made a flexitarian diet easier to practice than might otherwise be the case if having to cook plant-based meals from scratch. The greater availability of plant-based options on restaurant menus, expanding the choices for the flexitarian diner, was also highlighted as a welcome development.

In addition to being a consumer of proliferating, innovative food products a small number of positively coded articles reinforce other dimensions of being a flexitarian consumer in their references to the cost savings associated with following a flexitarian diet in a context of rising meat and other food prices (Fellowes, 17.11.2008, Te; Anon, 22.1.2013, Gu). By

substituting some animal-based foods for plant-based foods, the flexitarian consumer can, it is claimed, save money, although supporting evidence for this claim is limited. One article explains:

> "Experts in the field … will tell you that the culture of flexitarianism is spreading fast, and those who were not tempted on health grounds *have lately found themselves persuaded for economic reasons*"(Kelner, 23.1.2013, In, emphasis added).

A small number of interviewees also identified the money-saving potential of flexitarianism. Eric, for example, claimed that he has "definitely saved money" being flexitarian because animal products can be expensive but less are consumed in a flexitarian diet. Ella explained that flexitarianism "doesn't have to be expensive" particularly when cooking with pulses rather than with processed plant-based products, with a similar point made by Audrey. These claims find support in recently published research by Springmann et al. (2021).

<u>"Avoiding drama at the dinner table": the 'anti-politics' of flexitarianism</u>

A further prominent theme within the data speaks to the idea of the 'anti-politics' (Li 2009) of flexitarianism in ways that are distinct to those implied in the preceding sub-sections. This idea attracts journalistic support because flexitarianism's "relaxed" (Kelner, op cit.) approach makes it a more achievable, even "sane"(Molloy, 1.1.2014, In) way of eating than the apparently more restrictive, rigid or "puritanical" (Wolfson, 19.1.2019, Gu) vegetarian and vegan diets; a feature of these diets that is also claimed by some interviewees, one of whom went as far as to label the latter "militant" (Claire). The argument is made that it is simply not realistic to expect people to give up eating meat entirely (Smyth, 19.5.2017, Ti; Dillner, 5.1.2018, Gu), and so flexitarianism offers a more achievable way to realise the multiple benefits of reduced meat consumption. As one article describes,

> "'Flexis', it seems, have the best of both worlds, benefiting from the potential health advantages of a vegetarian diet and still being able to order a pepperoni pizza when they get the urge"(Ursell, 21.2.2009, Ti).

Flexitarianism is framed as enabling the eater to keep their dietary "options open" (Lytton, 12.10.2016, Te), and to be able to respond freely to animal-based gustatory urges

(Silverman, 23.10.2017, Te). In addition, flexitarianism may reduce or eliminate entirely any awkwardness in social contexts such that the flexitarian can help to avoid “drama at the dinner table” (Anon, 2.12.2018, SuEx) that might occur when following an apparently less flexible, more restrictive diet.

Interviewees also identified with flexitarianism’s anti-politics when providing a range of examples of how it is much easier, on social occasions, to be a flexitarian than a veg*n (Eric, Emily, Madison, Leah, Bella). This identification corresponds with the 'Compromise’ dimension of Kemper and White’s (2020) four Cs conceptualisation of flexitarianism among young adults. As a young unemployed man who lives and eats with his parents Peter was anxious not to “rock the (dietary) boat too much” by eating more fish and chicken than would probably be the case if he lived alone with more control over what he eats. Being able to eat meat when socialising helps, according to Liz, “avoid negative judgements and to fit in”. Although she is working towards a wholefood plant-based diet Claire also argued that she cannot, at the current time, “go the whole way” because she is not prepared to have “those sorts of fights with my tight knit family” who are livestock farmers and eat meat every day. A flexitarian subjectivity enables her to avoid these potential domestic conflicts.

A flexitarian diet: It’s not just about me

The neoliberal dietary subject acts, for the most part, in their own interest. However, as revealed through Harris’s (2009) analysis dietary subjects can, in practising particular diets, also be concerned *for* others and can act *with* others to produce desired changes in food provisioning. Both of these dimensions of flexitarian subject-making are evident within the empirical material suggesting a more than neoliberal dietary subjectivity that is not (only) self-oriented.

Prominent within the media is an effort to construct flexitarian subjects as concerned, not only for their own health, but also for the state of the environment and the welfare of agricultural animals, with the former being much more pronounced than the latter. It is asserted that eating less meat within the context of a flexitarian diet can help to address a suite of global environmental problems, particularly relating to the climate. For example:

> “The ecological arguments for adopting a "flexitarian" approach are compelling. The industrial farming of livestock is a major contributor to greenhouse gases; it also uses land, water and energy and requires food that could be eaten by humans” (Henry, 26.08.2017, Te).

