


WellBeing International
WBI Studies Repository

1993

Animal Rights: The Frontiers of Compassion

Henry Spira
Animal Rights International

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/hensart>

 Part of the [Animal Studies Commons](#), [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), and the [Politics and Social Change Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Spira, H. (1993). Animal rights: the frontiers of compassion. *Peace & Democracy News*, 7, 11-14.

This material is brought to you for free and open access by WellBeing International. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the WBI Studies Repository. For more information, please contact wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org.



Animal Rights: The Frontiers of Compassion

Henry Spira

There are those who feel that, where there is injustice, they have an obligation to do something about it. I think readers of *Peace & Democracy News* would tend to be part of the group that identifies with the powerless and the vulnerable—the victims, all those dominated, oppressed, and exploited. Readers of *PDN* who might be skeptical about the extent or importance of animal suffering may wish to ask themselves whether this is an issue that demands their attention as ethical people and social activists; whether there aren't a myriad of ways, large and small, to "make a difference."

I came to my current involvement in the animal rights movement after decades of involvement in social struggles. The driving force behind my participation in these struggles has been that I don't like to be pushed around, and I don't like to see others get pushed around either. And, over the years, I've come to expand my circle of concern to include nonhuman animals. It is the non-human animals whose suffering is the most intense, widespread, expanding, systematic, and socially sanctioned of all. In the United States alone, each year, some 20-50 million animals are used for research, testing, and education as if they were mere test tubes with whiskers, while another six billion animals live in hell before they are slaughtered to be eaten. Sentient beings are regarded as edibles, as lab tools, as clothing, and as objects for "sport."

British writer Brigid Brophy observed that "the exploitation of the other animal species by the human animal species is the most unscrupulous, the most cruel, the most nearly universal and the longest-lasting exploitation of one class by another class in the history of the world. And the pattern of mental blind spots that allows us to do it is a pattern very easily adaptable to any other of the (fashionable) tyrannies ... "

William M. Kunstler draws a similar parallel between the exploitation of humans and the suffering of non-human animals. In an August 1992 speech at the American Bar Association, Kunstler argued that "a growing revulsion against the atrocities (committed against farm animals) might well have a positive effect on reducing those practiced regularly on these shores against the aged, African-Americans, poor whites, Latinos, women, lesbians and gays, social activists, Native Americans and Asians, to name but a few of our perennial pariahs."

Still, Brophy notes that while many political activists include animal rights in their political agenda, others feel that bringing animal rights into politics diverts attention and energies from more important issues, from the real struggle. Brophy is concerned that those who practice "selective intellectual blindness" toward animals may find it easier to ignore the agonies of unpopular fellow humans.

Animal Rights and the Left

Why are so many leftists uncomfortable with both animal rights and environmental issues? There is the view that humans are in conflict with nature and animals, and need to dominate both. It is a philosophy of competition rather than interdependence; a defense of exploitation rather than a desire to live in harmony with the rest of nature. And there is the anthropocentric view that humans define themselves by stressing

the differences rather than the similarities between themselves and other animals, with animals relegated to instruments of labor.

Yet not all sectors of the left have subscribed to this view. Polish-born Rosa Luxemburg, in her 1917 letters from prison, identified with a team of buffaloes that had been unmercifully flogged by soldiers. She wrote, "the beast looked at me; the tears welled from my own eyes, the suffering of a dearly-loved brother could hardly have moved me more profoundly than I was moved by my impotence in face of this mute agony ... The strange and terrible men--blow upon blow and blood running from gaping wounds ... I am with you in my pain, my weakness and my longing." Luxemburg recognized that there is no victim's heartbeat that is not, somehow, also our own.

Socialist and vegetarian John Howard Moore, in *The Universal Kinship* (published in 1906 by Charles H. Kerr's socialist cooperative), wrote of his conception of "earth-life as a single process...every part related and akin to every other part," and recognized that "all beings are *ends* [and] no creatures are *means*."

