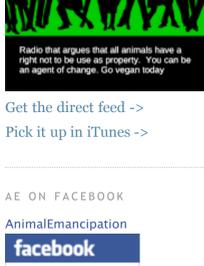


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WE OTHER ANIMALS: A BLOG ABOUT SOLIDARITY WITH NONHUMAN ANIMALS

This blog addresses the prospect that contemporary, mainstream understandings of species difference are constructed primarily through discourse, posing animal rights theory and activism as a counter-hegemonic practice.

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Of HSUS and hegemony: abolitionist veganism as a rising force

One of the things I addressed in a recent podcast with Roger Yates and Gary L. Francione was how the community is shaping and reshaping itself. Definitely worth a listen if you haven't already heard the podcast.

In this article, I wanted to follow-up and expand on my comments. As I said during the podcast, in my view, the advocacy community is shaping up into three basic factions: a sphere of influence led by HSUS (and that includes groups and figureheads like PeTA, "Vegan" Outreach, Erik Marcus, COK and others). They are shaping into a coalition of interests that takes a "happy meat, indirect, let's improve animal welfare not end use" position.

The second faction are welfare groups (some militant, some nonmilitant, some traditional who say they're not in favor, some new welfare groups who say they're in favor of abolition someday, but for now, want to focus on treatment issues). These groups don't want to come under HSUS' sphere of influence for whatever reasons. Further, some advocates in this faction have already declared that HSUS is hegemonic, but this misguided. It reflects either an ivory tower view distant from the struggle on the ground, or a desire to misrepresent the situation.

The third faction are abolitionists. Unlike welfare groups that typically focus on wild animals or domesticated animals, or food animals, or fashion animals, and so on, abolitionists focus on the rights of other animals generally. Opposing the property status of all animals means opposing the property status of all animals, and taking their rights seriously, including their space within the ecosystem we all share. We're small in number, but we're obviously growing. The uptick in personal attacks on abolitionist advocates through social media like Facebook and Twitter make it increasingly clear that these groups are afraid of us. But clear analysis suggests that the political situation is very much up for grabs.

There's little convincing evidence that HSUS has attained hegemony yet, although they're certainly working toward it. I'll address this first. As a hundred million dollar/year organization, it's likely to happen. But saying HSUS has achieved hegemony, even among welfare groups, ignores key facts. For example, it leaves out SPCA factions and other smaller groups who are not interested in coming in under HSUS's sphere of influence, as well as grassroots abolitionist groups (since we're obviously very critical of HSUS, welfare, and new welfare no matter the label).

The ASPCA is also another 100-million dollar a year animal welfare organization. Even within the SPCA circle of influence, things are not settled. There was also a serious spat just last year between two rival SPCA groups in the UK between the RSPCA and the Scottish SPCA over whether the former should advertise in Scotland. Even if HSUS is working toward hegemony, there's a huge political differences between having hegemony and fighting to get it.

Everything points to HSUS as being in the position of working quickly to consolidate a strong foot-hold in the advocacy movement, but things are far from decided. Moreover, the Internet as an organizing basis allows for counterhegemonic work and activity that is historically unparalleled. Many advocates have positioned HSUS and now PeTA as straw figures to establish their own "abolitionist" creds. Advocates shouldn't confuse scene posturing and donation diving with the serious critique of welfare groups involved with abolitionist work.

If an "animal advocacy" organization is not spending the vast majority of its time and budget on promoting veganism or with hands-on animal rescue, we have to start asking: why not? The room for businesses in the industry is shrinking, but the room for serious advocates is expanding. HSUS's movement toward hegemony leaves a lot of welfare groups scrambling to show how they are different to volunteers, donors and fans. Welfare groups who are reluctant to align themselves with HSUS/PeTA/VO will remain viable only insofar as they can convince the public that they are meaningfully different from the HSUS/PeTA/VO, and they are starting to do so by trying to position themselves as abolitionists. These other groups typically sell adventurism or meaningless bans on particular types of treatment to advocates who recognize that traditional welfare like HSUS doesn't work, object to PeTA's antics and oppressive tendencies and so on.

In some cases, these groups promote veganism (which is good, so long as this promotion of veganism is clear and abolitionist in nature). To sustain their donation flow, these groups typically sell the same single-issue, high optics, low-value welfare victories that HSUS sells. They are ambivalent (or even critical) about the prospect that HSUS may start to promote veganism entirely because that will eclipse almost all differences between HSUS and them as far as donors are concerned.

In other cases, these groups promote violence and adventurism, along with single issues campaigns and veganism. Again, to sustain their donation flow, these groups drive donations, not with reform of the system, but promises of individual lives saved through confrontational work. Sometimes they claim it's to fight speciesism, but these campaigns are practically poster-children for a focus on the treatment of mammals insofar as they tend to focus on fur and farm animals.

