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Henry Spira
Animal Rights International

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Fighting for Animal Rights: Issues and Strategies

Henry Spira

Animal liberation is also human liberation. Animal liberationists care about the quality of life for all. We recognize our kinship with all feeling beings. We identify with the powerless and the vulnerable—the victims, all those dominated, oppressed, and exploited. And it is the nonhuman animals whose suffering is the most intense, widespread, expanding, systematic, and socially sanctioned of all. What can be done? What are the patterns underlying effective social struggles?

All 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. In addition, those who make rules can unmake and circumvent their own rules to suit their convenience and interests. As long as one remains boxed into their game, those who run the power system know they need not take one seriously and therefore will pay little attention to pleas for change.

Power concedes nothing without effective struggle. It was only after a determined effort by a well organized group of the physically handicapped that bureaucratic inertia was broken. They occupied the Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) offices, conducted an all night vigil at the home of the HEW Secretary, and demonstrated at a presidential function. Within ten days, a do-nothing policy was forced to give way to new regulations forbidding discrimination against the physically handicapped. An organizer commented, "We won because we had strong political connections, and mostly because we took matters into our own hands."

And only after the women's movement became mass action oriented, fighting its way into the political arena, prepared to make it costly to those who would keep them out, did women win any political and economic concessions.

The meek don't make it. But audacity must be fused with meticulous attention to program, strategy, and detail.

TARGETING

Before taking an action, we must consider what our priorities are, what we are most concerned about. The priorities of animal liberationists should be based on the number of victims, the intensity of their suffering, and our ability to effect change. The main bases of animal slavery, as analyzed in Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, are exploitation for food and as "lab tools."

We are surrounded by systems of oppression, and they are all related. But in order to influence the course of events, we must sharply focus on a single significant injustice, on one clearly limited goal at a time.

One criterion for choosing a target is that the mere statement of the issue tends to place the adversary on the defensive: Is another shampoo worth blinding rabbits to you? Do you want your tax monies spent to mutilate cats deliberately in order to observe the sexual performance of crippled felines?

And the goal must be winnable, with the possibility of expanding ripple effects. Success is then used as a stepping stone toward still larger struggles and more significant victories.

The animal research industry cloaks itself in the noble cause of protecting health and saving lives. We wanted to spotlight the lack of real scientific payoff in make-work, tax-supported bizarre horrors. At the American Museum of Natural History in New York, there was a 20-year history of deliberately mutilating cats and kittens in order to observe their sexual performance that we believed needed to be stopped. The public came to perceive the Museum experiments as a gross, grotesque, crude, useless perversion of science. We created a broad base of support, and in the process, helped change the ideological climate so that animal experimenters can be held accountable to an increasingly critical public. The campaign began in June 1976. By December 1977, the American Museum of Natural History's cat-sex experiments had stopped and the labs were dismantled.

WE CAN HAVE IMPACT

Basically the strategy in all struggles for freedom is similar. Generally, the other side has all the power, and the oppressed have only justice and the capacity to mobilize people on their side. To succeed, we need much expertise and credibility, and must carefully work out partial, short-term goals to reach people and effect the changes we desire.

Through meticulous preparation, a small group can release an enormous amount of energy. After all, the power structure has problems and weaknesses that render it susceptible to successful attack, and these offer us the needed openings. The task is to find these openings and to move in boldly.

To create bridges connecting us with the public's current awareness, we must first check an issue out with a wide variety of people, and listen carefully to their responses. How do they react? Can they feel themselves in the place of the victim? Are they outraged? What in particular do they focus on? Will this action propel their consciousness forward?

THE CAMPAIGN

We need personally to research and analyze all available verifiable materials, to find patterns and connections, and to see the vulnerable points that offer us maximum leverage.

We provide a framework for people to organize themselves through articles and activity sheets that must be clear, logical, and defensible in public debate.

Our current campaign concerns the Draize Test: the routine use of the eyes of unanesthetized rabbits to test hazardous substances. This test is vividly painful. We all know what it feels like to get a little soap in our eye. In addition, it is also unreliable, with extreme variation in the results. It could be replaced. And finally, the goal is trivial and frivolous: blinding rabbits for the sake of yet another mascara, yet another oven cleaner.

