

The Politics of Animal Rights: Making the Human Connection

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Animal Rights is in the air, so much so that the term borders on becoming a buzzword and the cause itself the latest form of radical chic. Although Lewis Gompertz, Henry S. Salt and others put forth radically different views on attitudes and

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relations toward other animals more than a century ago, the publication in 1972 of essays by Brigid Brophy, Richard Ryder and others in the book, *Animals, Men and Morals* (London: Gollancz, 1971; New York: Taplinger, 1972) and the more popular book, *Animal Liberation*, by Peter Singer (New York Review, 1975) have sparked another wave of these views and have inspired a spate of college courses, articles in both academic and popular periodicals and radio and television programs on the subject of animal rights. We are reaching the public now with better analyses and better ways of explaining why humans should stop abusing and using other species.

Still, there are early warning signs of cause for concern. The now trendy label "Animal Rights" is being slapped over some of the same old animal welfare campaigns — old wine in new bottles, so to speak. Also, some animal rights advocates may be trampled in the rush to get media coverage, and the survivors may be "had" by media outlets which because of time or space limitations and constraints on content imposed by advertisers, characteristically deal with only the most sensational, superficial or harmless aspects of any subject. In both cases we face a danger that the full meaning and implications of the case for animal rights/liberation will be lost in the shuffle and be assigned some stereotyped image that has no relevance to its substance. If that happens, we go back into the closet of political irrelevance with other crank causes for another umpteen dozen years. In the meantime, animals will still suffer and more species will become extinct.

To head off these developments, I suggest that our movement emphasize the human connection, but I mean a real connection through personal and political action and not merely one of argument. One way to make this connection is to identify the forces and institutions under human control that perpetuate exploitation of animals; the other is to identify how animal-hating and -exploitative habits affect people.

In the first part of the effort, we are up against a consortium of industries and institutions that thrive on consumer demand for meat, milk, eggs, leather, drugs, medicines and a host of nonproducts from animals such as companionship, entertainment and biological data. The demand comes from a society with deeply rooted, long-held habits of using animals for food, work, sports and other purposes. It is a self-sustaining cycle: Industry profits, and in the case of nonprofit institutions, contributions are plowed back into research and development programs that reinforce the habits and bolster demand. Society might be willing to make changes, but the industries and institutions which it put in business tend to resist them. We will have to determine how to break these cycles if we want to advance the cause of animal rights/liberation. To do that, we will have to extend the sweep of our movement. Our promotion of vegetarian and vegan diets and our campaigns against specific abuses do not run far and deep enough to produce the necessary social, economic and technological changes.

This brings us to the second part of the human connection. We need to locate our cause on the map of human concerns so that it can be perceived and understood as relevant to other social and ethical causes. It has already been done on paper, but the movement as such does not follow through with the action behind its rhetoric. Singer's case for animal liberation begins with the position that discrimination based on race or gender is immoral and goes on to state that "speciesism", a related form of discrimination, is likewise immoral. One would expect that every animal rights/liberation advocate would then necessarily embrace this basic position. To be sure, many animal activists oppose racism and sexism, but more, it seems, out of coincidence than from animal liberation convictions. Sadly, I keep

coming across advocates of animal rights who either ignore or verbally attack the messages of (what should be) our companion movements against racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination among our own species. This strikes me as worse than a lapse in adhering to animal liberation principles. It is misanthropy and misogyny, that is, forms of speciesism — the very prejudice we claim to oppose. Moreover, since we are a political movement (if we are not, then what are we doing?), we ought to know better than to antagonize parallel, perhaps potentially supportive movements. If our moral principles against prejudicial attitudes and practices really mean anything to us, should we not have the personal conviction to act politically to further those principles? And if we as individuals do that, should not our movement as a whole follow through with political action? Without such commitment, we will be not only hypocrites but failures.

This is where our movement is most lacking. Our failure to speak, act and live according to our own basic principles isolates us from the rest of progressive politics; it makes us appear irrelevant (“kooky”), and it contributes to the perception that our case is academic rather than political.

The idea of extending our movement has been all too quietly discussed among animal rights/liberation advocates over the past few years. A friend wrote recently urging me to remind others that “the struggle for animal rights is a revolutionary movement aimed not merely at gaining protection for other creatures, but at a basic restructuring of institutions in our society.” Now this may sound too daring, too upsetting and too subversive for some people among the ranks of our movement. But then these people should not profess to want to bring an end to abuse and exploitation of animals. They should continue to function as most churches do, collecting money from the guilty, preaching platitudes and carrying on programs that are more palliative than curative.

Our movement must take stock of the cultural milieu in which we work. We are immersed in cultural attitudes and habits formed during several thousand years of a human economy based on the subjugation and exploitation of animals. We began this process some 10,000 years ago when we first brought animals under our dominion and control — ostensibly for our own benefit. In doing so, we invented oppression. We soon learned to apply the new invention to less powerful members of our own species — women, children or “outsiders” — and slavery was born. In her important book, *Woman's Creation* (Garden City, New Jersey: Anchor Press, 1979) feminist writer Elizabeth Fisher traces the archaeological evidence that shows how early animal-keeping societies (our cultural ancestors) gradually began to treat women like another kind of livestock, as instruments to be controlled or sacrificed. She documents how dramatic changes in these societies' perspectives on nature and sex roles are associated with war, slavery, prostitution and class oppression. Although the whole book is must reading, a few words from Fisher communicate just how relevant her findings are to our movement:

“...in a variety of ways the white man translated his ‘worst’ into his ‘best.’ Raw sexual aggression became retention of purity and brutal domination became faithful maintenance of civilized restraints. These translations, so necessary to the white man’s peace of mind, were achieved at devastating cost to another people.... In fearfully hoping to escape the animal within himself the white man debased the Negro, surely, but at the same time he debased himself.”