> “We all know that eating less meat is good for the planet …”(Hosie, 9.12.2016, In).

The second quote suggests that the positive contribution of flexitarian eating to the (planetary) environment is now common knowledge,. In some cases, recently published scientific studies or policy documents stimulate the reporting (e.g. Nelson, 15.9.2018, Gu). Reference is also made to surveys of consumers claiming to have reduced their meat consumption or who plan to do so out of concern to reduce their environmental impact (e.g. Hurley, 8.4.2019, Ti).

The print news media also reports that flexitarian subject-making is somewhat shaped by a concern for animals with surveys of the reasons why consumers have reduced their meat eating providing the basis of this reporting. Animal welfare and ethical /moral concerns (which seemingly refer to animals but not always explicitly) are one of several motivating factors. For example:

> “Almost 30% of meat-eating Britons reduced or limited their meat consumption over the six months to March, according to Mintel ... Another 14% said that they were considering doing so in the future, a rise in what has been dubbed "flexitarianism", … driven by a desire to eat more healthily, as well as concerns about the environment and animal welfare"(Moulds, 11.12.2017, Ti).

Concern for animal welfare is less pronounced in reporting than environmental concerns (and health) and avoided is any detailed discussion of the conditions for food producing animals except for an occasional reference to the undesirability of factory farming (Norrington Davis, 15.11.2009, Ob). However, a group of articles do go some way to address this issue, by specifying a particular type of flexitarian subject, described in one case as the “good flexitarian”(Anon, 22.1.2013, Gu), who eats only ethically produced meat or “less but better meat”(Howell, 17.3.2019, Te). In this way flexitarianism is aligned and at times

conflated with the concept of ethical omnivorism or “discerning or compassionately informed omnivorism” (Jarvis, 30.6.2010, In). Across this sub-theme it is acknowledged that so-called ethical meat may be more expensive while simultaneously asserting that eating less but ‘better’ meat can make it affordable. "Cutting down is something we should all respond to - a practical demand that is also better for your pocket ... It might also help us switch to more ethically sourced meat too if budgets allow" (Farhoud, 6.5.2019, DMi).

Interviewees consistently referred to themselves as dietary subjects produced in relation to concern for the environment, particularly the global climate. The environment was the main factor in the flexitarian identity of six interviewees and for most of the rest it was in the mix of concerns as Claire explained when summing up that flexitarianism “means following a healthy diet, um, it means being ecologically responsible…”. Concern for animals, expressed in terms of “animal cruelty” (Liz), played a primary role in shaping flexitarian subjectivity in four cases as explained by Peter:

> “I don’t have a problem with eating meat in itself... But we have now got to a state where we are like factory farming hundreds and thousands of animals in like completely inhumane conditions… which is why I try and avoid most meats where possible.”

A further six interviewees acknowledged animals as a secondary or incidental benefit of following a flexitarian diet. Although health is the main reason for her flexitarian subjectivity Abigail explained that she finds industrialised chicken farming objectionable and avoids this type of meat. Both Emily and Madison are primarily motivated by the environmental consequences of meat production but acknowledged that since becoming flexitarian they were now more inclined to associate meat with animals, a connection that was uncomfortable and led them to avoid particular types of meat where this connection was pronounced.

A further, albeit relatively undeveloped dimension of this theme reveals how flexitarian subject-making is understood as part of a collective ‘new movement’ associated with growing societal awareness of the dis-benefits of meat-centric diets and the multiple benefits of plant centred diets. Explicit reference to this was made in four interviews and in

one article in which a journalist describes his ambition to give up meat for a year. Admitting that he continues

> "to eat eggs, milk and cheese …and, much to the disdain of my detractors, I also still eat fish. This makes me a flexitarian, in modern parlance, a phrase I'm still embarrassed to actually say out loud. *It seems I may unwittingly be part of a new movement.* According to a new report … an estimated quarter of the British population are also now deliberately cutting down on their meat intake" (Shute, 20.05.2017, Te, emphasis added).

Given the number of negative remarks that run through this article, the reference to a 'new movement' may be barely worth comment. Nevertheless, the attempt to link a commonly construed individual matter to a collective effort, or social movement is intriguing, and suggestive of a politics of the possible.

