



Political Animals

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In the last few years the animal rights movement has grown out of all recognition. It's now an important political force that challenges our definition of the political.

WESTERN PHILOSOPHICAL and religious traditions have always excluded animals from their considerations. So the Left has had little to say about the burgeoning animal rights movement. Animals, it seems, have not found a place among the political subjects that the Left considers important. But a combination of radical activism and wide popular support for animal rights make it difficult to maintain this attitude. The problem is that for animal rights to be taken seriously a rethinking of what we understand by 'political' will have to occur.

The religious background

In the West our conceptions of the position of animals draw on religious and philosophical traditions whose effect has always been to deny status to animals: giving humans unrestricted power over them; refusing them any rights; confining them to the status-less realm of nature; and perceiving them as constant competitors or enemies. The Judaeo-Christian tradition teaches that animals are there to be exploited, on the basis of God's having granted Adam and Eve 'dominion' over them in *Genesis*, and despite certain peripheral statements to the contrary, the effect of Christian teaching has been mainly to exclude animals from consideration. Within the humanist tradition, human nature, it seems, can only be defined in (sometimes violent) opposition to animals; that is, we discover *our* nature through describing how we differ from animals, and stressing the differences rather than the similarities (ie, we are rational, social,

compassionate etc). We describe ourselves as constituting the norm and then define animals, due to their lack of language and hence thought, as a deviation from that norm. We can picture ourselves more easily as rational beings if we can compare ourselves to unthinking beasts. Elements of this attitude to animals are present even in Marx, eg, in *Capital Voll*, where nature is little more than brute matter to be

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dominated by the combination of will and imaginative labour which makes humans what they are, and animals, especially domestic ones, can be regarded as mere 'instruments of labour, along with specially prepared stones, wood, bones and shells.'

A further philosophical problem falsely represents animals as being in a position of competition or conflict with people, in relation to limited resources - the 'lifeboat theory' of conflicting needs discussed by moral philosophers. In this model, it is assumed that any attention we give to animals will be at the expense of humans. One example often cited is the case of the Third World farmer protecting his crops against locusts. Here, animals and humans are clearly in direct competition, and humans must therefore come first. However, especially in the West, these situations of direct life-or-death competition are ex-

Illustration: Nook Daines

tremely rare. Our relationship with animals and the natural world is one of interdependence rather than competition. Furthermore, whilst it is obvious that we are going to care more for those we consider most similar to ourselves, this does not in any way preclude our also giving help to others.

Redefining nature

The redefinition of the nature and status of animals has been ludicrously long overdue. Humans have never stopped thinking about themselves, and since the Renaissance, when increasing emphasis was laid on the importance of the individual, views of the universe have tended to become ever more human-centred. However, there can be few areas of life where our behaviour is governed by such outmoded concepts based on obsolete information as it is in relation to animals. For instance, the notion of the species barrier (where it is considered that there is a clear division between other species and ourselves which is much greater than any division between other species) is still widely accepted and yet it was formulated centuries ago. The ignorance of the period was partly wilful ie, evidence about the intelligence, sensitivity etc, of ordinary animals was ignored, but more importantly nothing was known about the most highly developed non-human species: whales and dolphins were assumed to be fish; the great apes were unknown.

More adequate information has, however, done little to modify the underlying categories. Knowledge that animals are closer to us than we have previously cared to admit has not resulted in our treating them any better. It is typical of the intellectual dishonesty of those who exploit animals that they are forced simultaneously to maintain two contradictory positions: the first is that animals *are* like us, in order that the results of experiments on them may be generalised to humans. The second argument states that animals are *not* like humans, especially in terms of their ability to feel pain, and therefore no-one need worry about the cruelty and suffering inflicted (this explains why no anaesthetic is given to rabbits when chemicals are dropped into their eyes for the Draize test).

