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Hyperactivism: The Phenomenon of Doing Without Achieving

Henry Spira

For some time the animal rights movement has been trapped in the nightmare in which you run as hard as possible but can't seem to move forward. For all its growing resources and considerable energy, the movement is barely scratching the surface of animal suffering and misery.

This is a tragedy given the remarkable progress made in the 1970s, a period in which activists convinced society that the suffering of animals matters. Today, polls suggest that more than 95% of Americans care about the well-being of animals. Active supporters of animal protection in the U.S. are counted in the tens of millions, and committed activists in the hundreds of thousands or even millions. In the past two decades, since animal rights emerged as a political force, the movement has built a high profile -- raising hundreds of millions of dollars in the process and achieving notable success along the way.

Twenty years ago, animal activists challenged the status quo in lab animal testing, focusing on the Draize blinding test and the LD50 death tests. The victories which followed reshaped scientific and corporate thinking and set the stage for a new science of alternatives to the traditional use of laboratory animals. For animal protectionists an important bridge was crossed. But instead of moving on to tackle even greater areas of animal suffering, many activists continue to run back and forth across the same bridge.

Looking at the universe of animal suffering in America today, we see pain dominated by the more than seven billion farm animals. Roughly 95% of all animal misery is endured by animals raised for food. Why then has the movement allocated only a fraction of its time and resources to their plight! This is something that is only now, slowly, beginning to change. Sometimes it seems as if more time is spent discussing whether or not the public functions of animal organizations should be vegetarian than fighting to protect farm animals. Meanwhile, farm animal suffering is on the increase.

Many of Us, Few Achievements

How can so many activists with so many resources achieve so little? Of course, this problem is not unique to the animal movement; there's a tendency among most social change organizations to repeat old strategies that have produced success in the past rather than thinking ahead to the future. Lack of imagination and bureaucratic inertia become the norm and organizations just keep doing more of the same, year after year.

Rather than moving ahead, looking for new horizons, animal protectionists too often settle into the creeping routinism for which we criticize animal researchers. Campaigns such as the ongoing bashing of cosmetic companies have evolved into mindless ritual without beginning or end. What, other than raising funds, is gained by activists continuing to attack companies who have spent tens of millions of dollars responding to the issues raised nearly 20 years ago? Clearly, this discourages the corporate world from being responsive to new activist concerns. In addition, it encourages cynicism inside and outside the movement.

Ironically, it may be the financial success of many animal organizations that is proving to be the largest barrier to progress in the farm animal arena. Faced with the need to maintain budgets and infrastructures,

many organizations are pressured to choose campaigns on the basis of popular appeal rather than the urgent need to fight animal suffering.

If the public is more predisposed to opening its wallet for bunny rabbits than seven billion chickens, it is not because they are any less deserving but that the movement has yet to make a compelling enough case for their misery. It's worth remembering that some 20 years ago, the public did not appear concerned with cosmetics testing on animals until the issue was spotlighted through full-page advertisements in the *New York Times*.

Failure to assess priorities and undue emphasis on lesser problems can also muddy the real issues. For the last few years environmental organizations have wallowed in their victory in persuading the fast food industry to switch to more environmentally friendly hamburger packaging. The fact of the matter is that the contents of the packaging represent the real environmental threat, yet this continues to be largely ignored.

Focusing on the Fundamentals

The aforementioned would suggest that the movement lacks a common objective. While none of us can define exactly what an overarching strategy should look like, we can probably agree on certain fundamentals. One such fundamental, it seems, would be to acknowledge that the general awareness building which was necessary in the 1970s and perhaps in the 1980s, needs to be refocused. Right now, the urgent need is to focus on making a difference in the lives of billions of farm animals.

