

The AMERICAN LEFT SHOULD SUPPORT ANIMAL RIGHTS: A MANIFESTO

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Illustrations by S. Coe.

Animal Rights—From the Left

The animal rights movement has grown enormously in the past two decades, and animal advocates have effectively attacked the exploitation of animals for experiments, food, clothing and entertainment. We have placed the issue squarely before members of the general public. We have disseminated widely the grotesque pictures of beagles and pigs that have been blow-torched in burn experiments, and the primates whose brains have been "accelerated" in worthless and costly head injury experiments. We have educated virtually everyone about how veal calves are taken from their mothers a day after their births, are confined in 22-inch-wide veal "crates" so that their muscles will remain undeveloped, and are fed a liquid diet to ensure anemia—all so that consumers may enjoy "milk-fed" veal. We have exposed the cruelty of rodeos, pigeon shoots and diving mules. The abuses go on and on, and only the most oblivious or callous would deny that animals get a pretty raw deal in post-modern technological society.

For the most part, however, the response of the left has been either to ignore the animal rights movement, or to view it with suspicion and, perhaps, hostility. The animal rights movement is seen as the quintessential bourgeois movement, comprised of white, middle-class people who are often apolitical, or, even worse, conservative, and who place animal interests above human interests, often to the detriment of underprivileged people.

Such reactions by progressives understandably, but not unjustifiably, find support in four sources.

First, progressives are critical of a movement whose historical origins are linked to 19th-century middle- and upper-class notions of "pet" ownership, and in criticism by the bourgeois of animal exploitation by the working class. The implication is that the philosophy of animal rights today can be seen as similarly connected to middle- and upper-class property notions and to selective condemnation of animal exploitation by the working class.

Second, although most enlightened people support the "humane" treatment of animals, progressives have failed to realize that there can never be "humane" treatment of animals as long as they are regarded as the private property of some other person. That is, when it comes to animals, the most vociferous critics of private property stop being vociferous critics and accept the status of animals as private property to be used for virtually any purpose in a capitalist or socialist economy.

Third, and perhaps most fundamental, is that progressives have never really explicitly rejected the notions of speciesism or species discrimination. They have instead accepted the propaganda of the biomedical industry and agribusiness, and have regarded the animal rights movement and the doctrine of speciesism as equating animal rights with human rights, or seeking greater rights for animals than are accorded the most deprived or disabled members of society. These interpretations are incorrect, but, as mentioned above, are those offered constantly by the big-business users of animals, and echoed in the mainstream press.

Fourth, many progressives mistake animal *welfare* for animal *rights*. Animal welfare is a very conservative doctrine and may be (and often is) espoused by those who have a great stake—usually financial—in maintaining the *status quo*.

Conversely, many animal advocates have treated the issue of animal rights as if it were politically "neutral" and able to be packaged to appeal to the left, to liberals, and to conservatives. This approach manifests itself in the all too frequent response by supposed animal rights advocates, "we don't have a position on that," when asked about any topic other than animals.

In this article we want to explore the historical and theoretical bases upon which the animal rights movement rests. We will

conclude that the left has very much misunderstood the movement, and that far from being alien to leftist concerns on one hand, or politically "neutral" on the other, the animal rights movement, properly understood, is very much a movement of the left—and, indeed, of the working class.

Elitist Origins?

In *Marx and Engels on Ecology*, Howard Parsons claims that although social reformers were naturally interested in animal welfare, concern for animals tended "to arise among the wealthy classes and high-salaried or professional persons" who had an "elitist fear of popular or socialist control of resources" and "a desire to protect [their own] private holdings." According to this view, the working class is seen as the victim of reform because reformers unfairly sought to abolish animal abuse by the lower classes, while leaving intact the bloodsports of the rich, such as fox hunting.

