



1. ANIMALS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

“The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.” — attributed to Mahatma Gandhi¹

A Civilized Society?

Canadians may think they are doing pretty well according to Gandhi’s criterion. Most Canadians believe we should respect animals and treat them humanely. Over half of us have pets, many enjoy observing wildlife, humane societies operate across the country, and numerous churches conduct an October “Blessing of the Animals” (Pet Friendly Canada 2005). Prior to the 2008 federal election, both the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies and the World Society for the Protection of Animals sent the five major political parties questionnaires about anti-cruelty legislation and animal welfare. Apart from the Conservatives, who opposed legislation and refused to respond, all expressed support for animal welfare. Even those who use animals for food, clothing or in research claim to be concerned for their welfare and to observe rigorous standards. It appears that animals matter to Canadians and that we care about what happens to them.

However, Canadians seem to be affected by what Rutgers University law professor Gary Francione (2000) calls moral

schizophrenia: confused and incoherent ideas about animals. While claiming to take animals' interests seriously, we regularly ignore those interests and subject animals to suffering, pain and death for trivial reasons. Clearly, our conceptions of what constitutes ethical or humane treatment are confused. We have reached a place where words lose their meaning when those who exploit, abuse and kill animals can claim to "love" them and to treat them with "respect." What does happen to animals in Canada? How much "greatness" or "moral progress" have Canadians achieved in our treatment of animals?

Although most Canadians think animals should be "treated with respect" and that "they should not be subjected to unnecessary cruelty," serious examination reveals a very different, much darker picture. But even suggesting such an examination creates problems. Questioning our treatment of animals or mentioning animal rights, veganism or even vegetarianism provokes resistance and ridicule. This hostility is shaped by massive propaganda efforts and advertising from multi-billion-dollar industries, such as meat, dairy and egg operations, restaurant and grocery chains, biotechnology and pharmaceutical corporations, research institutions and entertainment and fashion enterprises, all of which present animal exploitation as normal and acceptable, as "common sense." Opposition to animal rights is understandable from industries based upon animal exploitation. More surprising is opposition to serious thinking from those who are otherwise progressive but who ignore animal rights as a social justice issue. Some reject animal rights as sentimentalism. Many try to trivialize the issues. Dismissing concern for animals, they say human problems must be solved first. Of course, Canadians face many challenges — environmental degradation, economic turmoil, impoverishment of the Indigenous population, homelessness, threatened social services, war in Afghanistan and so on. However, caring about animals does not exclude concern for human problems. Placing these in opposition is merely a means to avoid inconvenient modifications to one's own behaviour while preserving a complimentary view of oneself

as a moral person. Becoming vegan, not using animal products for clothing and boycotting circuses, rodeos and zoos are simple measures one can undertake to avoid harming animals; they require minimum effort and do not detract from engagement with other issues. No one would dream of raising such weak, bad-faith objections in any other context. We would consider it strange for someone to dismiss concern about, say, people being killed in Darfur because of ongoing atrocities in Congo. Often, those who raise this argument do little to help humans but simply use it as a means to invalidate concern for animals. As for accusations of sentimentalism, we do well to recall novelist Brigid Brophy's observation: "Whenever people say, 'We mustn't be sentimental,' you can take it that they are about to do something cruel. And if they add, 'We must be realistic,' they mean they are going to make money out of it" (quoted in Robbins 1998: 73).

Making money is fundamental to animal exploitation. Although all human societies exploit animals, the extent of oppression differs. Capitalism involves exploitation of animals as well as humans and the profit-motive extends suffering to a broader scale: billions of animals are killed each year in the food, vivisection, fashion, hunting and entertainment industries. Mistreatment of animals is shaped by systems of oppression that developed over time to maintain profit, privilege and power. Systematic, institutionalized oppression of animals is shaped by our power over them, our economic motives and our ideological justifications for using them (Nibert 2002). Speciesism is the ideology that legitimizes our exploitation of other animals. It is not just a preference for our own species but institutionalized oppression that serves the interests of wealthy elites; like racism and sexism, it is part of the structural social order. Speciesist prejudice towards other animals naturalizes their suffering, making it seem acceptable and marginalizing animal rights-based critiques. Psychologist Richard Ryder devised the term speciesism as the basis for moral objections to vivisection (animal experimentation), using it to define prejudice in favour of one's own species, comparable to racism and sexism.