We should try to persuade the public to include all animals in its circle of concern. In its April 1, 1996 cover story, *Barron's*, the Dow Jones business and financial weekly reported that "surveys show that seven out of 10 American pet owners now think of their pets as children, and they are willing to spend on their pets as if they were children." There is no unbridgeable gap between companion animals and farm animals, though it may be convenient for those who eat animals to think that there is. Is it not possible for the public to share some of their affection for their non-human roommates with their roommates' close relatives? The needs and opportunities have never been greater. And 95% of the American public wants to end animal suffering. Within that framework, we need to assess how to use our energies more productively.

Let's get out of the past and stop ignoring the vast majority of animal misery. Activists need to remember the objectives and why we're doing what we're doing. This involves a realistic recognition of the problems to be addressed, a sense of what's possible, the ability to search out and seize opportunities as they appear and, whenever necessary, to switch gears. This all fits within the context of a stepwise, incremental movement. Rather than day-dreaming about perfect and absolute solutions, activists need to push for the most rapid progress. Above all, we need to continually assess what differences we are making. Are we accomplishing all that we can to reduce the total universe of animal pain and suffering? Clearly, we have the tools. Do we have the will?

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Dear Satya,

I disagree with Henry Spira's major points. ["Hyperactivism," Satya 2:12]

According to Spira, the movement should allocate resources based on the number of animals suffering. By his logic, we totally forget circus animals, since they number only a few thousand, and would be but a blip on Spira's scale. Should we tell circus animals to "wait" until the number of suffering farm animals declines to a comparable level?

Attacking the Life Pleasure of eating for the sake of animals widely regarded (however arrogantly) as stupid and dirty is tantamount to playing pool with a rope. Most people will make dietary changes for health reasons, and then only with sound nutritional information and availability of appealing foods. Compassion for chickens and pigs will occur in due time, but the human self-interest arguments of health, environment and taxpayer dollars are the best way to ensure the "most rapid progress." I recommend ethical arguments depending on the audience; secondary or tertiary status is the usual outcome.

Spira used self-interest issues in his full-page newspaper advertisement targeting bacterial contamination of chicken: a masterpiece. Unfortunately, he does not attack the vivisectors with anywhere near the same degree of ferocity, and seems to believe we should allow supply-side economics to eliminate animal research. Not only does this denigrate the successes of consumer boycotts, but cruelty-free cleaning agents are non-existent in most large commercial grocery stores. Do we expect non-cruelty-free manufacturers to disturb their collective monopoly?

One of the "majors," Proctor & Gamble, earned Spira's public pleas for leniency a few years ago even though they had helped create and finance a multi-million dollar pro-vivisection business coalition. P & G (according to In Defense of Animals) also spews tons of toxic compounds into the environment ("justifying" more vivisection!).

While Mr. Spira would not give the time of day to Frank Perdue, November 1993 found him hobnobbing with the vivisectors at the World Congress on Alternatives and Animal Use in the Life Sciences in Baltimore, sponsored by the John Hopkins University (JHU) Center for Alternatives to Animal Testing (CAAT). Although he was not alone (PETA, HSUS and APSCA were also present), myself and 30 other anti-vivisectors protested the Congress. The Congress (and CAAT itself) reaffirmed that "animal use ... advances science and our basic understanding of biology and disease" (quote from Congress program). Indeed, are JHU, DuPont, Ciba-Geigy, Hazelton Labs and P & G (Congress sponsors) really interested in stopping animal research? It seems like they are trying to placate the moderates and marginalize the "Radicals": a tactic straight from the American "Murder" Association's infamous plan to destroy the animal movement.

With the significant support and funding of the regulators, vivisection is the most massive health, scientific and medical fraud ever perpetrated. While the vivisectors publicly report that animal research saves sick babies, they admit privately that their data is not scientifically relevant to human disease (due to differences between all animal species -- human or non-human -- in metabolism, physiology, etc.). Vivisectors hate being confronted with these scientific arguments -- because they know they can't win. On the other hand, despite our concerns for the bunny, they can easily refute the standard animal rights arguments by exploiting America's ignorance, fear of disease and naivete about the politics of science, health and research. What's more, most of the major animal groups minimize this fact, and Spira does not help matters when he tries to elicit sympathy for the very perpetrators of the vivisectionist conspiracy, no matter how much money they claim to have spent.