Flexitarianism as a 'gateway' diet

Harris's reading for difference rather than dominance of the 100 mile diet includes reference to this diet as a 'tentative step towards' positive and transformative change within the food system and prompts investigation of equivalent 'tentative steps' within flexitarianism. Overwhelmingly, the data suggest that becoming a flexitarian subject, through individual, consumption-based acts of personal responsibility (a strongly neoliberal position), is sufficient to 'do your bit' towards making a positive change for yourself, the planet, and animals and as such is best conceptualised as a dietary 'end point'. However, a handful of articles and a small number of interviews frame flexitarianism as a 'gateway diet' i.e., a way of eating that is an initial, intermediate step or transitory phase between a conventional omnivorous diet and a veg*n diet (Kemper 2020). In one case a journalist explains how they were flexitarian for a few years before becoming vegan having watched some documentaries critical of milk production (Holliday, 27.10.2018, Gu). While acknowledging the tensions within a flexitarian way of eating, including the continued killing of large numbers of farm animals, another journalist argues "that flexitarianism serves as a valuable gateway diet, ushering the half-hearted towards not only vegetarianism but its many and varied cousins, such as pescetarianism … and veganism ..." (Rouse, 2.11.2018, DMa).

Six of the interviewees elaborated upon these insights. Emily made sense of her relatively recent identification as flexitarian as “probably a step towards becoming vegetarian” and Victoria, similarly, reported that she “wouldn’t rule out becoming a vegetarian in the future”. Although Chloe had previously practised a vegetarian diet and found it too restrictive, she expressed “that flexitarianism is a perfect gateway into doing more…to start cutting your [carbon] emissions and slowly do more and more”. Peter had also been a vegetarian for a brief period before being tempted back to meat eating because of its taste and convenience. Nevertheless, he admitted to ongoing tensions within his food choices, evidence perhaps of ‘meat related cognitive dissonance’ (Rothgerber 2020) and characterised his flexitarianism as “a work in progress” suggesting that it had not yet reached a dietary end point. Although the language of ‘gateway’ was more often implied than explicit there is nevertheless a sense of ‘working towards’ a way of eating that goes beyond flexitarianism amongst these respondents.

Challenging and questioning flexitarianism

Our evidence reveals that flexitarianism is questioned, contested and resisted in various ways that counter flexitarianism’s anti-politics. First, interviewed flexitarians challenged their own eating practice reporting a range of unwelcome emotions, notably guilt (Charlotte, Chloe, Peter, Audrey) and regret (Emma) and other bodily sensations such as “heaviness” (Emma) and “bloating” after consuming animal based foods particularly meat. Second, challenges arise from others who perceive contradictions within and limitations of flexitarian subjectivities. For example, Peter described his discomfort when people ask about the inconsistencies in his eating habits questioning why he is not a “full vegetarian”, while Leah spoke of her “wariness” of the label flexitarian because it “attracts criticism” from others claiming that she can eat whatever she wants. Joanna described her annoyance and frustration when her flexitarianism is made fun of and she is labelled by others as “a fraud”. Audrey speculated that other people might see flexitarianism as “ridiculous” or “stupid” because it is a “neither here nor there position”. This criticism is also present within media articles that unfavourably compare flexitarianism with vegetarianism. Flexitarians are variously referred to as people with (diet) commitment issues (Kellner, op cit), “life’s great ditherers” (Ursell, 21.2.2009, Ti), “vegetarians whose principles collapse at the sight of a

cheeseburger" (Anon, 18.9.2019, DMi), "failed" vegetarian (Hudson, 27.7.2017, DMi), "faketarians" (Silverman op cit) and "hobby vegetarian" (Shute op cit).

Third, flexitarians challenge themselves and one another when asserting that their actions alone, as individual dietary subjects, are insufficient to produce the changes they desire in the food system. Only one interviewee (Leah) articulated such a challenge and argued that intervention was required from both governments and business as well as by individuals making the decision to become flexitarian. However, this argument attracts a little more attention in the media with a handful of articles discussing a range of institutional strategies for reducing meat production and consumption (beyond those associated with market based governance actors discussed earlier) including meat taxes, soft public health messaging, subsidised (high quality) meat for low income consumers, civil society campaigns such as Meat Free Mondays, and changes to national nutrition guidance. The challenges associated with the introduction of these interventions are highlighted alongside an emphasis on the insufficiency of individual actions. The incorporation of governance strategies within the media discussion of flexitarianism indicates an evolution in the debate around (less) meat eating as Morris (2018) found this to be absent in her analysis of reporting of the Meat Free Mondays campaign in the UK print news media.