Franklin Rosemont, in the recently published *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (University of Illinois Press, 1992), notes that the international animal rights movement was founded by a socialist, Henry Salt, with the 1892 publication of his "Animals' Rights--Considered in Relation to Social Progress." Salt, in another work, had argued that "in spite of their boasted progress in sciences and arts, my countrymen ... are still the victims of that old anthropocentric superstition which pictures men as the centre of the universe, and separated from the inferior animals--mere playthings made for his august pleasure and amusement by a deep intervening gulf."

And Rosemont lists an impressive array of abolitionist and feminist leaders, including William Ellery Channing, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Frances Willard, who recognized that animals had rights and many of whom took up the cause of vegetarianism.

Andrew Rowan, a Tufts University historian of the animal rights movement, notes that "the current animal rights movement contains many of those who were also part of the civil rights and feminist movements, opposed the Vietnam war, and worried about pollution. Those people expanded or are now expanding their concern to include animals..."

Another reason that leftists may ignore the animal rights controversy could be the fact that animal rights is not exclusively a leftist issue. It has garnered impressive support across the entire political spectrum. Sara Mills and Patrick Williams assessed the animal rights movement in Great Britain (*Marxism Today*, April 1988) and noted, "More than any other contemporary movement, its membership crosses boundaries of age, class and politics. (It is rare, for example, to find anywhere else women in twin-set and pearls marching alongside punks and anarchists to lobby their MPs) ... The movement can also probably lay claim to a greater variety of tactics and approaches than any other. In addition to the forms of demonstrating, lobbying and direct action, much use is made of expert opinion and of the techniques of mass advertising ... The combined effect of this action has been to bring animal rights to the attention of the political parties and all of them now realize that they must at least gesture in the direction of concern for animals."

Growing Momentum in the United States

Animal rights is gaining tremendous momentum in the United States as well. It is one of three issues generating the largest amount of congressional mail (*Electronic Constituent Message*, 1/27/88). It has made the covers of major publications, been the focus of national television programs, and has been chronicled by James M. Jasper and Dorothy Nelkin in *The Animal Rights Crusade* (The Free Press/Macmillan, 1992). It has rapidly gained credibility and legitimacy as a movement that has a rational

foundation, has political clout, and is making real progress. The term animal rights is no longer belittled with quotation marks.

Why this sudden, growing popularity? To put the issue in a larger context, I believe we must keep in mind that only fairly recently has it been generally accepted, even if only at the level of official rhetoric, that all humans, regardless of sex, race, nationality, religious beliefs or abilities are entitled to equal consideration--that they have the right not to be harmed. The next reasonable step in expanding the "circle of concern" is to include other species in the "circle."

Common sense, as well as familiarity with Charles Darwin, studies of animal awareness, and personal contact with cats and dogs and other animals all suggest that humans and nonhuman animals are not separated by an unbridgeable gap. There is an overlap of mental abilities, capacity for rational thought, ability to communicate, and concern for others. There are shared feelings. Like us, animals want to get a little pleasure out of life. (See *The Question of Animal Awareness: Evolutionary Continuity of Mental Experience*, Donald R. Griffin, Rockefeller University Press, 1981.)

Animal Rights Crusade writers Jasper and Nelkin suggest that this "powerful social movement [is] driven by a simple moral position: animals are similar enough to humans to deserve serious moral consideration. They are sentient beings, entitled to dignified lives, and they should be treated as ends, not as means. Protestors ask how we can love our pets, yet experiment on identical animals in laboratories; how we can cuddle one animal yet eat another."

As far back as 1789, Jeremy Bentham put it this way: "The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*, but, Can they *suffer*?" When it comes to suffering, what relevant difference is there between us and other animals? What gives us the right to violate the bodies and minds of other feeling beings? Unless we subscribe to the tenets of tyranny, that might makes right, there is no way to justify our harming of other species.

Peter Singer Stops Eating Meat

The modern movement for animal rights was launched in 1973 by Peter Singer, an Australian philosopher. Singer may well have had personal reasons to challenge the concept of tyranny. Three of his four grandparents were murdered in the Holocaust. In the book he is currently working on, he reveals that:

The crucial change came when, at Oxford, I met some other graduate students who were ethical vegetarians. They challenged me to justify, in terms of any defensible ethical theory, a diet based on the presupposition that sentient creatures like pigs, hens, and calves are mere things for us to rear in confining stall and cages, inside the darkened sheds of modern factory farms ... I learned that agribusiness has turned animal production into a system that acknowledges animal suffering only when it interferes with profits. After a month of reading and debate ... I had to recognize that I could not justify it ... Unless I changed my diet, my hypocrisy was going to confront me at every mealtime...