The redrawing of boundaries within philosophy and religion has repercussions elsewhere - in this case, politics, where the inclusion of the animal rights issue challenges not only our treatment of animals but also the way in which we conceive of the political sphere in general. One result

of the religious and philosophical attitudes we have mentioned is that the question of the treatment of animals has never been seen as falling within the political - animals were obviously not to be regarded as constituent members of the state - and therefore never constituted a 'proper' question meriting serious consideration. This meant, in essence, that it was never considered necessary or worthwhile legislating about animals, and abuse in all its

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forms could continue unhindered. Indeed, it was so clearly not a serious matter that when the first attempt was made in parliament to legislate for the general protection of animals, hysterical laughter from all sides of the House drowned out the speaker. Parliament has not made a great deal of visible progress in terms of the status they are prepared to grant animals, witness Roy Hattersley trying to ascribe Labour's 1983 electoral debacle to the fact that they had concentrated on 'peripheral' issues, which inevitably included animals. So little have animals been considered a political issue that legislation on laboratory animals has not been amended since 1876.

A counterpart to the redefinition of the human and the animal has been a certain redefining of the political. From a view of politics as concerned with the administration of people en masse, we have moved to the opposite extreme with 'the personal is political'. Even if it is, however, that retains the idea of politics as addressing itself exclusively to human beings. A necessary way forward is provided by Gramsci with the assertion that the natural is political - or to be more precise, that human relations with the natural world have to be seen as forming part of the political. This is an important step for various reasons. Firstly, because human relations with the natural world are currently indefensibly imperialistic - one species decides the destinies of all the others - and believes that it is right to do so, simply because it happens to possess the requisite power. Secondly, it is a vital stage in the Requisition of status by animals: not as articles of human property, not even, as in Gramsci, through the different forms of

their relation with people, but rather as creatures who deserve it in their own right.

Capitalism v animal rights

In any discussion of animal rights it is essential to understand the central importance of connections between capitalism and animal abuse. This is not to suggest that other forms of society do not involve animal abuse, or that the removal of capitalism would automatically end it, merely that no social formation has been so deeply implicated in the maintenance and proliferation of the mistreatment of animals as capitalism. It is no coincidence that, in general, the relation of people in the West to the rest of the natural world has never seemed so unproblematic, so commonsensically self-evident as it has under capitalism - precisely because its problematic nature has been subject to the greatest degree of ideological naturalising, in the face of a variety of challenges.

The most obvious and widespread of the connections is established via the profit motive. Humankind's relation with animals has been one of ever-increasing exploitation, but not until the advent of capitalism was there the need, nor the means, for it to take place on such a scale. The principal areas of this exploitation now are: factory farming; commodity testing on animals (cosmetics, household products, fertilisers, pesticides); fur-farming; medical experiments (including drugs and psychological tests); warfare experiments (radiation, gas, injuries from bullets and bombs).

Under capitalism, animals are increasingly viewed as objects and commodities to be produced and sold, or as machines for the production of these commodities: 'The modern layer is, after all, only a very efficient converting machine, changing the raw material (feeding stuffs) into the finished product (the egg) less, of course, maintenance requirements.'¹ This

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process culminates in the factory farm, unalloyed greed in material form.

Even on its own terms, however, factory farming is not a great success: it is capital and energy intensive requiring enormous subsidies of the sort which agribusiness seems to obtain with remarkable ease. Yet in spite of the increasing barbarity of its processes - including mutilating or Em-

mobilising animals in an attempt to overcome conditions caused by the stressful nature of the environment - and the increasing use of dyes, hormones, antibiotics and other additives,² both the quality and the quantity of its products are declining, and some of the smaller farmers are being *forced* (rather than choosing) to go back to less intensive methods.

Pursuit of profit results in some of the very worst forms of animal abuse, not only in factory farming, but also in the millions of utterly pointless experiments carried out eg, to test cosmetics where harmless plant extracts or vegetable oils could be used; or those carried out on alcohol and tobacco, and on drugs where multinational pharmaceutical companies continue to produce drugs which merely replicate a dozen others already on the market (eg, painkillers and tranquilisers).

It is in the use of animals for medical experiments that many people find most difficult to object to. Here, perhaps vested interest rather than mere financial gain is the determining factor. But even here - in spite of the Research Defence Society's campaign of emotive disinformation - alternatives to the use of animals are already available and more are being developed by independent bodies such as the Dr Hadwen Trust, the Lord Dowding Trust, and the Humane Research Trust, in the face of a depressing lack of interest or funding by government or industry. Among the already available alternatives are the use of cell and tissue culture, and computer simulation, which replace anim-



force to reckon with. Its constituency, the size of its membership and the degree of commitment manifested from its supporters raise pressing questions about our long-held assumptions about the nature of political action.