We went as far as we could within the system. For 18 months prior to our public campaign, we sought a meaningful dialog leading to a collaborative approach. We presented Revlon with scientific suggestions on alternatives. It was only after Revlon refused to be responsive to our concerns that we launched demonstrations and a boycott of Revlon products.

COALITION POLITICS

We organized a single-issue coalition that now includes over 400 different organizations, with constituencies in the millions, banded together to abolish the Draize Test. When enough of us band together around a single issue, the tide can be turned.

A coalition can assemble different elements to maximize pressure and destabilize a target by approaching it from every direction on every front. It is an orchestrated, purposeful action.

Participation should be possible at whatever level allows organizations and individuals to feel comfortable. Some will boycott, demonstrate, and march, others will not. Organizations can get media publicity. The Millennium Guild placed full page ads in major papers and thereby created a turning point. Individuals can write letters to the editor where one can reach millions without spending a penny.

Within nine months of publicly launching our anti-Draize Test campaign, Revlon pioneered the funding for non-animal alternatives with a \$750,000 Rockefeller University project, followed by Avon, Estee Lauder, and Bristol-Myers. Within one year, over \$2,500,000 was committed by multibillion dollar corporations towards phasing animals out of the laboratories, and the Johns Hopkins Center for Alternatives to Animal Testing was established.

Bills were introduced in the Senate and House encouraging government agencies to promote alternatives to Draize testing, and the issue was spotlighted on network TV and featured in science-oriented publications. Ideas, combined with clout, sensitized much of the research community, industry, and government to our concern.

ACCENTUATING THE POSITIVE

We have to work with people's perceptions. Whether they are true or not, we cannot ignore them. They are part of the political reality. One perception is that those who challenge live animal research are anti-intellectual, anti-science sentimentalists. But, we accentuated the positive. We offered realistic options that, from the scientists' own perspective, are more productive.

We had suggested earlier that the American Museum of Natural History's death and pain-dealing methods of research were turning curious and sensitive youth away from biology; but that elegant and humane research would inspire and intrigue imaginative youth with its creative beauty and challenge.

And in our current anti-Draize Test campaign, we have urged industry to unleash its scientific creativity to develop effective and reliable non-animal tests.

EFFECTIVE TACTICS FOR CATALYSTS

Do not start off being personally hostile to your potential adversary. Suggest reasonable options, realistic collaborative approaches. Such an approach might work, and if it does not, you are still ahead. You have gained extra credibility for having tried, and have very likely blunted in advance much of the criticism sure to result when you then move from words to action.

Thus, we need always to emphasize that there is a better way. That non-intrusive science is more imaginative, more elegant, and likely to produce more relevant data. And that scientists need to initiate productive new departures in biology for ethical and scientific reasons.

By tackling one issue at a time, we can isolate our opponent rather than ourselves. We are not confronting a monolith. Some animal researchers have scruples against painful experiments that have no serious application, and may join their voices with ours.

And our adversaries can also be split. Thus, the chief Museum cat-sex experimenter publicly bemoaned being abandoned by his peers. They did not want to be identified with a grotesque, indefensible experiment while it was being spotlighted, though their own research efforts might be similar.

No congressional bill, no legal gimmickry, by itself, will save the animals. The courts can, at best, open up the possibility for us to intervene in defense of animals. But, the courts will not act until effective protests disrupt the system's orderly operation. Laws function to maintain and justify the status quo. In movement-related issues, laws are changed to keep disturbances at a minimum. And the legal process often deflects struggles into parliamentary gabberly and inaction. The legal front is no substitute for action. It must be organically connected with mass struggles to produce social change.

THE ROAR OF MANY WATERS

Society programs us into inconsistency, into being kind to household pets while other animals suffer from birth to death. And society also programs us into not focusing on the true levers of power. We therefore need to study the realities consciously, in a detached way, as a guide to action. Who is profiting and who is calling the tune? And how does the rest of the world perceive our concerns?

The majority of people would certainly prefer that animals not suffer, were the matter brought to their attention. Yet the intense pain of billions of animal victims continues unabated.

To fight successfully for the rights of animals, we need priorities, programs, effective organization, imagination, tenacity, expertise, and a good sense of strategy and tactics as we create bridges with the public's current awareness and move forward.

And, we need to remember the words of the Abolitionist leader Frederick Douglas--"If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favour freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the roar of its many waters. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

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