From this cursory foray into the literature on the historical roots of sexism and racism, I am convinced that there is much, much more weight to our cultural baggage of attitudes toward other animals than we have perhaps realized. While we must continue to employ science to search for alternatives to the exploitation of animals in the human economy, we must also employ history and science (anthropology, archaeology) to discover the ways in which our perspectives about ourselves, other animals and the natural world bear detrimentally on other social problems, especially on racism and sexism. In the process, I am certain that we will establish connections that will combine all progressive struggles against prejudice and oppression. This human connection to the cause for animal rights/liberation, if strengthened, would enhance our political effectiveness and accelerate progress toward a society unhampered by these lies and historical mistakes.

Although I have not yet made an exhaustive study, I believe that there is evidence that hatred, debasement and the other attitudes that made subjugation of animals emotionally comfortable to humans are interwoven among the historical roots of racism and misogyny. Ancient attitudes toward apes, for example, offer a revealing index to our attitudes about our own species in relation to other animals. Because the ape so resembled humans, it was the object of much neurotic hostility. To the Greeks and Romans, the ape was *turpissima bestia* (most vile beast), a hideous pretender to human status. In the early Christian era, the pejorative epithet "ape" was applied to all enemies of Christ and the ape became a *figura diabola* (representation of the devil) in art and literature. By the Middle Ages, apes symbolized humans in a state of degeneracy: laughable, contemptible and a reminder that we neglect "the spiritual aspect of our nature and unreasonably abandon ourselves to the sins of the flesh; in short, if we let our animal impulses get the better of us, then we sink to the level of ape..." (H.W. Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, London University Press, 1952). It took little thinking to extend this perspective to human differences, and sure enough, apes in art of the period are associated with Eve, the "fall of man," the victory of sensuality over Christian discipline, and feminine qualities in general. "Bestial," "oversexed" apes represented the "wantonness" and perhaps the "natural inferiority" of women.

Possessing this cultural outlook, Europeans of the 16th century were introduced to the anthropoid apes and to West African peoples at the same time and in the same place. As Winthrop D. Jordan states in his classic study on the historical origins of racism in the United States, *The White Man's Burden* (Oxford University Press, 1974):

"Given this tradition and the coincidence of contact, it was virtually inevitable that Englishmen should discern similarity between the man-like beasts and the 'beast-like' men of Africa. A few commentators went so far as to suggest that Negroes had sprung from the generation of ape-kind or that apes were themselves the offspring of Negroes and some unknown African beast.... By forging a sexual link between Negroes and apes, Englishmen were able to give vent to their feelings that Negroes were a lewd, lascivious, and wanton people."

Jordan points out how undertones of sexuality run throughout English accounts of West Africa and how the likening of Africans to beasts indicated the fear and loathing of the animal within humans. In the conclusion to his work, Jordan argues

that racism based on hatred of animals served not only to legitimize in the Christian mind the enslavement of another people, but that the racist subjugation of African people offered peace of mind that the beast in humans was under control:

"...The continuum between animals and people is felt by many. Small wonder then that the keeping and raising of animals had wide-ranging effects on the customs, art, and psyche of human society.

"...Now humans violated animals by making them their slaves. In taking them in and feeding them, humans first made friends with animals and then killed them. To do so, they had to kill some sensitivity in themselves. When they began manipulating the reproduction of animals, they were even more personally involved in practices which led to cruelty, guilt and subsequent numbness. The keeping of animals would seem to have set a model for the enslavement of humans, in particular the large-scale exploitation of women captives for breeding and labor, which is a salient feature of the developing civilizations."

Other feminist writers see the connection between animal exploitation and human oppression, and more than a few advocate ethical vegetarianism along with feminism. In her book, *The Violent Sex* (Guerneville, California: Bluestocking Books, 1978) Laurel Holliday writes:

"Peter Singer has presented the case (for vegetarianism) with the utmost philosophical clarity... My purpose here is not to recruit vegetarians so much as to make the point once again that the root of the problem is in our blithely taking power over the lives and deaths of other creatures whose suffering is in no way necessary for our survival. If we so easily take the lives of animals who are only a few evolutionary steps removed from us, what is to prevent us from doing the same to humans who are physically very different from us — of a different color, or speaking an unintelligible language, or "primitive" in their customs?" (emphasis in original)

In the introduction to their excellent vegetarian cookbook, *The Political Palate* (Bridgeport, Connecticut: Sanguinaria Publishing, 1980) the women of The Blood-root Collective explain the reasons for their diet:

"Our food is vegetarian because we are feminists. We are opposed to the exploitation, domination, and destruction which come from factory farming and the hunter with the gun. We oppose the keeping and killing of animals for the pleasure of the palate just as we oppose men controlling abortion or sterilization. We won't be part of the torture and killing of animals."

In their search to understand the roots of their own oppression, these feminists see the significant relationship between animal subjugation and human social relations — a relationship that our movement would do well to better illuminate. They note well how once animal subjugation, exploitation and the hatreds that go with them come to be legitimized in a culture they can be directed elsewhere. Indeed, the severest degrees of hatred and oppression of Blacks, Jews, Orientals and other "races" are still rationalized on the grounds that these humans are "just animals" and not entitled to moral consideration.