Back in 1973 I came across Peter Singer's essay on animal liberation. In it, he argued that it's wrong to harm others, and that we cannot set limits on who those others are. His ideas appeared consistent with civilization's best traditions. Singer argued that animal liberation is a matter of justice, not sentimentality. And Singer contested the notion that only humans matter.

[Some claim that] our own species must come first ... But why should we accept this claim? Only 200 years ago, it might have seemed just as 'contrary to human nature' for us to take great care for the interests of other races ... When I see myself as one among

others, the relevant point of the comparison is that others also have feelings, others can also suffer or be happy. Any being capable of feeling anything, whether pain or pleasure or any kind of positive or negative state of consciousness, must therefore count.

Epilogue to *In Defence of Animals*

Fighting in defense of animal rights is a matter of consistency. We cannot be selective about whom we defend from being dominated, experimented upon, confined or butchered for dinner. What American society sanctions with regard to animals for dinner would land one in jail if inflicted on the familiar companion cat or dog--yet the pain each feels is exactly the same. We are shocked by violence against infants and the elderly because they are so defenseless. Non-human animals are just as vulnerable.

Animals as Economic Resource

The problem is not the odd sadist getting his thrills out of torturing animals. It is the basic structure of our society, which considers animals just another economic resource to be exploited, like inanimate coal or lumber. And while there is increasing recognition that the suffering of animals does matter, this has not yet been translated into a significant reduction in the universe of animal pain and suffering.

What can be done? Experience indicates that struggles for justice are not won, nor are significant reforms achieved, by politely limiting oneself to rules laid down by the power structure. The reason is obvious. The powerful do not design rules that encourage outsiders to take away or share their power.

After reading Singer's essay, I enrolled in a course he taught at New York University. And when the course ended, a handful of people from his class met at my apartment to plan what we could do to begin changing things. In developing our strategies, we adapted methods that had proven effective in movements for human rights, including my own experiences in the civil rights and maritime union democracy movements.

The American Museum of Natural History

Our first target focused on a series of painful and, we claimed, useless cat-sex experiments performed at the prestigious American Museum of Natural History in New York City for twenty years.

We began by trying to talk with Museum officials, but they refused to speak with us. Stonewalled, we circulated copies of the Museum's documents. These outlined how the experimenters planned to deafen, blind, and destroy the sense of smell of cats by removing parts of their brains, and to then observe their sexual performance with the intent of transferring this information to human experience. The point we were able to make was that this sort of research gives science a bad name, because it resulted only in creating victims, not in relieving any human pain.

Every weekend, for 18 months, we demonstrated outside the Museum. At first, the Museum refused to budge, but the pressure grew to the point where 121 members of Congress questioned the National Institutes of Health (NIH) about its funding of the cat-sex experiments. The demonstrations began to hurt the Museum's image (see *Science*, 10/8/76, "Animal Rights: NIH Cat Sex Study Brings Grief to New York Museum" by N. Wade). Then the NIH stopped funding the experiments, and the laboratory was dismantled.

This protest ended two decades of pointless experimentation and saved 60 felines from pain and suffering. It also sent a clear message to animal researchers that they would be held accountable by a public that does not support pain where there is no significant gain.

We had suggested early in the campaign that the Museum's death and pain-dealing methods of research were turning curious and sensitive youth away from biology and that elegant and humane research would inspire and intrigue imaginative youth with its creative beauty and challenge. In our next campaign, we urged industry to unleash its scientific creativity to develop effective and reliable non-animal safety tests.

The Draize Test

David Smyth, the late head of the British Research Defense Society, which supports animal experimentation, had suggested in the late 1970s that the Draize test, which measures the harmfulness of chemicals by observing the damage caused in the eyes of conscious rabbits, would be a good candidate for replacement by non-animal-using methods. Based on this suggestion from a leader of the science community, we urged the U.S. cosmetics industry flagship--Revlon--to develop alternatives to the Draize.

