

Nonhuman Comrades

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Anti-speciesists should take the slogan “until every cage is empty” more seriously. I mean that every cage with an animal inside should be opened – farms, fields, zoos, pet shops, labs, whatever. Not only if we have the means to put the captives in a sanctuary. Nor if, having done our homework, we deem them to fit in to the surrounding ecosystem and are therefore willing to release them into the wild. It’s time to abandon the model of animal liberation activism as we currently know it. A model which only deems animals appropriate for liberation if they fit into some kind of human-defined plan. This approach reproduces a commitment to human control among anti-speciesists, cripples our ambition as a movement and prevents our nonhuman comrades from joining the clash against civilisation.

(1) Boundless animal liberation

Take a factory farm imprisoning thousands of pigs. The standard approach among anti-spe activists is to ask whether (a) one has the capacities to transport those inside to sanctuaries or (b) they can be released into the wild without significantly altering the surrounding ecosystem. In almost no case would either be possible. Farm pigs are the genetic outcome of many generations of domestication, and which sanctuary would have room to house even half of them? In order to be a “responsible” activist we’re expected to turn our backs on them. Along with almost all of the nonhuman animals held in cages around the world. I call this bullshit. Animal liberation must be boundless, it cannot stop until every cage is empty.

A lot of animals we often consider hopelessly domesticated would actually have good chances of surviving outside, away from human stewardship. Here is a very brief overview in alphabetical order:

- Chickens: Broiler/meat hens have the worst chances of survival outside, because they’ve been selectively bred to grow so quickly that often their legs can’t support their own body-weight. Laying hens, however, would have better chances outside. They could likely find their own food and would be able to escape most predators, insofar as they learn to roost (i.e. sleep up in trees overnight).
- Cows: Those bred to produce high quantities of milk would have a hard time surviving without being milked by humans (if they get pregnant). Cows bred for meat would have much better chances. Escaped cows have been known to survive for months outside before being recaptured by humans.
- Goats: The physiologies of many species of domesticated goats are little different from that of their wild ancestors. Goats could be expected to easily survive in a wide range of habitats, artificial and wild.
- Horses: They have even better chances than cows, as they grow both summer and winter coats. Horses are usually only put in stables and clothed in rugs to keep them from looking crusty. The majority of horses anyway do better without shoes and grow harder hooves in rockier environments within a few days.
- Pigs: To the extent they can avoid human intervention, pigs have great chances of surviving and thriving outside. There are already huge populations of feral pigs (i.e. farm pigs who

escaped or were released from captivity, and their descendents) living in Australia and the Americas. Feral pigs have been known to grow bristly hair, longer snouts and tusks – just like their wild ancestors – within a few generations after entering the wild, and by some reports even in a matter of months.

- Rabbits: Wild breeds (those with longer faces and upright ears) would most likely be fine on the outside. Heavily selectively bred rabbits (smaller heads, floppy ears, short legs) would have much lower odds, though they might still have a chance.
- Sheep: Those bred to produce wool (e.g. merino) will keep growing it no matter how long it gets. However, sheep bred to produce meat mainly shed their hair by themselves and would have good chances of survival outside (most of them are already more or less self-sufficient). Worth adding, is that even escaped merinos have been known to survive in the wild for years without shearing.¹

As such, it might make most sense to prioritise broiler chickens, milk cows and wool sheep for being rehoused in animal sanctuaries. I think there's a strong case for simply opening the cages of the rest. And even with those with very little chances of surviving outside for long, when sanctuaries aren't an option, I still think it better than nothing to open their cages, so that they can decide for themselves what to do. Even the worst case scenario – being hit by a car after half an hour on the outside – might still be preferable to being left to rot in a cage.

The case of zoos is slightly different, because these inmates haven't been domesticated. Rather, they or their ancestors were abducted and transported there from faraway habitats, without having had their genes altered through selective breeding. But the basic principle is roughly the same. Rather than deciding for the caged animals whether or not they are fit for being liberated, therefore maintaining a position of power over them, why not just open their cages, letting them decide for themselves whether or not they want to stay?

The complications involved in rehousing or releasing zoo animals has meant that their prisons have been almost entirely off-limits historically as potential targets for actions. Simply opening the cages might seem like a ridiculous proposal. But I don't think so. My point isn't that releasing zoo-inmates without having a plan for their future is a nice proposal, I wouldn't argue for that. All I want to say is that, given how fucked the current situation is, it might well be the best we can do for them. I don't know about you, but if I were a wolf in a cage, I would be extremely glad for someone to help me break free. I could decide for myself whether I wanted to stay inside a cage in which, despite being a slave, I could be sure of food and warmth. Or else I could decide to make a run for it. It would be utterly beyond you or I to know in advance how I would fare on the outside – only life itself can tell. And if I was killed by a cop or a hunter within a day or two, at least I would have known freedom.