We can only get off the treadmill by confronting all the issues with equal vigor and human self-interest strategies.

Mark E. Rifkin, Baltimore, MD

Henry Spira replies:

Rifkin's major complaints are that I focus exclusively on farm animals and ignore the suffering of all other animals; am a sell-out artist who hobnobs with the enemy and defends vivisection; and don't always recognize the importance of framing issues with the self-interest of the audience in mind.

My position has always been that the suffering of every animal matters. We don't want to exclude any animals from the area of our concern, we are urging expansion. Not to ignore the 5%, but also not to ignore the 95% of animal suffering -- the eight billion farm animals who don't have the looks to make them popular.

Partially due to effective activism, the number of animals suffering in laboratories has been reduced by an estimated 50%. In contrast, while two billion farm animals were slaughtered every year in the 1960s, the numbers have since quadrupled. Now, it's eight billion.

Rifkin and I can probably agree on our long-term vision -- a world with no violence, no exploitation and no domination, where we live in harmony with other humans, other animals and the environment. Where we differ is on how we're going to get there.

Too often, the animal advocacy movement has been viewed as a holy war with the world divided between saints and sinners. Just as often the war cry has been "all or nothing," -- with the almost inevitable result being nothing.

I believe it's our task to bring the elements together to most rapidly reduce the pain and suffering of animals on the farm, in the labs, in the circus and anywhere else. In "hobnobbing" with industry, government and academia I've never abandoned my ideals, but the question is how do you get from here to there. We see issues as problems with solutions.

During our early campaign to abolish the Draize rabbit-blinding test, we had a great deal of access to Revlon's vice-president. But after a year passed and nothing happened, we ran full-page ads in the *New York Times* asking, "How many rabbits does Revlon blind for beauty's sake?" The point isn't to socialize for its own sake, but to get results. And when dialogue isn't getting anywhere, then we shift to confrontation.

Ongoing dialogue, or "hobnobbing," should not be lightly dismissed. In the early 1990s, we saw an opportunity to abolish the traumatic practice of shackling and hoisting conscious animals. Many unsuccessful campaigns had been waged around this issue. In a low profile campaign, with letters, phone calls and a few face-to-face meetings, we were able to persuade the nation's largest meatpackers to install much less traumatic upright restrainer systems. Today, as a result, shackling and hoisting of large animals has been largely phased out.

We totally agree with Rifkin that successful strategies appeal to self-interest. And that's how we've operated from Day One towards the public and towards those we negotiate with. In our most frequently used ad, we link meat-eating with cancer and heart disease, and environmental destruction. And when a corporation becomes responsive, we hail their initiative and urge others to follow suit. It defies common

sense to bash a company or an institution that pioneers the development and implementation of alternatives.

In our recent campaign against the face-branding of cattle we tried to talk with USDA decision-makers. When that didn't work, we ran full-page ads in major dailies to generate public outrage. The USDA reported that it had received more than 12,000 written comments, not counting petitions. When the USDA responded in a proactive fashion, we publicly thanked the USDA with full-page ads. This has opened additional doors for us, including the USDA launching an Interagency Animal Well-Being Task Force to improve conditions for farm animals in all areas.

Beyond the issue of numbers there is another critical argument for expanding our efforts to farm animal suffering. In my 1988 Coordinators Report, I quoted Peter Singer's observation that "the total abolition of animal experimentation will not, I believe, come about until the total abolition of (at least) factory farming. The simple fact that we eat animals dominates our attitude toward them. Unless we change this attitude toward them, we will never achieve our goal."

In essence we believe that all animals deserve our concern and are willing to dialogue with industry, academia, government and animal experimenters if, and only if, it results in moving us towards our goal of reducing and abolishing animal suffering.

Recommended Citations:

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