From this perspective, using non-human animals for food, clothing, biomedical experiments, product testing and entertainment is reconceptualized as comparable to the worst atrocities committed against humans.

Socially Constructed Relationships

We tend to overlook the fact that our present relationship with animals is a social construction, not a natural or historical constant. For example, the globalized meat industry's intensive exploitation of animals means more meat is consumed now than ever before. Historically, humans were predominantly vegetarian, obtaining most food through foraging, not hunting. Hunting was unreliable, not the foundation of human survival, contrary to mythologized images of "man the hunter." As development of technology facilitated a gendered division of labour, killing animals increasingly became linked to male power and privilege, shaping unequal gender relations, increasing women's workloads and denigrating their social status. Development of agriculture and permanent settlements 10,000 years ago intensified ideas about hierarchy as well as exploitation of animals for labour and food; animals and women came to be seen as possessions, owned by men.

As production of animals for "meat" increased, so did requirements for grazing, which deprived humans of land needed to produce crops for their own consumption; historically, processes of intensified animal exploitation are linked to human hunger. While the rich hoarded food to feed animals they ate, poor humans faced starvation.

Patriarchal exploitation of animals provided a model for oppressing humans and these forms of oppression are materially and historically interrelated (Nibert 2002). Economic exploitation of animals was essential to colonialism as Europeans developed huge industries based on fur and skin trades, fishing, whaling and cattle-herding. Animals became the means to obtain greater wealth, and profits from these industries fuelled the development of industrial capitalism.

Development of capitalism intensified exploitation of those defined as lesser beings, both animal and human. Oppression of animals runs parallel to violent racism, including enslavement of Africans and attempts to exterminate Jews and other “undesirable” populations in Europe (Davis 2005; Patterson 2002; Spiegel 1996), as well as to oppression of women (Kheel 2008; Luke 2007). Consistently, humans justify exploiting others of their own species by describing them as animals, who are, by definition, unworthy of ethical concern and can be subjected to any form of atrocity.

Animals and Ethics

In 1894, socialist Henry Stephens Salt became the first writer to explicitly state the case for animal rights in his remarkable book, *Animals Rights Considered in Relation to Social Progress*. An ethical vegetarian, anti-vivisectionist and opponent of blood-sports, Salt (1894: 19) argued that animals should be recognized as individuals with their own interests, that they deserved not just better treatment but, like humans, should be awarded rights since “the same sense of justice and compassion apply in both cases.” Much of what Salt wrote was restated in Australian philosopher Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation*, which galvanized the modern animal rights movement. This is ironic, since Singer, unlike Salt, endorses not animal rights but welfare. Adopting utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s idea that animals’ ability to feel pain requires us to give them moral consideration, Singer believes ethically correct actions are those that lead to the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Singer believes interests should not be distinguished along the lines of species, arguing that all beings capable of suffering deserve moral consideration and that all interests should be considered equally. He compares liberation of animals with liberation of women or African Americans, in the sense that morally irrelevant physical differences (sex, skin colour, species) are unacceptable as a means of differentiating interests. Moral consideration must be based on

capacity to suffer; no reason, beyond prejudice, exists for not considering other animals' interests. Although all sentient beings should have their interests considered equally, Singer does not consider all lives (including human lives) of equal value or that all beings should be treated equally. Different beings have different needs, and some rights, such as the right to vote, simply are irrelevant to non-human animals.

Singer does not think animals (or humans) have inherent rights. Emphasizing minimization of suffering, he says animals should be treated humanely but thinks they lack self-awareness, continuous mental existence and interest in continuing to live, and therefore it is all right to kill and eat them if they are killed painlessly and replaced by other animals. Essentially, Singer considers animals to be replaceable units with little consciousness. These notions are unconvincing to those who observe behaviour of companion animals and also are challenged by new work in cognitive ethology that shows animals have a much more complex mental life than we have assumed.