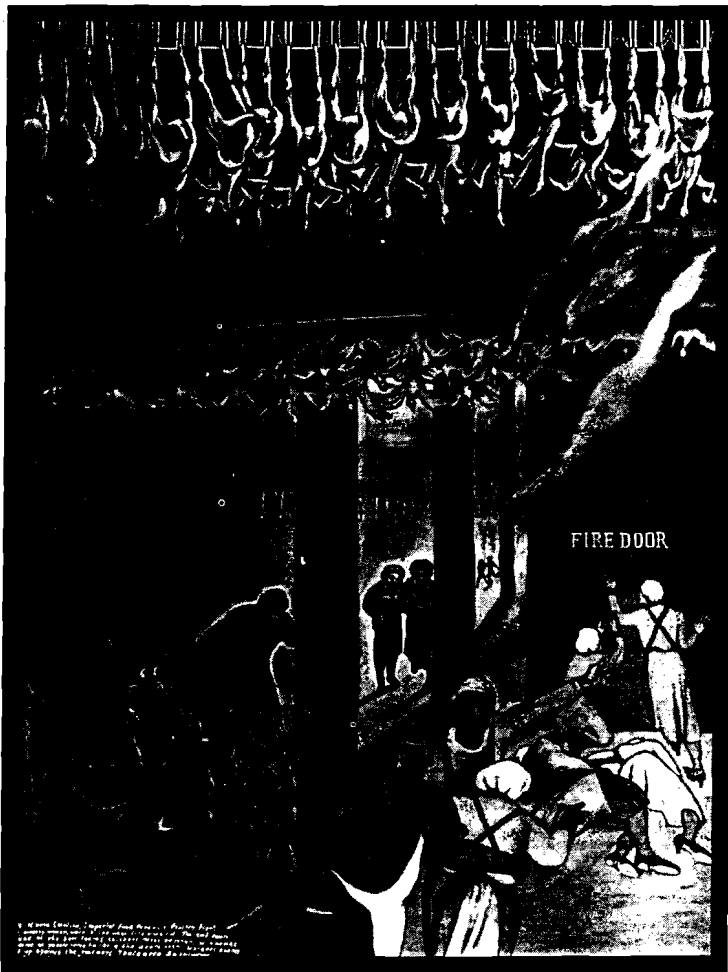
The working class is also seen as an obstacle to reform. Richard French, author of what is regarded as the definitive history of the anti-vivisection movement in the 19th century, states that the movement failed because of "the profound indifference of the working class."

The problem with the view that the animal rights movement finds its roots exclusively in bourgeois ideology is that it is simply wrong. There was, of course, a bourgeois presence in the movement, but its role has been greatly over-emphasized to the detriment of socialist thought on the doctrinal level, and the important practical participation by women and the working class.

Nineteenth-century concern for animals was very much expressed by liberals, such as Bentham and Mill, and socialists, such as Shaw, Henry Salt, and Edward Carpenter, all of whom opposed animal exploitation and were active in other social causes. For example, Frances Cobbe, who opposed animal exploitation, was a tireless opponent of cruelty toward women and children, and opposed pornography. Charlotte Despard, a vegetarian and antivivisectionist, was secretary of the Women's Social and Political Union, and went to jail for her activities in support of universal suffrage.

Few are aware that in London in 1907, trade unionists, mindful of Engels' admonition that men's labor would be replaced by the cheaper labor of women, nevertheless joined forces with feminists and anti-vivisectionists to oppose vivisection in what has come to be known as the "Old Brown Dog Riots." The three groups literally battled a group of doctors and medical students from the University of London. Two cavalry charges of police were required to disperse the rioters.

In her historical study of the riot, *The Old Brown Dog*, Coral Lansbury states that both women and workers distrusted the medical profession and found symbols of their own oppression in the



practice of vivisection. "[T]he vivisected animal stood for the vivisected woman: the women strapped to the gynecologist's table, the women strapped and bound in the pornographic literature of the day."

Lansbury discusses in great detail how women who could not afford medical treatment were forced to get treatment by volunteering to be mere teaching tools. They were strapped down in an unnecessary and vulnerable position, and examined by a doctor while dozens of medical students observed, poked, and prodded, thereby transforming the women into objects of degradation.

Workers objected to using animals in experiments because it was not difficult for them "to see those animals as images of themselves." On the grounds that the few must suffer for the many, the working class and unemployed were used as "experimental subjects" without consent, and the dead bodies of the poor often ended up in the anatomist's dissection room.