Fourth, news articles coded as negative frame flexitarianism as a threat to health. Mostly presented from a 'pro meat' position these articles argue that it is unhealthy to cut out or reduce meat as this can lead to nutrient deficiencies if poorly planned (e.g. Jourdan, 3.11.2015, Dma). The idea that meat is a more "natural", safe and traceable food product than processed meat substitutes, particularly when "home produced" by British farmers (Carrington, 12.6.2019, Gu) is occasionally used in support of the health-based arguments against flexitarianism that fail to recognise that most flexitarians continue to eat meat.

A fifth point of tension concerns the implications for animals of flexitarianism.
The notion, evident in some of the media coverage, that being a flexitarian improves animal welfare because fewer animals are eaten side-steps what happens to the animals that provide food for the animal-based elements of the flexitarian diet. This is recognised in reporting that argues flexitarianism does not go far enough in addressing food system

problems and that any amount of meat eating is unethical, unsustainable, and inefficient (e.g. Rivera, 8.4.2016, In). As this author goes on to question, "can slaughter be humane?", while another asserts that "organic butchery is no guarantee of ethical standards, and that getting our nutrition from meat-eating is unsustainably inefficient. If the personal is political, the only defensible option is to 'go veggie'" (Harris, 18.2.2013, Gu).

Such questions for flexitarianism around the role and treatment of animals in food production also emerged amongst interviewees when they limit their knowledge seeking activities in relation to the animal origins of food. These actions are indicative of the deployment of 'strategic ignorance' about meat consumption (Onwezen and van der Weele 2016) and also illustrate the use of strategies to prevent meat related cognitive dissonance (Rothgerber 2020). Ella explained that she had "read horrible things [about the dairy industry but]… I haven't dared to watch one of these…movies that shows what goes on in the milk industry because I think that…ignorance is bliss…that is not a good thing to say, I know". She is wary of learning too much because this might challenge other aspects of her flexitarian eating, a position also articulated by Bella. Joanna acknowledges animal welfare issues but stated she *had not researched these as much* as the environmental dimensions of animal food production which she identified as driving her flexitarianism.

Discussion and conclusions

In the context of a marked, rapid recent increase in scholarly interest in meat reducing and plant centred eating this paper has focused attention on flexitarianism. It has done so in an effort to further open up this heterogeneous dietary subjectivity to critical scrutiny and make a contribution to the expanding literature on flexitarianism by developing an approach that avoids positioning individual flexitarians and their cognitive characteristics at the centre of the analysis. Specifically, it has sought to understand whether and how (much) flexitarianism represents a politics of the possible and the limits of these politics, to better assess the claimed for contribution of flexitarianism to de-meatifying or moving towards food systems less dependent on animal-based foods. The paper's theoretical lens is inspired by Harris's (2009) reading for difference not dominance of food system 'alternatives'. The concept of the politics of the possible draws attention to the openings in flexitarianism and flexitarian subject-making that signal its more than, or other than neoliberal character. In

this final section we firstly discuss those aspects of the media and interview data which provide *some* evidence in support of the proposition that flexitarianism represents a politics of the possible. We then go on to discuss the *limits* to flexitarianism's politics of the possible as revealed through our evidence and why these need to be taken seriously within flexitarian scholarship. At the end of the section we offer three suggestions on how the limits of flexitarianism's politics of the possible might be addressed in policy, practice and future research.

According to Harris a politics of the possible in alternative food provisioning entail initial, tentative yet meaningful steps towards a more radical form of food system transformation, rather than a finalised and coherent outcome. In our analysis this possibility is explicit in the media framing of flexitarianism as a 'gateway' diet i.e. an unfinished eating project or subjectivity that may open up rather than close down opportunities for a more radical re-arrangement of food production and consumption that is relatively more plant-centred. Mirroring this framing, *some* interviewees understood their flexitarianism as an achievable first step - or 'gateway' - towards a way of eating that reduced even further or completely eliminated meat and other animal based foods[v]. Flexitarianism's politics of the possible are even more pronounced in the media and interview material that show how flexitarianism is 'not just about me'. In other words, flexitarian subjectivities are being made through a set of concerns that extend beyond the benefits to self to encompass nonhuman others notably the environment and the welfare of agricultural animals. Admitedly these wider, "pro-social" (Verain et al. 2022, 6) concerns appear to be mostly realised through acts of individual consumption i.e. as flexitarians make individualised choices to purchase more plant based and less animal based food including meat and milk substitutes. This situates flexitarianism within the domain of ethical consumption (Barnett et al. 2017), an approach to social change that is highly contested but has been recently endorsed as a meaningful strategy of leftist politics in relation to veganism (Dickstein et al. 2020)(. Nevertheless, an associational or relational dimension is also a feature of flexitarianism when it is identified explicitly within media discourse and interviewee accounts as an embryonic collective or social 'movement'. When flexitarianism is framed and enacted in this way, as a phenomonen that goes beyond self interest, it signals the possibility for collectively organised challenge and change even though this has yet to see a formal institutional