In some cases, the differences with the HSUS faction may be ideological with some financial consideration. In some cases, it might be mostly financial with minor ideological difference. I tend to think of social phenomena as being economic in nature, regardless of how people imagine it, and so, I tend to see it as largely a battle over the size of the slices of the donation pie. But it's always possible that even the leaders of these groups are sincerely convinced that they are doing abolitionist work even as they promote what amounts to a position that is inimical or counterproductive to abolition.

What unites them is their opportunism, their focus on shortcuts and their fear. They know that there are only so many dollars and volunteers to go around. They know that to remain relevant, they have to try to make inroads somehow. These groups are trying to convince advocates who reject welfare that they represent an abolitionist alternative, and that's not the case. If an organization focuses on addressing specific types of animal treatment, not on all animal use, if they engage in violence or adventurism, and so on, then they're not doing abolitionist work. Just promoting veganism or just rejecting happy meat here and there or just talking about anti-speciesism are not enough to make a group abolitionist in nature.

But most of all, if these groups are serious about abolition, then they must stop conflating what is in their interests with what is in the interests of nonhuman animals and focus their work exclusively on the latter. Advocates who work in these groups shouldn't settle for half-measures and opportunism; instead, they should form their own abolitionist groups.

That's not a personal condemnation of any advocate: it's a political critique of organizations driven by opportunism and a personal statement of my faith in everyone who takes other animals seriously to do the hard but desperately necessary work that will lead to their freedom. If I disagree with anyone, it's only because I take them seriously enough to have a dialogue with them.

Abolitionist veganism, the rising force. There are certainly grass roots abolitionist organizations. I run one with my colleague. Joanne (hi, Joanne!) and I always encourage advocates to work with those groups or start their own abolitionist groups. We don't have donors, nor do we need them. We're both firm believers in Francione's view that we all have to become leaders.

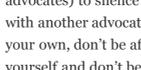
What Schonfeld's program and his piece in The Guardian, and Gary Steiner's piece in the NY Times have done is to make it clear that that hiding veganism is unnecessary. None of this would have been possible without Gary L. Francione's pioneering work. We can all peacefully pioneer. We can say go vegan. We can say that we should abolish the slavery of nonhuman animals as soon as possible. The public isn't going shriek in terror and run away. Worst case, they'll ask for some well-reasoned arguments, and some evidence to show why veganism is important and they'll ask for some alternatives.

We can fight for all nonhuman animals with three sentences: animals have a basic right not to be used as property and you should go vegan. Did you know that veganism is easy and the most important change any of us can make? How can I help you to make the transition?

We do not need these national organizations and figureheads to do our work. In fact, I never ask advocates to stop working; I want them to start working consistently on things that will make a serious difference to nonhuman animals and that's promoting and educating people about veganism and working toward abolition in meaningful ways with vegan education. When we miseducate the public about what we owe other animals, we are harming their interests. Racist and sexist campaigns are bad, but so are speciesist campaigns. So are ambiguous campaigns. So are confusing campaigns. It's always best to be clear and unequivocal in our education efforts. That puts veganism, abolition and anti-speciesism front and center to our work.

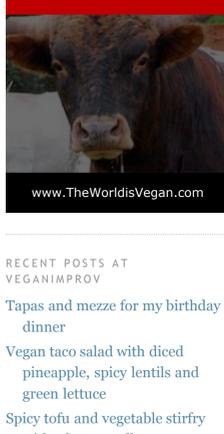
What these businesses and figureheads are afraid of is a public dialogue about these issues. They don't want the public to know all sides of the argument. They know the public can make up their own minds, as can advocates, and they're afraid. Don't allow them (or other advocates) to silence you. If you agree with another advocate or have ideas of your own, don't be afraid to express yourself and don't be afraid to engage in a sincere dialogue with anyone in our community.

Of course, if you're not a vegan already but take animals seriously, you should go vegan today. If you're not an abolitionist, you can learn more about the approach at www.abolitionistapproach.com or by reading some of my earlier articles.



LABELS: ABOLITIONIST VEGAN, ANIMAL ADVOCACY, ANIMAL RIGHTS, ERIK MARCUS, GARY L. FRANCIONE, GRAMSCI, HEGEMONY, NONVIOLENCE, PETA, VEGAN OUTREACH

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ABOUT ME VINCENT

I've been vegan for 10 years. I'm also a doctoral candidate, a rebellious wage slave, an abolitionist, a step father, an immigrant, a tennis player, a pirate (I don't care what the quiz says), a cyclist, a poet and a concerned citizen.

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