Even those who worked in slaughterhouses objected to tormenting animals that were to be killed. Their concern finds its modern resonance in a speech given in Washington, D.C. at the March for Animals on June 10, 1990 by an official from the meatpackers' union. His passionate speech on behalf of animals illustrated clearly his recognition of the exploitation of both worker and animal, and the concern that his union has for these animals. The point is underscored by a recent tragedy. In March 1992, 25 people—mostly women of color—died when a North Carolina chicken processing plant burned. The owners of the

plant had blocked the fire exits to ensure that the workers did not try to steal any chickens. The workers and the animals died because the factory owners saw both as expendable commodities. Is it any wonder, then, that the working class has been sympathetic to the plight of animals?

Karl Marx would probably not have supported the ideas of animal rights, although it must be admitted that many leftists very conveniently ignore that Marx was also not particularly excited about the idea of human rights, either. Moreover, although Marx attacked almost every other institution, there are many indications in his writing that even he saw science as "superior" to those other institutions. Marx thought that the supposedly "objective" knowledge learned by scientists would result in powerful technological tools that would aid the working class in achieving its goal of a communist society.

In any event, whatever Marx's position on rights as a general matter, he certainly believed that nonhumans differed from humans primarily with respect to what he called "conscious life activity." According to Marx, a "species being" such as a human, is conscious in a way that differs from animals—the former "makes his life activity itself the object of his will and his consciousness" while the animal "is immediately one with its life activity."

Marx probably got this idea from Hegel, who believed that animals were not self-aware. But he also could have gotten it from others, such as Descartes, according to whose reductionist scientific method, animals had no consciousness or sentience at all. In any event, Marx (and Hegel and Descartes) was, of course, wrong. Few will doubt today that most animals are conscious, sentient, and intelligent. Putting aside the matter of rights, nonhumans most certainly may be said to be "alienated" in a capitalist system in very fundamental ways.

As Dutch philosopher Barbara Noske has remarked, under prevailing forms of capitalist agriculture and biomedical research that are closely linked with industry and the military, animals are, in essence, treated as "machines." Because of their confinement, they may be said to be alienated from many of the actions that their bodies would perform, alienated from other animals, and alienated from natural surroundings.

Thus, contrary to prevailing opinion, concern for the treatment of animals was *not* limited to the elite, and *was* shared by women, by the working class, and by left-wing intellectuals. Although there was a bourgeois element concerned about animal welfare—primarily about dogs and cats, which were viewed as property by their owners—this group cannot be said to be the exclusive, or even the primary influence in the development of the modern animal rights movement.

Animal Welfare and the Property Status of Animals

Many progressives accept the legitimacy of animal welfare,

and urge that we treat animals as "kindly" as possible, but refuse to accept that animals have any rights. They believe that under certain circumstances, it is permissible to exploit animals in various ways. The problem is that a framework of animal welfare—as opposed to animal rights—will never, and can never, succeed in ameliorating or even alleviating suffering.

Animals, unlike human beings, are regarded as completely incapable of having rights. Under the common law system of Commonwealth countries and the United States, and under virtually all of the civil law systems of Europe, animals are regarded as the property of human owners. Animals are simply "things."

This is not to deny, of course, that there are many laws that appear to alter the status of animals as property and that appear to accord rights to animals, or, at least, require that human beings have duties that run directly to animals. Nevertheless, such laws reflect the position of animal welfare—a position that accepts that animals are the property of humans and may be exploited "humanely," but only when "necessary."

For example, there are laws that regulate vivisection, and although these laws look fine on paper, and appear to provide ample protection to animals, they do not. The primary source of regulation of experiments involving animals is the Federal Animal Welfare Act. It may safely be said that the Act provides no *effective limitations* on what types of experiments or procedures may be done on animals.

Although the Act stipulates that researchers are supposed to provide anesthesia and analgesia to animals used in experiments, such pain relief may be withheld when "scientifically necessary." And the determination of what constitutes scientific "necessity" rests mainly with the individual vivisectioner, subject to approval by an internal committee composed almost exclusively of other vivisectioners. Moreover, the act makes clear that the government may not interfere with the conduct or design of experiments.

Legal protection for animals is very much a matter of empty theory. In nearly all instances, a relatively trivial human interest is balanced against an animal's most fundamental interests in not experiencing pain or death, and the human interest nevertheless prevails. Even though we all reject "unnecessary" cruelty, we still allow bowhunting, pigeon shoots, rodeos, and all sorts of activities that are very difficult to justify on any coherent moral ground. Nevertheless, such practices are tolerated by all of us, and vehemently defended by those who participate in them.