Although Britain has had animal welfare organisations for a century-and-a-half, the rapid growth and radicalisation of the movement in recent years has been a direct response to the proliferation of forms and the quantity of animal abuse, not only in factory farming and experiments, but also in the violence done to domestic animals, as RSPCA reports show. This, in turn, has led to the formation of a large number of groups, at both national and local level, which, despite the diversity of their concerns, are united in the aim of reducing the suffering of animals at the hands of humans and of bringing animal rights both to public attention and onto the political agenda.

The movement can be broadly divided into three areas (though many people belong to or support more than one of the groups within them): The traditional organisations like the RSPCA, the PDSA and the Cats' Protection League, which are often termed animal welfare groups; the originally more middle-of-the-road organisations like the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection (BUAV), which have become more radical; and the more 'militant' organisations like the Animal Liberation Front and the Animal Rights Militia which have been established more recently by those who feel that trying to change legislation is not an effective way of saving animals in the short-term.

The first grouping, the animal welfare associations, are in the main conservative, and have stressed the need to change the status of animals only through legislation. Concerned mainly with the welfare of domestic animals (the RSPCA also deals with farm and wild animals), these groups ensure that those who mistreat animals are prosecuted, and that animals are given adequate medical treatment. But even within these associations, there has been a certain amount of radicalisation due to the influx of younger members unhappy with

their entrenched conservatism (this change can clearly be seen in the recent publication of leaflets by the RSPCA which strongly condemn fox hunting and fur-trapping). There have been occasional attempts to suggest that there is an opposition between animal rights campaigners and animal welfarists, with organisations like the RSPCA trying to retain respectability by describing this split as greater than it in fact is. However, it should be remembered that most animal rights campaigners are so because they care about animal welfare.

The second grouping, which consists of organisations such as BUAV and the Vegetarian Society, are those which, like the RSPCA, have been in existence for some time, but which, especially in the case of BUAV, have become more radical in recent years because of a *massive* influx of younger people. BUAV at first believed that the reduction and eventual abolition of the use of animals in experiments could only be achieved by lobbying parliament and holding demonstrations. But although their campaigning methods have become more forceful, they still maintain that significant change in animal conditions can only be achieved through legislation, and they do not actively encourage the use of violence.

Although the changes in the composition and outlook of the Vegetarian Society have followed rather than led the growth in numbers of people turning to vegetarianism, the society does play an important role, catering for all age groups, and providing information not only about vegetarianism, but also about the wider implications, such as farm animal abuse (their largest annual demonstration is against the Smithfield Livestock Show) and the links between meat production and starvation in the Third World (which results in absurdities such as Britain buying £1m worth of best quality grain from Ethiopia in 1984 to be used for animal feed).

The third grouping consists of the more militant organisations like the Animal Liberation Front and the Animal Rights Militia, and even within this grouping there is considerable divergence of tactics. There is a strong anarchist element in the ALF. They believe in direct action, raiding laboratories, breeding establishments and factory farms, to liberate animals and to draw public attention to the conditions of animals and the more unsavoury aspects of experimentation, like pet stealing. They also believe in attacks on butchers' shops

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als in a wide variety of experiments, not only those like Draize or LD50³ but also in research into arthritis and cancer. The fact that, in the past, progress has made and cures have been found using animals in experiments when alternatives had not been developed (often because no attempt had been made to look for any) is no justification for pretending that only the continued use of animals will guarantee further scientific advance.

A growing movement

But, it is the sheer presence of the animal rights movement today that makes it a

and shops selling fur. The ALF and groups associated with them such as Central Animal Liberation League, have stated that, whilst they believe in damaging property, they do not believe in hurting people, except in necessary self-defence. Groups like Animal Rights Militia, however, who claimed responsibility for the bombs which were planted at the homes of vivisectioners recently, and who organised the Mars bars poisoning scare, believe that it is through such actions, which entail massive publicity, that the position of animals will be improved.

A new politics

One might ask why the animal rights movement has such an appeal and how it is able to draw on the broad constituency it does. More than any other contemporary movement, its membership crosses boundaries of age, class and politics. (It is rare, for example, to find anywhere else women in twin set and pearls marching alongside punks and anarchists to lobby their MPs.) The precise extent of the support is not easy to determine, but there are, for instance, an estimated 3m vegetarians in Britain, and a recent mid-week lobby of MPs - not the sort of thing which brings supporters out in droves - attracted over a thousand people. Similarly, accounting for the nature of the appeal runs the risk of oversimplification, but one can suggest certain factors, namely, a concern for other living creatures; a concern for the environment; opposition to an inhuman and exploitative system; and a sort of solidarity of the oppressed and the marginalised. More importantly, because the movement embraces all these positions, it can engage the same person on a number of levels and a variety of issues.