At first, like the Museum, Revlon was unresponsive. Then we publicized the issue by running full-page ads asking "How many rabbits does Revlon blind for beauty's sake?" and distributed photographs of the Draize test.

The public soon voiced its outrage at cosmetic companies hyping a dream of beauty while creating a nightmare for the rabbits. And within a year, Revlon recognized that change was inevitable--the company funded the first Draize alternatives research program at Rockefeller University. (*Lab Animal*, January-February 1981, "The Draize Test," by L. Harriton)

We then contacted Avon, the second largest cosmetic company, for additional support, and within a few days Avon agreed to provide the initial funds to launch the Center for Alternatives to Animal Testing at Johns Hopkins University. (*Alternatives to Laboratory Animals* (UK), 11/90, "Alternatives: A Socio-political Commentary from the USA," by A.N. Rowan and K.A. Andrutis.)

These initiatives were the "big bang" needed to transform the search for alternatives from an animal rights issue into a legitimate scientific enterprise that receives large-scale support from multi-billion dollar corporations and is linked with the most respected medical research institutions. (The New York Times, 2/28/88, "Beyond White Mice and Rabbits," by B. Feder.)

Within ten years of our ads challenging Revlon, there was a total turnaround. In April 1990, Revlon placed full-page ads in major womens' magazines, publicizing a "Pure Skin Care" line with its "100% non-animal tested formula." In a scant decade, a whole new discipline, in vitro (non-animal) toxicology has entered the scientific mainstream, propelled by the scientific enthusiasm and excitement generated by the search for alternatives to traditional animal testing methods.

Pressures to find further alternatives continue. Procter & Gamble, the leader in promoting alternative testing methods, has spent more than \$14 million since 1986 on alternative methods, and their researchers have published or presented more than 100 papers on alternatives. And pharmaceutical giant Hoffman-La Roche reduced the use of animals by 67 percent through such methods as computer technologies that predict biological effects.

Farm Animal Well-Being

It has been said that if we each had to kill the animals we eat, the number of vegetarians would rise dramatically and rapidly. But most people don't see, don't feel, don't hear the suffering of animals for dinner. Public awareness of the realities of raising, transport, and slaughter of today's food animals is

almost nonexistent Pigs, veal calves, and birds are all victims of a system that routinely denies them the most basic freedoms: to stand up, lie down, extend their limbs or spread their wings, and tum around.

A consensus is developing within the animal protection community that having made an impact in reducing the use of animals in product testing, we can now campaign for the six billion farm animals suffering from birth to slaughter every year in the U.S. (*The New York Times Magazine*, 11/26/89, "Pressuring Perdue," by B.J. Feder.) Because factory farming methods account for 95 percent of animal suffering in this country, every 1 percent reduction in farm animal pain will accomplish more than all previous animal protection campaigns.

Each of us can make a difference in breaking the brutal practice of factory farming. The "three Rs"--Reduction, Replacement, and Refinement--encourage everyone to commit themselves to the degree they feel comfortable. While some are ready to commit to a meatless diet for ethical reasons (Replacement), others may be willing to eat fewer animals on ethical and health grounds (Reduction). And everybody can agree that we must relentlessly pressure industry and government to develop, promote, and implement systems that reduce the suffering of farm animals as long as people continue to eat them (Refinement).

Imagine the impact of one meatless meal a day, or cutting down on portions of meat. Such a change would mean a huge reduction in animal suffering while benefiting human health--since it is now clearly understood that people are healthier when they consume more grains, fruits, and vegetables and less meat. And with a non-violent food lifestyle, we save animals and encourage discussion. Which would you prefer, a stroll through a slaughter house or an apple orchard?

Novelist Alice Walker concludes that "the animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for whites, or women for men." To be consistent, we cannot be selective about which groups of beings are worthy of our concern. Non-human animals, by any standard, are among the most exploited of all sentient beings. Those of us who oppose domination and exploitation need to speak for the voiceless and try to have an impact on preventable suffering. Can we claim to be enlightened, or even "civilized," if we acquiesce in animal suffering?

Recommended Citation:

Spira, H. (1993). Animal rights: the frontiers of compassion. *Peace & Democracy News*, 7, 11-14.