Singer's decision to judge actions by consequences offers little protection to animals, since he accepts harming them if some larger number of humans would benefit. Indeed, Singer's ideas put him at odds with the animal rights movement. In *Animal Liberation*, Singer endorsed vegetarianism since raising animals humanely for food on a scale to supply modern societies is economically impossible. More recently, he claimed humans can be "conscientious omnivores" by eating animals who are raised and killed "humanely" and praised corporations such as Whole Foods, suggesting that they have made significant improvements in animal welfare.

Ideas about animal rights find more support from philosopher Tom Regan (1983). Recognizing humans' basic moral right to respectful treatment, Regan extends this to other beings. Animals should not be regarded simply as resources for human use but as beings with their own inherent value whose moral status is comparable to that of humans. He opposes using animals for food, in vivisection and in clothing and entertainment industries. Regan says we should respect

interests of animals who are subjects of a life, that is, those who are not merely alive but who have a complex mental life involving perceptions, desire, memory and intent. Originally, Regan applied this criterion to adult mammals but now includes other animals, acknowledging difficulty in drawing a line. Nevertheless, all subjects of a life should receive respectful treatment and not be harmed. Whereas Singer considers it ethically acceptable to kill animals “humanely” (a dubious notion), Regan rejects this. He opposes using animals regardless of any possible benefits to humans, even in what may be the strongest case, biomedical research. He believes emphasis on animal experimentation prevents scientists from developing other methods that could provide comparable or superior results. Nevertheless, Regan does not consider all lives as being of equal value, arguing that because humans have self-awareness and a sense of the future, it would be acceptable to sacrifice a million dogs to save one human.

However, Gary Francione rejects this, considering sentience the quality that endows animals with moral significance, regardless of other characteristics such as self-awareness, language or cognitive abilities. Francione says animals need one right: not to be considered property. His abolitionist approach eschews all use of animals. Advocating nonviolent vegan education, Francione thinks animal rights have been undermined by neo-welfarist approaches, which claim victories through promoting larger cages, free-range eggs or humane slaughter. These approaches do little for animals and instead help to legitimize exploitation and make people more comfortable about continuing to regard animals as commodities and consuming them. Calling this neo-welfarism or neo-carnism, abolitionists criticize groups that claim to be advocates for animals for endorsing “humane” products that still involve exploitation and killing. Some modest gains, such as room to turn around in their cages, may have been achieved for some animals. To the extent that such measures may reduce immediate suffering, they are commendable, but a major effect of neo-welfarism is to perpetuate suffering by encouraging people to exploit and kill animals but to feel less guilty about it.

Animal Rights and Social Justice

Some think concern for animals developed only recently, reflecting sentiments of Western, urban, middle-class people disconnected from nature. In fact, ethical treatment of non-human animals has a long history in Western thought, extending back to classical Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras, Porphyry, Plutarch and Empedocles. Major religions include merciful treatment of animals as an important principle, typically overlooked in practice. Christianity has been particularly hostile towards animals; just as the Church justified patriarchy and slavery, it endorsed speciesism. Christian ideology asserts that humans have dominion, which (despite minority tendencies that interpret this as caring stewardship) is typically understood to mean that animals exist to serve us and meet our needs. European philosophers shared this view; for example, Kant maintained that animals exist only for humans, and Descartes claimed animals were merely automatons who could feel no pain; therefore, we have no ethical obligations towards them.