(2) Beyond ecology

To engage in political struggle with the hope of preventing ecological catastrophe is to join a fight which is already lost. The ecological conditions broadly present prior to the arrival of

¹ A conversation with a vet friend was my source for most of the above info. We were discussing with a Central/Northern European climate in mind. Thank you.

civilisation are gone forever, and they will not return. The actions of human supremacist cultures across the planet have already wiped out an unspeakably vast number of animal species and their wild habitats, and will only continue to do so. I would only be restating what we've already heard a hundred times by pointing out the bleakness of the situation. I say this in order to make the point, that it's a mistake to try and block boundless animal liberation with the response that releasing animals into alien habitats risks disturbing prior ecological conditions, because those conditions are already long gone. Nothing we can do can avoid this disaster. But there are many things we can do to make the most of it.

Like most Western sciences, ecology is contaminated, along with other poisons, with post-Christian commitments to a static conception of truth. There is a certain way that an ecosystem is supposed to be, therefore particular animals are "right" or "wrong" for it. On the contrary, I see habitats generally as constantly shifting, chaotic terrains in which nothing is off-limits. We cannot know how they operate and we never will. The attempt by humans to manage nature is the very tendency which resulted in the meltdown surrounding us, and more of the same is not the remedy. The only way out is to be brave enough to abandon the commitment to human control, and anti-speciesists should be the first to do so.

As an aside, I would mention that there is a good case for considering many zoo animals to be good fits, ecologically speaking, for Central/Northern European habitats. Remains of lions as recent as 10,000 years old have been found in modern-day Netherlands. Bears, bison, antelope and wolverines all used to live as far north as Great Britain. Straight-tusked elephants, rhinoceroses, hippopotamuses and hyena – all of whom are nowadays associated with African environments – were once native to Europe as well. This means that many plant-species have co-evolved with these now extinct animals and are seemingly well-adapted to them.²

In saying this, however, I risk undermining my main point, which is that all animals in cages are good candidates for being released into the wild. Who could have predicted that escaped parakeets could thrive in environments as urbanised and far north as London? Whether voluntarily or by force, nonhuman animals have always moved around, covering vast distances and settling in completely new places. As a parallel, there are examples from the history of colonialism of human slaves being captured in one part of the world, transported somewhere far away, then breaking free and surviving on the outside by becoming indigenous to a once alien habitat.³ This is only what making the most of an awful situation looks like.

Of course there's a risk of non-native animal species destabilising the environments they escape into. Yet evolution has always been a random rather than a designed process, and destabilisation is – for better or for worse – very much part of the norm. In any case, it utterly misses the point to criticise those who want to help non-native animals escape, because they're not the ones who genetically modified and/or transported them to alien habitats in the first place. Given the lack of alternatives we have for zoo and farm captives, refusing the viability of releasing them into the wild demands the impossible. It means accepting that animal liberation will never be an option for the vast majority of caged animals.

² George Monbiot (2014), *Feral: Rewilding the Land, Sea and Human Life*, ch. 7 & 8.

³ Russell "Maroon" Shoatz (2013), "The Real Resistance to Slavery in North America" (from *Maroon the Implacable: the Collected Writings of Russell Maroon Shoatz*)

(3) Afraid of chaos?

Feral animals are those who escape their cages and begin to rewild, shitting on the border between wild and domestic. To be civilised is to hate them, for they disturb the neat categories our minds project onto nature, proving that human supremacy is always an illusion. I can't help but wonder if many anti-speciesists would say that cows escaping from farms, being adopted by tribes of bison or deer and taught the ways of the wild,⁴ enjoying their lives far from the reaches of human captivity, is somehow "not how things are supposed to be".

Underlying much if not most anti-speciesism, is an unspoken tendency which seeks to protect animals... by keeping them under human control. Some anti-spe activists critique the saviour complexes displayed by traditional animal liberation rhetoric, only to insist on practical proposals which reproduce exactly that stance. One which treats other animals as passive, voiceless victims who could only ever make it in the world insofar as humans are there to spoonfeed them.

I see this attitude surfacing in the insistence among some comrades that the only responsible way to "liberate" a caged animal is by putting them in an animal sanctuary. I don't want anything I say to detract interest from sanctuaries, they are and always will be vital for the broader anti-speciesist movement. But we should be open in admitting that they promote animal rights, not liberation. I've never seen an animal sanctuary which wasn't surrounded by fences, and to me fences are still cages. In many cases animals are held there against their will. Whilst bigger sanctuaries sometimes begin to resemble industrial farms themselves. Of course, even the most alienating of sanctuaries will be hugely preferable to the hells that those inside were rescued from. But sanctuaries generally remain places of tight control, in which everything from where the animals live, what they eat and who they fuck are decided for them by human caregivers. Given that they will anyway never be capable of housing more than a fraction of exploited animals, why not open their gates more often, allowing those animals who actually want to be there to be prioritised?