In most instances, our entire approach to resolving human-animal conflicts virtually guarantees that animal interests will be

regarded as of lesser import, even when the human interest is trivial relative to the animal interest. The reason for this is that when we balance human and animal interests, we generally balance two very different entities. Human interests are often supported by accompanying claims of right; animal interests cannot be supported by accompanying claims of right, because the legal system does not view animals as capable of possessing rights. Thus, to the extent that humans have rights and animals do not, animal interests will, of necessity, be accorded less weight than the human rights with which they conflict.

The lopsided results generated by such an approach are exacerbated when the property rights of humans are involved, because animals are a form of property. As such, humans are entitled under the law to convey or sell their animals, consume or kill them, use them as collateral, obtain the natural dividends of animals, and exclude others from interfering with an owner's exercise of dominion and control over an animal. A property owner's treatment of an animal may ostensibly be limited by anticruelty laws, but property rights are paramount in determining the ambit of protection accorded to animals by law.

The property aspect of animals is almost always a major component in the resolution of human-animal conflicts, because even if the property aspect is not explicit, in almost all

circumstances in which human and animal interests conflict, a human is seeking to act upon her or his property. As far as the law is concerned, it is as if we were resolving a conflict between a person and a lamp, or some other piece of personal property. The winner of the dispute is predetermined by the way in which the debate is conceptualized in the first place.

It is clear why the legal system must regard animals as property: in our capitalist society, their exploitation is functionally indispensable. Virtually every industry from food to defense to cosmetics to clothing to pharmaceuticals uses animals or animal products. The economic interest in regarding animals as property is so strong that even when people do not want to consider animals as mere "property," and instead, view animals as members of their family (as in the case of dogs, cats, and other companion animals), the law generally refuses to recognize that relationship. If one person negligently kills the dog of another, most courts refuse to recognize the status of the animal as family member and will limit the owner to the same sort of recovery that would be allowed if the property were inanimate—the fair market value of the animal.

The status of animals as property is really no different than

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the treatment of slaves as the property of their master, or a woman as the property of her husband or father. In all cases in which sentient beings are reduced to being chattels or property, they will never win in conflicts between them and their "owners." The deck is always stacked. For example, a law that prevented masters from killing their slaves for no reason was often not applied because courts deemed that any master who would destroy his own property (the slave) was *temporarily insane*. The expression "rule of thumb" derives from a legal principle that prohibited husbands from beating their wives with a stick or rod that exceeded the width of the husband's thumb. This was "progressive welfarist" legislation designed to provide protection to women, who were regarded as the property of their husbands, but still entitled to moral consideration.

Rights for Animals?

The left has really never faced the question whether it is morally acceptable to continue our treatment of nonhumans as property for purposes of determining legal status. Consequently, most progressives continue unwittingly to adhere to the theory of animal welfare, and to ignore the theory of animal rights. In so doing, the left ignores a powerful doctrine that lies at the foundation of animal rights belief.

That doctrine consists of the rejection of species discrimination or "speciesism." Speciesism is the belief that the species of a being is morally relevant for determining who is a member of our moral community, or, assuming that we agree that a being is a member of that community, the weight that should be accorded to that being's interest. Humans frequently assume that animals lack certain characteristics, such as the ability to think and reason, speak, have complex personal relationships, etc., and that this supposed lack of "important" characteristics entitles us to exclude animals from our moral consideration, or to accord less weight to their interests.

Our differential treatment of animals can be explained by our species bias: even though a human and animal may be similarly situated with respect to a putative "defect," such as the inability to speak or reason, we accord greater weight to the human interest than to the animal interest. This elevation of species to a morally relevant characteristic is no different from the elevation of race or sex to such a characteristic.

This does not mean that we ignore morally relevant differences between members of different species and treat all species equally. *It does mean that we cannot use species alone to justify differential treatment, just as we cannot use race and sex alone to justify differential treatment.*

Once we take off the blinders of species bias, is there any reason not to extend at least *some* rights to animals? In his book, *The Case for Animal Rights*, philosopher Tom Regan makes a compelling case for extending rights to animals. Regan argues that evolutionary theory, common sense, and ordinary language all point to the possession

of consciousness—indeed, of a complex mental life—by animals.