Mobilization for animal rights is a serious social justice movement, sharing fundamental elements of other progressive political movements: a sense of compassion and fairness, a focus on power relations and a critique of domination, inequality and hierarchy, along with efforts to alleviate conditions of exploitation. Historically, animal advocates also struggled for human rights. For example, in the early nineteenth century, Elizabeth Heyrick, who opposed animal abuse in cruel sports such as bull-baiting, campaigned for immediate abolition of slavery and emancipation of slaves when most British anti-slavery organizations were taking a gradualist approach, mobilized women's involvement, including boycotts of slave-grown sugar, supported prison reforms and advocated for the homeless. Similarly, in 1824, anti-slavery activist Catherine Smithies created the Bands of Mercy to oppose hunting. Late-nineteenth century socialist Edward Carpenter, who we would today call an environmentalist and gay-rights activist, was a vegetarian and anti-vivisectionist and

supported animal rights. In 1891, Henry Salt, a socialist and pacifist involved in prison and school reform, created the Humane League and campaigned for vegetarianism and against hunting, vivisection and other forms of animal exploitation, linking these with human exploitation. Consistently, animal rights advocates supported women's emancipation and feminism, anti-slavery, anti-racism and civil rights, and anti-war activism. Many, like Ronnie Lee, a founder of the Animal Liberation Front (originally named the Band of Mercy after Smithies' group) were influenced by socialist and anarchist politics. What is remarkable about the animal rights movement, however, is that it exceeds other social justice movements by extending compassion and concern beyond the boundaries of our own species.

David Nibert (2002) notes that animal rights theorists tend to focus on ethical dimensions of speciesism, but Nibert argues that it is critical to recognize economic and institutional structures underlying this system of exploitation and how animal oppression is entangled with human oppression. Ecofeminists, who propose an ethic of care based on compassion, analyze animal exploitation in conjunction with other types of oppression, particularly that of women (Donovan and Adams 2007). For example, Adams (2000) analyzed links between exploitation of animals and pornography, images of animals and women as objects to be consumed, often depicted in violent conflation of sex and death. Considering oppressions of class, gender, racism and species as mutually supporting expressions of patriarchy, ecofeminists propose a holistic approach to interconnected issues of animal advocacy, environmental ethics and feminism. Although we now recognize intersecting oppressions of class, gender and racism, we are only starting to challenge our anthropocentric orientation and acknowledge speciesism as another socially constructed system of domination.

Nibert (2002) explains entangled oppressions of animals and humans by highlighting economic exploitation, power (sanctioned by states and allowing dominant groups to use violence to maintain their economic interests at the expense of the dominated) and ideological

justifications. Humans exploit animals for economic benefit, making them both workers and slaves: their labour is useful to those who own them as property and their bodies are commodified, as meat, eggs, milk, fur, leather, as tools for research, as objects of entertainment and as pets. Any form of exploitation and violence against animals is socially accepted and defended by the state if it produces profits. Individual acts of sadism may be condemned if performed purely for personal pleasure, but virtually the same acts can be conducted in laboratories under the name of research and institutionalized torture and killing are accepted as standard industry practices.

All human societies have exploited animals although the extent of oppression differs. Capitalism intensifies the scale of exploitation, subjecting billions of animals to suffering and death, and expanding oppression into globalized systems of agribusiness, pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries, wildlife and pet trades, sport hunting and zoo and entertainment industries. Exploitation of animals is a fundamental component of capitalism, systematic and institutionalized, with interlocking industries that breed, feed, cage, sell, transport, experiment upon and slaughter animals, using their skins, flesh, organs and genetic material. Industries that exploit animals directly are underpinned by subsidiary businesses that supply the materials and equipment to do so. Animals are transformed into machines and their bodies bear the marks of their exploitation through breeding, branding and butchering. Hribal (2003) considers animals part of the working class, contributing unpaid labour essential to the development of capitalism (although they have not developed the class-consciousness that human workers may adopt). Owned as property, animals are both labour, as they are forced to work to produce other commodities, and raw materials, commodities themselves, their bodies sold as food, clothing or research tools. Animals are also objectified and assigned value through entertainment spectacles such as circuses, rodeos and zoos.

