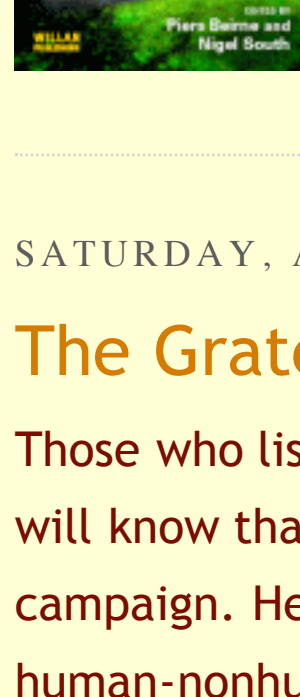


ON HUMAN-NONHUMAN RELATIONS

A SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF SPECIESISM.



SATURDAY, APRIL 7, 2007

The Grateful Dead.

Those who listen to the podcasts of vegan advocate Erik Marcus will know that he is a big fan of HSUS' current 'cage-free' eggs campaign. He is also an opponent of the abolitionist position on human-nonhuman relations. The reason for his apparent pessimism about bringing forth meaningful change is his belief that there is a large percentage of society who will never -not ever- forego meat eating, and certainly will not for ethical reasons. The single thing that stops such people eating the flesh of other animals is their own deaths, he suggests.

Given this less than optimistic prognosis, Erik advocates small, limited, step-by-step, reforms based within orthodox animal welfarist views of human-nonhuman relations. He never seems to talk about nonhumans as rights bearers and I've never heard him say that the human treatment of other animals amounts to rights violations.

This places Marcus within the majority of current members of the 'animal right movement' who either reject the rights-based philosophy on human-nonhuman relations [1] or will not articulate their position in terms of the moral rights of nonhuman animals.

In Erik's podcast of April 4th, he repeats his attacks on the abolitionist position and his support for the cage-free campaign. He also provides web links to industry sites in order to support his claim that the user industries fear the HSUS. They may do - and they certainly will say they do, whether they perceive a genuine threat to their interests or not. Industry journals and other outlets have an ideological position to maintain - and need to keep their supporters and subscribers on their toes.

This is very much part of what's been described as the hyperbole of the 'movement-counter-movement dialectic' which exists between social movements and their opponents. [2]

Erik Marcus' position interests and concerns me. For example, one might very easily see that the likes of the HSUS are going to continually involve themselves in these baby-step welfare adjustments and user system alterations, but it's not as clear why a vegan advocate would, especially one who rejects the notion that his position may be accurately described as new welfarist. [3]

The HSUS as an organisation is probably akin to the British RSPCA: an animal welfare organisation which seeks legislative changes on a range of animal use issues. What may be confusing about the HSUS' position at the moment, and why it is often misnamed as an animal rights mobilisation, is their recent appointment of a vegan advocate as their highly paid top dog. Certainly Marcus made much of this point in his debate with Francione and suggested it was a major advance that HSUS gatherings no longer serve dead animals for people to eat. However, in terms of their actual membership demographics, the HSUS are likely to be supported by a few vegans and many more meat eaters and vegetarians. Indeed, and perhaps more surprisingly, it turns out that PeTA's current membership profile is similar. [4]

Elements of social movement theory are useful analytical tools here. For example, resource mobilisation theory (RMT) suggests that once an organisation gets to the size of HSUS and PeTA, they can experience tensions arising from the fundamentals and pragmatics of day-to-day campaigning. In other words, just because new members join on the basis of their support for one or other aspect of the group's position - perhaps a number of sexist men have joined PeTA lately, attracted by the pictures of naked women - that does not guarantee support for all aspects.

Moreover, because RMT sees large-scale social movement organisations primarily as businesses, it predicts the problem of "goal displacement" which, on a basic level, says that many people who join a group to change the whole world end up holding jumble sales instead in order to maintain the group's existence.[5] In the case of the HSUS, they, as a business enterprise, have a large non-vegan membership who have to be persuaded year-on-year of the point of renewing their subs. This is why most social movement organizations are in the habit of frequently announcing new campaigning initiatives and regularly declaring this and that 'victory' in terms of their on-going activities.

We see, in the above, reasons why orgs like the HSUS will adopt the sort of campaigns they do and why their counter-movements will scream blue murder about any proposed reforms to use systems. As I indicated above, Erik supplied an user industry link which he thought supported his case. However, he apparently failed to appreciate that the same site provides powerful reasons for questioning the whole cage-free egg campaign.

Indeed, the *Feedstuffs* link Erik provides features a whole raft of people -admittedly all pro-use- who emphasise the complexities of getting mired in the politics of deciding between systems of nonhuman animal use and exploitation. Of course, the fact that these people are use-friendly should ring alarm bells in terms of our judgement of the reliability and validity of what they claim. However, that is not the same as suggesting we can merely dismiss everything they say.