Although acknowledging that it is difficult to draw a line, Regan believes that virtually all mammals (human and nonhuman) share mind states such as perception, memory, desire, belief, self-consciousness, intention, a sense of the future, emotion and sentience. Animals with such characteristics are said by Regan to be subjects-of-a-life. They have a sense of psychological identity in addition to being alive in a biological sense.

Regan then goes on to argue that a subject of a life has inherent value in that her life is of value to her irrespective of how that life is valued by others. The most basic moral right is the right to respectful treatment, and this right precludes treating right-holders as a means to an end. For example, if someone walked up to you and persuaded you that pain and death inflicted on you during an experiment would benefit many others, you would probably not volunteer for the experiment. Your life is of value to you irrespective of its (high or low) value to others.

Regan maintains that we have a *prima facie* obligation not to harm beings with inherent value. Anyone who wishes to override a right must present valid moral reasons for doing so and may not simply appeal to consequences that would result were the right to be overridden. Regan distills clearly the concept of a right as it is used in modern legal philosophy: a right acts as a barrier between the right-holder and everyone else, and the barrier cannot be breached solely because that breach will result in some utility to someone else.

Of course, once we recognize that animals have rights, we must determine what rights they have. We do not propose to present a catalog of those rights, but we do wish to maintain that there is one right that must be given to any right-holder: the right not to be considered as property. The reason for such a right is clear—as long as a being is regarded as property, that being will virtually never prevail in any conflict with a right-holder seeking to assert her or his "property right" in that creature.

Once an animal is seen to have the right not to be considered as property, then it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to justify the use of animals in experiments, for food, or for entertainment purposes. These results flow from our conception of the scope of human rights: human experimentation without the informed consent of the subject is prohibited almost everywhere, and we do not eat, wear, or use people in entertainment without their consent.

Some participants in the debate about animal rights have argued that we cannot be morally obliged to extend rights to animals because animals cannot have a moral entitlement to rights. This theory states generally that rights were created by humans and only humans can properly have any claim to rights.

As a historical matter, rights were originally the creation of a privileged elite. There were no working-class participants in the signing of the Magna Carta. Eventually, the concept of rights was extended to a broader and broader range of human beings, but there is no sense in which the concept of rights was originally intended to

benefit all humans and humans only. As a logical matter, we now extend legal rights to humans, such as children and the mentally incompetent, who could not, in any sense, be said to be formulators or creators of the concept of rights. Nor can they be said to be bound by duties. Of course, there will be hard questions concerning animal rights; such questions also arise when we consider human rights.

Finally, to those who criticize animal rights on the ground that rights are patriarchal or hierarchical because they are notions derived from male political philosophy and theory, we reply: physics and geometry were developed primarily by men, but that does not mean that we should junk all science and math. Sure, men formulated the notion of rights, but that is because men have historically been in charge of just about everything. Rights may be interpreted in a patriarchal manner, but they may also be interpreted in a feminist manner—there is nothing about a right that is *inherently* patriarchal. Even if we changed to a matriarchal (or Marxist) society immediately, we would still need some mechanism for asserting and resolving claims that we have. There will never be a society that will be wholly without conflicts, and there must be some notion of what counts as a legitimate claim. And that is what rights talk is all about; the problem now is that rights doctrine is often used to support patriarchal means—a practice that we deplore.

Animal Liberation is Human Liberation

The rejection of speciesism is powerful because it assumes a rejection of other forms of prejudice as well. Animal rights advocates reject animal exploitation because it is *morally* objectionable. And it is morally objectionable because it is like racism, sexism, or homophobia, all of which also impermissibly use morally irrelevant criteria to determine membership in the moral universe.

Speciesism permits the exploitation of nonhumans for economic gain, and must be condemned, just as a lack of economic justice results in economic exploitation of the working class. Recognition of animal rights will not injure the underprivileged; on the contrary, it will strengthen them. Animal agriculture is not only ruining the ecology for the planet, but it is making it impossible for the earth to feed all of its inhabitants—a goal that would be easily within reach if we abandoned an animal-based agriculture. The animal advocate seeks justice for all animals—human and nonhuman alike.