All forms of oppression legitimize themselves through ideologies that justify systems of power and domination, presenting exploitation

as the natural outcome of a hierarchical ranking of beings. Industries are supported by mass media and consumer culture that endorse animal exploitation through advertising and propaganda depicting animals as objects and commodities. Just as racist propaganda portrays its human victims as deserving of and, often, happy with their subordination, speciesist propaganda depicts animal exploitation as natural and acceptable, often portraying animals eagerly offering themselves for consumption. Animal exploitation is taken for granted, considered natural, just as enslavement of Africans and extermination of “lesser races” of humans were seen as inevitable in the march of progress. Treating humans like animals is a standard means to dehumanize subordinated humans and thus render them deserving of atrocities directed against them. Typically, racist discourse operates by animalizing the despised other humans and describing them as vermin, cockroaches, dogs, pigs, apes and so on, rendering them fit for enslavement or extermination.

Speciesism and animal exploitation structure our world just as legal slavery structured it in the recent past. Those who benefit from such structures of oppression proclaim them natural and find arguments to defend them. The political left shares speciesist ideas, accepting animal exploitation as natural, considering animal rights disconnected from other progressive concerns and sometimes even opposing it. Progressives claim to be motivated by compassion but, unreasonably, sharply limit it by confining concern to members of their own species. Professions of compassion are unconvincing when contradicted daily by a diet directly based upon others’ misery.

Since animal products are unnecessary for survival and vegan diets healthier, consuming animal products is justified on the basis of taste or tradition. No one would accept such reasons in defence of human slavery or other forms of oppression, and they are no more acceptable when the victims are non-humans. Unnecessary suffering is something everyone claims to abhor, yet we perpetuate this against animals on the slightest of pretexts. Consuming animals because we like the taste of their flesh is no different from the sadist who blow-

torches a dog; the pleasure we derive from exploiting others does not justify our actions (Francione 2000). Animals should not be treated as things, as the property of others; they are not resources or means to our ends but beings who have their own interests, and the principle of equal consideration must apply to all sentient beings. We cannot use others simply as our tools, and there are no humane forms of exploitation and murder. It is hypocritical for those who espouse other progressive causes to endorse hierarchy, oppression and exploitation simply because the victims belong to other species. Since species is not a morally relevant factor, this is no more acceptable than justifying oppression because the victims belong to other “races.”

Despite widespread human exploitation, animal exploitation dwarfs it in terms of the sheer numbers of individuals involved and the suffering they endure. Animals are completely at the mercy of their owners, who can do anything to them for profit. They are made slaves and chattel for their entire lives, forced to work for their owners and are treated worse than human workers, who, despite countless degradations, are not usually killed and eaten or skinned for clothing. The unacceptability of these violations is reflected in the outraged cry of virtually every human group that feels they have suffered impossible indignities and unbearable atrocities: “we were treated like animals!”

Like other social justice movements animal rights is a critique of power, hierarchy and inequality and an attempt to eliminate them. However, animal advocacy surpasses other movements by extending concern and compassion beyond boundaries of species. This is based on a principle of equality, which means animals’ interests should receive equal consideration with human interests. Obviously this does not mean that all have the same interests, so it is not necessary to treat all the same way. Mark Rowlands (2002) suggests a simple method of deciding what is equitable and just. Adapting John Rawls’ idea of an original position, Rowland suggests we must conceive of a just society without knowing what role we will play in it. Removing all morally irrelevant variables such as class, gender, racial categorization

— and Rowlands includes species as one of these morally irrelevant features — the rational choice is to devise a society in which things are divided fairly and evenly, so we are more likely to design a world that is better for all.

Note

1. Although this quote is widely attributed to Gandhi, no source is supplied. The International Vegetarian Union, which Gandhi joined in 1890, suggests that although Gandhi may have expressed the idea, it originated in his friend Howard Williams' 1882 collection *The Ethics of Diet: A Catena*. Williams quotes Dr. David Strauss (*Die Alte und die Neue Glaube*) "The manner in which a nation, in the aggregate, treats the other species, is one chief measure of its real civilisation." Gandhi mentions the book in his autobiography and may have shared its view (International Vegetarian Union n.d.).