For example, on the site Marcus recommends, there is a document entitled, 'Welfare depends on management'. Essentially this piece argues that animal welfare considerations are management dependent rather than system dependent. 'Animal behaviour specialist', Janice Swanson, is cited as being frustrated because some 'activist groups' are telling people that some use systems are far superior - in the sense of more humane - than others.

In relation to the whole thrust of Erik's position on the cage-free campaign, the most telling contribution to this article comes from philosopher Paul Thompson at Michigan State University who says that cage-free and free-range production may 'sound good' but other important factors also need to be considered.

This is Erik's problem. He appears to simply assume that cage-free is dramatically 'better' than the battery system. In our mind's eye, we might think a perfectly-run cage-free system is 'better' -obviously and inevitably- than even a perfectly run battery system. In all honesty, 'cage-free' and 'free-range' initially sounded good to me too, especially when such terms were put up against 'battery hens' and 'the battery cage system'.

However, animal advocates have a great responsibility if they are to start recommending some use systems over others. Surely it is not enough to merely assume anything. Advocates of system reform rather than abolition should know without doubt that a use system they are prepared to promote as better is better.

Erik told Gary Francione in their recent debate that he has not actually seen a cage-free system, so he apparently remains satisfied with assumptions. However, when one reads the web pages Erik himself suggests, then the picture becomes terribly messy and unclear. To repeat, this is what we should expect if we get involved in the politics of deciding between systems of use and exploitation.

The author of the *Feedstuffs* piece, Rob Smith, cites an unnamed observer who allegedly toured a "non-cage egg production system" and found very high levels of ammonia and dust. Indeed, he reports that the amount of dust in the cage-free unit was so high that it made even seeing the chickens difficult. Professor Thompson states that moving away from a caged system is difficult. Not many animal advocates are going to shed tears over that, but Thompson is tapping into another major problem with 'cage-free' -or any 'more humane'- system.

Thompson speaks of the need to have a well trained workforce to make any 'humane' system function properly. However, we are talking about ideal types here, and we know that in the real world standards are often routinely flouted. He claims that both cage-free and 'conventional' battery systems have their share of "horror shows and showcases." There have been a number of recent examples on both sides of the Atlantic ocean, documented on Gary Francione's blog, in which so-called humane systems have been shown to be appalling due to lax monitoring.

Given these systemic problems - and the fact we know from experience that many humans will cut corners in order to make a fast buck - how Erik Marcus thinks he can, *with any confidence*, tell consumers that one type of egg is guaranteed much 'better' than another defeats me. It is important to move as baby steps, rather he presents them as major welfare improvements on the battery system. As the available evidence seems to suggest, however, which individual production unit is 'most humane' at any particular period will likely change from location to location and over time depending on how efficient the monitoring systems (if any) are.

We already know that 'beak trimming' (industry speak for debeaking) will continue in cage-free facilities and so will the practice of forced molting. Indeed, recently adopted industry standards advocate debeaking chickens a second time if their beaks grow again after the first painful procedure. 'Cage-free' does not mean the birds are ever allowed outside their prison units, just that they can move about - among thousands of others - within them. Pictures also show that cage-free facilities might still require chickens to walk on wire floors, while others are allowed 'deep litter' arrangements.

Despite the horrors of the battery system, if the claim about ammonia-filled units has any credence, then hundreds of millions of birds are to be freed from close confinement only to endure the types of severe welfare problems, such as hock burns, associated with standard 'broiler' production. A switch to 'cage-free' (which, we see, really means imprisonment in one big cage) also does not in itself address the welfare problems in catching, handling, transportation and killing.

Finally, Erik Marcus may have cause to think again if he reads yet another link on the *Feedstuffs* site he has recommended. In an article entitled, 'Sorting out cage-free dilemmas', agricultural scientist Jeffery Armstrong describes how the University of Notre Dame (UND) came to reject a request for the use of cage-free eggs made by student advocates from the group Notre Dame for Animals.

According to Armstrong, university officials lead by nutrition manager and dietitian Jocie Antonelli, along with two students, visited the battery egg farm that already supplied UND with eggs and two cage-free facilities.

They found debeaking and forced molting in *all* three examples.

However, they reportedly concluded that none of the systems could be properly described as 'inhumane'. They said there was 'not much difference' between the two systems, although they thought the birds' quality of life in cage-free facilities was 'slightly better'. [6]

Although they saw the positives in birds being able to dust bathe and scratch, they noted the higher ammonia and dust levels in the cage-free units. Ironically, what seems to have finally decided them against a change of system was a consideration of human welfare. Apparently Antonelli "expressed concern with food safety issues (including salmonella, egg contact with feces and freshness of the eggs) in the non-cage systems" since the university regularly had children, retired priests and pregnant women on campus.