The movement can also probably lay claim to a greater variety of tactics and approaches than any other. In addition to the forms of demonstrating, lobbying and direct action, which have already been mentioned, much use is made of expert opinion - professional philosophers such as Peter Singer, Mary Midgley and Tom Regan, and scientists such as Richard

Ryder - and of the techniques of mass advertising, for example David Bailey's commercial for the Greenpeace/Lynx anti-fur campaign.

As well as diversifying to allow concentration on one particular abuse such as fox hunting or vivisection, animal rights groups are aware of the benefits of co-ordinated action, eg, four of the major anti-vivisection groups have banded together to form Mobilisation in order to try to oppose the new government bill on animals more effectively. The run up to the 1979 and 1983 elections saw the formation of umbrella organisations, the General Election Co-ordinating Committee for Animal Protection, and the more radical Animal Protection Alliance; and even at a local level there are confederations of animal rights groups, and magazines which deal with all forms of animal abuse, rather than dealing only with one area.

The combined effect of this action has been to bring animal rights to the attention of the political parties and all of them now realise that they must at least gesture in the direction of concern for animals. The problem, as ever, is in translating this into effective action. To take a current example: Labour's response to the government's new bill on animal experiments has been feeble in the extreme. There has also been the recent bizarre spectacle of Gwyneth Dunwoody, former shadow cabinet member, accepting a £4,000 per year post as a parliamentary consultant for the British Fur Trade Association. There may be more hope at the local level: Islington Labour council introduced an animal charter designed to improve the protection of animals, and a similar document is to be presented to Nottingham's Labour-controlled council in the near future. More importantly, surveys carried out before the 1983 election suggested that as many as 15% of the population would allow animal issues alone to decide how they voted. Also, it has been claimed that activity by the Animal Protection Alliance determined the result in several marginal constituencies.

In all of this, animal rights presents both a challenge to the Left and an opportunity to learn. Firstly, there is the conceptual level. The Left has, quite rightly, championed the notion of human dignity, but its perception of the limits of its proper concerns are too monolithically and statically human. The animal rights movement has demonstrated that human concerns do not begin and end with humanity. The second area is organisation, in particular

the multi-strategic nature of the movement. This includes: working within and without the parliamentary system; being basically pro-Labour as notionally the most progressive party, but prepared to let non-party principles determine strategies and allegiances, and using whatever method seems appropriate to the need. The animal rights movement is also very

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decentralised and anti-bureaucratic - the Hunt Saboteurs Association does not even have an office or staff and yet manages to be highly effective. The third area is that of its aims. The disparate sections of the animal rights movement are able to agree upon objectives and identify a common enemy to be fought, and at the same time to acknowledge special or localised areas of concern, which does not result in the sectarian bickering so familiar in politics on the Left today.

The animal rights movement, with its diversity of tactics, objectives and support could point the way to a new conception of political action in the future in Britain. Because the movement has called into question the limits of the political, and has turned into activists people who would normally perhaps never have considered involvement in campaigns of this sort, it creates possibilities for large-scale participation in politics. It is not, however - or should not be - a case of the Left taking notice of animal rights in order to take it over or of cynically manipulating its radical energy for self-seeking ends. Rather socialists should realise that they cannot be speciesists and the Left should belatedly recognise that here is an issue which genuinely belongs on its political agenda. •

¹ *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, Jan 30, 1962.

² A report to the US Department of Agriculture in 1979 stated that of 143 drugs and pesticides likely to leave residues in raw meat and poultry, 42 are known to cause or suspected of causing cancer, 20 of causing birth defects, and 6 of causing mutations.

³ In this test, you take a group of animals and force-feed them with anything from Paraquat to food colourant until half of them are dead (LD 50 stands for lethal dose for 50% of the animals.) This produces information like the fact that a person would need to drink 2,250 litres of wine at a single sitting before running the risk of poisoning by the tartaric acid in the wine.