arrangement in the form of a ‘Flexitarian society’ that is equivalent to the long-established civil society organisations that advocate for vegetarianism and veganism.

A further dimension of flexitarianism’s politics of the possible that is evident within our empirical material, and a feature of our investigation that extends Harris’s analysis, is the various direct challenges and resistances to flexitarianism. Flexitarianism is framed, both within media reporting and by flexitarians themselves, as an inconsistent, even incoherent, dietary subject position. This challenge can be understood as part of a politics of the possible because it is evidence of the struggles over flexitarianism’s knowledge claims and practices. Such struggles can be productive, they can represent ‘possibilities’ because they signal but also can stimulate further discussion and debate about the role of diet, and particularly the balance of animal and plant based foods, within food systems change (Morris et al. 2021b).

We now turn to those aspects of the evidence that suggest notable *limits* to flexitarianism’s politics of the possible. Such limits are revealed in the making of flexitarian subjectivities in ways that are clearly neoliberal in character and very much to the fore in both the media and interview data. Flexitarians are constructed in media reporting as good for business, who act first and foremost as self-interested consumers enjoying an increasingly wide range of ultra processed meat and milk substitutes purchased in diverse food outlets (Mylan et al. 2019; Sexton et al. 2019; Lonkila and Kaljonen 2021, Tziva et al. 2020). This is the case even though studies suggest that flexitarians are ambivalent about meat substitute consumption (Kemper 2020) and that flexitarianism “does not equal consuming meat substitutes alone” (Sijstema et al. 2021: 15). It is acknowledged that some of the positive media commentary around this dimension of flexitarianism can be accounted for by the role of corporate public relations (PR) in generating media content (Topic and Tench 2018). Nevertheless the media narrative of the flexitarian as the celebrated, target consumer of new plant-based products is too prominent to be explained by the influence of corporate PR alone. Flexitarians are also positioned in media discourse as otherwise self-interested, individualised actors concerned primarily for their own health and personal finances while ‘doing their bit’ for a perceived range of food system problems. They are being ‘responsibilised’ as consumers for food system change and, based on the interview data, most accept this facet of their dietary

subjectification (see also Evans et al. 2017). The development of new food business opportunities in association with flexitarianism is undoubtedly engaging a much wider constituency of actors in reducing animal-based food consumption than previously has been possible. However, this is, necessarily, leaving market-based forms of governance to do the heavy lifting of food system change which is widely criticised (Evans et al. 2017; Johnston 2008; Sasatelli 2015). Also prominent in both data domains is evidence that speaks to the notion of flexitarianism as a form of 'anti politics'. This is a further dimension of our analysis that extends Harris's initial work on making neoliberal dietary subjectivities. The antipolitics of flexitarianism dampen down controversy around dietary transitions that involve animal-based foods, by "avoiding drama at the dinner table" both metaphorically and practically (see also Singer 2016; Morris 2018; Kemper and White 2021). Flexitarianism's antipolitics work against discussion and debate which is a necessary feature of social change

The limits to flexitarianism's politics of the possible cannot be ignored. They suggest that the proponents of flexitarianism, including food studies scholars, should at the very least be more cautious in their support for this dietary practice unless they are content with the individualised, market driven version of flexitarianism that currently dominates. Asking the question "is flexitarianism enough?" to reduce the health and environmental burden of global food choices suggests that a more qualified and potentially progressive perspective is emerging within flexitarian scholarship (Dagevos 2021, 537). Here we provide some suggestions on how the limits of flexitarianism's politics of the possible may be addressed in policy, practice and in research.

