

Treating women like meat

Geov Parrish - WorkingForChange

03.20.02 - What's gotten into PETA?

Animal rights activists and groups can be notorious for the single-mindedness of their advocacy, willfully ignoring on other oppressions in order to highlight and change our society's shameful abuses of animals. And People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the country's largest and best-known advocacy group for animal rights (as opposed to more service-oriented groups like the Humane Society or PAWS), has always had an unsettling habit of pushing the envelope in inappropriate ways in order to draw attention to its issues -- and of exploiting and mistreating its young, often female staffers and volunteers. But PETA's recent embrace of the exploitation of women's bodies to agitate for animal rights is beyond dubious. It's a level of offensiveness that would raise an uproar if it were coming from a right-wing political group.

PETA's treatment of women is more than a one-time error in judgment, and it's more than a trend. It's a clearly calculated campaign to stand out in a saturated media environment by appealing to the most prurient possible tastes. Consider:

- A television ad in which a woman is being beaten to death with a bat in a subway, with a man ripping off her fur coat, and the inscription: "What if you were killed for your coat?" The ad was pulled by PETA as "too violent in the wake of September 11," but it remained on PETA's web site.
- Another ad, this one print, with a blonde woman in an Uncle Sam outfit -- unbuttoned with cleavage showing -- and the inscription "I want YOU to go vegetarian." The woman, it turns out, is Playboy's Kimberly Hefner. The ad was distributed as a cutout poster in "Stars and Stripes," the newspaper of the nation's armed forces, distributed around the world to soldiers as they bomb away. PETA has praised the military's operations in Afghanistan, because its propagandistic food drops were, more or less inadvertently, vegan.
- Another ad, with another young, blonde woman in a come-hither centerfold pose and the bizarre inscription "Pleather Yourself."
- Another ad, featuring yet another young blonde woman, this time naked, in a classroom setting, only partly turned to the blackboard (underdeveloped cleavage showing) on which she is repeatedly writing "I'd rather go naked than wear fur." The model, it turns out, is Dominique Swain, star of *Lolita*, and a PETA press release touts her as "the youngest star ever to pose au natural for PETA's anti-fur campaign."

For decades, feminists have linked animal rights with women's rights; some of the earliest modern women's liberation protests involved beauty pageants in which women explicitly decried being treated like meat. Animal rights groups have always relied upon women for the bulk of their organizing, and any serious critique of patriarchal values has always described male dominance and mistreatment of everything: women, animals, the environment.

It's more than a little surreal to have the country's best-known animal rights group seemingly endorsing male violence in virtually all its forms: militarism, male violence against women, objectification of women, even, with the use of a naked actress associated with *Lolita*, statutory rape -- in the service of ostensibly encouraging people not to commit violence against animals. It's also extraordinarily discrediting, not just to PETA, but to the entire animal rights movement.

PETA's ads would be bad enough if they had been executed by, say, The Gap or some auto company. They would be incomprehensibly offensive promoting a right wing political cause. But in this case they're being trotted out in the service of an ethic that is supposed to oppose oppression, not embrace it. The ads lend unfortunate credence to the long-standing, often spurious rap against animal rights activists -- that they care more about animals than people. Moreover, it makes the rap specific to 51 percent of humanity. The modern-day PETA, it seems, loves animals; it just hates women.

Reclaim History!

Things that happened on Mar. 20 that you never had to memorize in school:

43 B.C.: Birth of Ovid (43 BC-17 AD), Sulmona, in the Abruzzi. Banished from Rome, ostensibly for writing "The Art of Love," a guide to lovemaking.

1815: Switzerland declares permanent neutrality in all wars.

1852: Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" published, provoking a wave of hatred against slavery. The first novel to sell a million copies. Stowe's novel would have aroused condemnation today for its patronizing view of African Americans, but at this time the controversy concerns Stowe's depiction of slaves as human beings. By the end of 1853, more than 300,000 copies sell, an astronomical figure at the time. Within three years, Southerners respond with 30 anti-Tom novels aimed at reversing public sympathies.

1863: Pres. Lincoln makes proclamation offering lands of the Cowlitz (near Longview, Wash.) for sale, even through the tribe had never signed a treaty relinquishing them.

1896: U.S. Marines invade Nicaragua. It becomes habit-forming.

1899: Martha Place becomes the first woman to be executed by electrocution. She had tried to kill her 17-year-old stepdaughter with acid and an ax, but wound up smothering her with a pillow. Sing Sing Prison, New York.

1970: Collision involving the tanker Othello, in Tralhavet Bay, Sweden, results in a 60,000 - 100,000 ton oil spill.

1983: One hundred fifty thousand people (1 percent of the country's population) join in anti-nuclear rallies across Australia.

1985: Bolivian Army crushes general strike.

1996: Twenty-five arrested at Dept. of Justice in Washington, D.C., and 27 others in San Francisco, during protests demanding freedom for Native American political prisoner Leonard Peltier.

1997: Three hundred family farmers protest factory-style hog farms at a National Pork Producers Council meeting. Urbandale, Iowa.