This is not to say that all animal rights advocates are flaming radicals. Indeed, most of the large (and rich) national groups quite intentionally avoid speaking about other social issues lest they offend their conservative donors. A notable exception is Feminists for Animal Rights, the only national animal rights group that took a position against the Gulf War and other little imperialist endeavors, and which argues for racial, sexual, and economic equality across the board.

A frequent concern voiced by animal rights advocates involves abortion. Some animal advocates think that recognition



of animal rights means opposition to abortion. Nothing could be further from the truth. Abortion presents a *unique* moral problem that is replicated nowhere else in our society. Even if the fetus is regarded as a rights-bearing "person," the reality is that *this subservient right-holder lives inside the body of the primary right-holder—the mother*. We can either leave the decision to terminate pregnancy to the mother, or we can leave the decision to some white male legislator or judge who cannot get pregnant. In our patriarchal society, those are the only choices that we have. In our view, our opposition to oppression commits us to support freedom of choice.

Moreover, a fetus cannot be analogized to a laboratory animal with the mother as vivisector. Both the vivisector and the nonhuman are *separate* entities in which the state has an interest to protect. The animal does not live "inside" the vivisector. The nonhuman is more like a child living *with* the vivisector. The law routinely allows the removal of a child from her home if she is being mistreated, and most of us think that such removal, if justified, does not unduly invade the privacy of the abusive parent(s). There is simply no way for the state to regulate abortion without actually "entering" the woman's body and dictating her use of her reproductive system. And in a patriarchal society, that invasion must be deemed oppressive and objectionable.

We will never get the support of our sisters in the women's



movement unless we make our position plain: we oppose all oppression, and that means that we support a woman's right to complete equality of treatment and the right to control her reproductive systems.

Progressives often confuse animal welfare with animal rights, and view "the movement" as a conservative one or one that tries to tread the line right down the political center. This is an accurate characterization of animal welfare. Welfarists accept the property paradigm and maintain that animal exploitation may be justified as long as no "unnecessary" pain is inflicted, or as long as the nonhuman is treated "humanely." Welfarist attitudes are often espoused by people or groups that stand to benefit substantially (and usually financially) from the status quo. There are two reasons why this characterization is not accurate as far as animal rights is concerned.

First, to accept the doctrine of animal rights is to reject the notion that some animals might have their interests sacrificed and rights violated *today* so that some benefit may be bestowed on other animals *tomorrow*. Moreover, we believe there is no empirical evidence to suggest that the welfarist strategy even works. That is, there is no reason to believe that animal welfare steps lead to an animal rights end rather than just to more animal welfare.

Second, an animal rights theory simply makes no sense unless one has already accepted a human rights theory with widest scope. For example, one cannot sensibly maintain that humans must not

interfere with nonhumans, but that heterosexual humans can prevent or penalize the sexual expression of lesbian and gays. Again, acceptance of animal rights does not disadvantage any humans; on the contrary, the rights of animals serve to bolster, support, and stretch human rights to their furthest limit.

Conclusion

More and more, individuals are abandoning the bloated national organizations and establishing small grassroots groups all across America. These groups are political, and their politics are generally those of the left. They have come to understand that the movement must return to its radical roots and to recruit the people who must work for a living (the vast majority of citizens) into its ranks. They have come to understand that a revolution such as the one we contemplate cannot be imposed from the top down, but must come from the bottom up.

Rejecting speciesism requires the rejection of the exploitation of *all* who are oppressed under capitalism; and those on the left who reject the oppression of all human animals need to start asking themselves why they draw the line so as to exclude the other sentient beings with whom we share the planet. Conversely, those in the animal rights movement *must* understand that a coherent animal rights position *needs to* provide justice for all beings. Any other position leads to a valid criticism that our movement is misanthropic.

Despite the supposed growth of worldwide democracy as the result of U.S. military actions and covert cold-war tactics, the world economy is in grave danger. More and more economists are starting to recognize that the capitalist system is crumbling, and that something else must be put in its place. What that something else looks like will depend on our determination and our willingness to reach out and embrace all of our sisters and brothers who seek liberation from oppression. ■

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