One way of countering the individualised, market based character of flexitarianism is through more collective, civil society and state based actions that promote and foster flexitarianism, including a greater sense of a flexitarian identity (Rosenfeld et al. 2020; Kemper and White 2021). A particular action here is public engagement, specifically the fostering of lively and open public debate about dietary change and transition in the public interest and the means by which this can be realised. New institutional arrangements are likely to be needed to enable such engagement and debate to take place as part of wider developments in UK national food policy (Lang et al. 2021). Other potential actions include public health messaging, public catering services, school and other community based

cooking classes which feature plant-based meals and therefore support flexitarian eating (Kaljonen et al. 2019; Kemper 2020; Kemper and White 2021). A further relevant action is the establishment of a civil society based Flexitarian Society that could work in partnership with organisations from other food governance domains to raise the profile of flexitarianism and support practical interventions. In this context it is interesting to note the recent establishment of the 'Reducetarian Foundation', an international, non-profit organisation which works collectively "to improve human health, protect the environment, and spare farm animals from cruelty by reducing societal consumption of animal products". The Reducetarian Foundation demonstrates the potential for institutional level action on reducing animal-based food consumption. Its emergence, activities and impact could comprise one aspect of future flexitarian scholarship informed by Renting et al.s (2013) concept of 'civic food networks' and food citizenship.

Second, reducing the consumption of meat, or other animal based foods, within flexitarianism leaves unattended the treatment of animals that provide the meat and other animal based foods that continue to be consumed, albeit in reduced quantities, within a flexitarian diet. This unattendance represents a significant curtailment of flexitarianism's politics of the possible. Nevertheless, some ways forward are suggested in part by the data themselves. In the media reporting the 'good flexitarian' is the 'ethical omnivore', the dietary subject who not only consumes less meat but is concerned to eat 'better', more ethically and humanely produced meat. This is an objective that is already being promoted in the UK by the Eating Better campaign, which brings together 60 civil society organisations to promote "less but better" meat production and consumption. A 'Flexitarian Society' or similar NGO, if established, should promote ethical omnivorism as part of its activities while public catering services should also ensure that their animal based foods are animal welfare accredited (Morris et al. 2021b; Lang et al. 2021). Additional public policy support is likely to be needed here that goes beyond consumption oriented initiatives to promote flexitarianism e.g. agricultural policy measures that not only incentivise welfare friendly animal based food production but also legislate against ethically questionable production systems. How production and consumption oriented governance interventions intersect to support or undermine the 'good flexitarian' or 'ethical omnivore' is arguably an important facet of further research into flexitarianism's politics of the possible.

Finally, we offer a reflection on addressing the limits of flexitarianism's politics of the possible through its anti-politics. As paradoxical as this may appear, flexitarianism's ability to avoid drama at the dinner table should, perhaps, not be underestimated or de-valued. Mealtimes can be stressful for families and households (Wilk 2010) and instituting a dramatic change away from a meat centric diet is likely to add to this stress. In this context, flexitarianism and its proliferating range of plant-based, animal food substitutes can be understood as a useful coping strategy for families that goes beyond addressing the challenge for individuals of reducing their meat related cognitive dissonance (Rothgerber 2020). Flexitarianism may provide a conciliatory position that is helpful in negotiating the complexities of domestic eating situations including their gendered dimensions (e.g. when male household members may favour meat more strongly than female members). This suggests a re-focusing and extension of flexitarian research away from individuals to family relationships, domestic spaces and the politics of the dinner table, an approach that has not featured prominently in research to date but could usefully build on Kemper's (2020) and Kemper and White's (2021) work on flexitarianism at different stages of the life cycle.

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[i] The concept of 'plant-centred' recognises that the current dietary excess of food from animals is a problem that needs to be addressed while leaving open the possibility that future food systems and ways of eating could either involve less food from animals or none but in both cases more plant-based foods will be produced and consumed.

[ii] This tri-fold classification of flexitarian motivations finds further support in a recent study which uses flexitarianism, as reported in the national print news media, to explore the theory of the social amplification of risk (Duckett et al. 2020) and offer a different, sociological perspective to the other work cited here.

[iii] We judged as unnecessary the exclusion of any article on the basis of type since our interest was to assess the range of perspectives on flexitarianism, wherever and by whomever they were included, across the print news media.

[iv] Only in a very small number of cases reported are the products of interest 'whole foods' e.g. portobello mushroom 'burgers' (Poulter, 29.4.2017, DMa), 'posh veg' (Turnbull, 26.5.2018, Ti) and 'deli-style thin sliced celeriac' (Smithers, 8.12.2018, Gu).

[v] We acknowledge other studies find that many flexitarians have no intention of taking their dietary 'journey' any further i.e., to become vegetarian or vegan (e.g., Kemper 2020). This dimension of flexitarian subjectivity and identity deserves further attention.