Once again, we should be wary of the accuracy of this reporting since it comes from a trade rag. It would be interesting to hear what the student observers made of their 'tour' - and whether, indeed, they were students from the animal advocacy group (the report is ambiguous about this). However, what seems to be increasingly clear is that the HSUS and Erik Marcus have not done their homework on the differences between the systems. Rather than confirming and showing the alleged massive improvements of the cage-free systems, they appear to be mainly asserting them.

This really is the sort a mess one gets into by getting embroiled in trying to decide between different abusive systems of use. Were these human rights advocates rather than animal welfarists, they'd be in the business of recommending systems of human trafficking that provided thicker mattresses for those forced into bondage.

We all know the problems are fundamental ones about rights violation - welfare tinkering is just that: tinkering. However, such reforming zeal at first seems incredibly odd when its advocates apparently lack knowledge of the systems under review, have no continuous method of system monitoring in any effective sense and over time, and have to rely on the exploiters to maintain standards. Once we understand that middle-class careers are involved, and regular "victories" need to be trumpeted, we get a clearer sense of animal welfarism.

[1] I am a little wary, however, of forcefully making this claim. In his recent Erik's Diner debate with Professor Gary Francione, Marcus admitted to not having read any of the former's books even though he persistently expresses opposition to the abolitionist position. It could be the case, therefore, that he has not read any of the rights-based books on human-nonhuman relations. The most popular text on such relations, and one that Erik claims familiarity with, remains Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* despite it not being an animal rights book and is based on utilitarian animal welfarism.

[2] Meyer, D.S. and Staggenborg, S. (1996) 'Movements, Counter-movements, and the Structure of Political Opportunity', *American Journal of Sociology* vol. 101: 1628-1660; Yates, R. (2007) 'Debating "Animal Rights" Online: the Movement-Counter-movement Dialectic Revisited', in P. Beirne & N. South (eds.) *Issues in Green Criminology: Confronting Harms Against Environments, Humanity and Other Animals*. Willan.

[3] Francione, G.L. (1996) *Rain Without Thunder: The Ideology of the Animal Rights Movement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

[4] <http://blog.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=blog.view&FriendID=121920569&blogMonth=12&blogDay=11&blogYear=2006>

[5] In the early 1980s, I served on the executive committee of the BUAV (British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection) and it became clear to the 'more adventurous' members such as Sea Shepherd Europe's Dave McColl and myself that some others cared more about keeping the BUAV operational rather than necessarily effective. The BUAV subsequently caused outrage among grassroots campaigners by agreeing to give compensation payments to vivisectionists Boots the Chemists rather than closing down in order not to pay.

[6] This opinion differs markedly with that of the HSUS' Paul Shapiro who told USA Today ('Cage-free hens pushed to rule roost' by Elizabeth Weise, April 2006): "The quality of life of a cage-free hen is so much better than the quality of life of a battery-cage hen that this campaign is meant to move the industry in that direction".

POSTED BY ROGER YATES AT 4:59 AM

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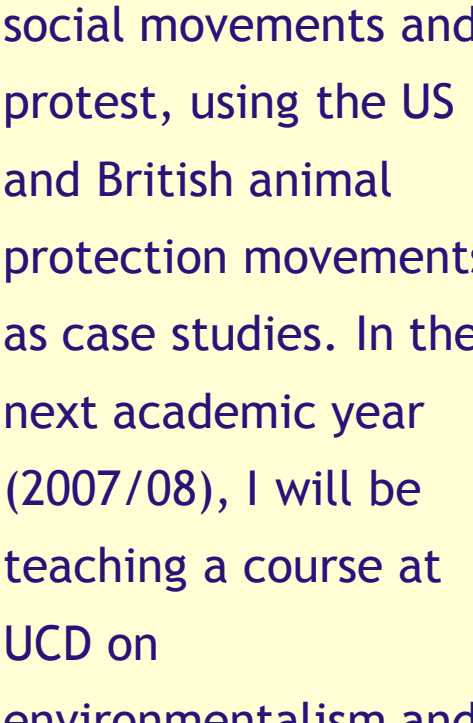
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ABOUT ME

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I am a lecturer in sociology at University College Dublin, Ireland and at the University of Wales, Bangor. At Bangor, I have taught critical/social theory, social change and the sociology of humour. I also taught courses on social movements and protest, using the US and British animal protection movements as case studies. In the next academic year (2007/08), I will be teaching a course at UCD on environmentalism and animal rights and hope to complete a book on "animal harming animal lovers". I completed my Ph.D on Human-Nonhuman Relations in 2004. Most recent publication: 2007 - "Debating 'Animal Rights' Online: the movement-counter-movement dialectic revisited", in P. Beirne & N. South (eds.) *Issues in Green Criminology: Confronting Harms Against Environments, Humanity and Other Animals*, Willan publ.

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