I was astonished to learn recently just how many millions of feral pigs are already living wild and free around the globe.⁵ I'm inspired by stories of farm pigs escaping and running amock, regrowing their tusks and bristly hair, pillaging human infrastructure and not giving a fuck about our orders. I love this image precisely because it dethrones us. Feral animals show that even after thousands of years of domestication, it is still possible to rewild. Both for them and for ourselves.

Some indigenous humans have been described as believing in "spirit animals," wild animals such as eagles or wolves or bears who offer inspiration through the trials of life. I love the sound of this tradition, though I question its applicability to my own life. Half-domesticated as I am, perhaps my spirit animal would have to be a farm pig. But not just any pig. One who fights daily against her imprisonment, who is already somehow liberated by the very fact of resisting, who would take the slightest opportunity to break out and run, across the hills and deep into the forest, never to return to the clutches of civilisation.

⁴ Sarat Colling (2021), *Animal Resistance in the Global Capitalist Era*

⁵ Wikipedia article: "Feral pig" (August 2024)

(4) Insurrectional anti-speciesism

I think the most important response to boundless animal liberation, is the kinda obvious worry that most animals released from their cages will only be recaptured or killed by speciesist humans shortly after escaping. This motivates me to say, that even though it's always a good moment to open every cage, some moments might be better than others.

Moments of insurrection, of generalised revolt which paralyse the social order, have always been an inevitable response to the expansion of civilisation. I can easily imagine that such upheavals among humans will only multiply and deepen over the coming decades. Opening cages in the midst of these ruptures, besides providing escaped nonhumans with the greatest chances of remaining alive and free for as long as possible, would simultaneously allow our nonhuman comrades to join the clash against human supremacism, pushing the break with normality into unknown terrain. Perhaps it is time to pose the question, could it be worth opening up a zoo or a factory farm during an inner-city riot?

The boundary between human and nonhuman is the least interesting. Much more important is the one dividing those creatures resigned to domestication from those ready to rise up against it. I chose to call this text *Nonhuman Comrades* because I see it as a common mistake to only consider human beings when searching for affinity. There are many billions of nonhuman animals languishing in their cages at this very moment, and I don't assume that all of them would choose to escape if given the chance, but I know that a great many of them would. Supporting these nonhuman comrades isn't a matter of convincing them of anything. They have already begun the fight, in fact they never gave it up. And in their case, the desire to make the rupture last, to leave their cages and never look back, often seems way more uncompromising than it usually is among humans, anarchists included.

It can be easy to assume that most people don't want this world to end. But that's only the case if we take the word "people" to refer to humans rather than animals in general. Perhaps the vast majority of nonhuman animals would be extremely glad to see the end of the techno-industrial nightmare, at least to the extent it ravages their lives. Only by maintaining a speciesist attitude do we fail to see that opposition to civilisation is already all around us, it could hardly be more widespread. I say this not to tally opinions, as if we were doing a democratic vote, only to raise the question, how can we get better at opening common lines of resistance with our nonhuman comrades?

Ideas for practical solidarity could include sabotaging roads and fences, defending and expanding wilder places (like forests and wetlands) where escapees can find refuge, as well as finding ways to give those humans determined to end their freedom (cops, hunters, farmers) other things to worry about. More broadly, the point is to be as ambitious as possible regarding our capacities for imploding the human supremacist order and its technological infrastructure, because animal liberation demands nothing less.

Many attempts have been made to fuse animal liberation with revolutionary praxis. But if revolution is the establishment of a new order, then such a combination will never work, because barriers of language and of culture ensure that nonhumans cannot be involved in setting up a new society, except on a lower level. To say the words "animal liberation" and really mean it, is to will the end of this world. Human liberation and animal liberation are one and the same struggle, and the name of that struggle is the downfall of civilisation.

(5) Nonhuman comrades

Cages work in both directions. Their main purpose is to hold captive those inside. But in another sense they also put those of us on the outside behind bars, as long as we resign ourselves to living in a world in which our nonhuman comrades are kept locked up. To accept the inevitability of cages is the surest indication that we ourselves are domesticated. To determine ourselves to open them all, is to know in our own hearts the feeling of being wild and free.

Until every cage is empty! Death to speciesism, death to civilisation, long live the wilderness and those who fight for it!!!

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