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# Ambiguities of Animal Rights

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Throughout Europe and North America, a considerable portion of the contemporary radical scene takes for granted the notion that animal liberation is an integral part of revolutionary politics. Many talented and dedicated activists in anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian movements came to political maturity in the context of animal rights campaigns, and in some circles veganism and animal liberation are considered the apogee of oppositional authenticity.<sup>1</sup>

In order to contest these views, and critically examine the philosophical and political presuppositions that underlie them, it is not necessary to defend or condone the exploitation of non-human animals in factory farms, cosmetics laboratories, and elsewhere. Much of the current industrialized manufacture of animal products is socially worthless and ecologically disastrous, as is to be expected in an economy organized around commodification and profit. Nor does the critique of animal rights entail the wholesale rejection of

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<sup>1</sup> For purposes of this essay, I am ignoring the differences between 'animal rights' and 'animal liberation' discourses. I will use both terms more or less interchangeably to designate the belief that harming and killing non-human animals is on the whole impermissible.

personal convictions or lifestyle choices. There are a number of legitimate reasons to abstain from eating meat or to oppose cruelty to animals.

This essay explores some of the illegitimate reasons for doing so. Such an undertaking is fraught with difficulties, not least of which is the strained sense of incredulity and indignation that critiques of animal rights almost invariably arouse. The topic leads onto tricky terrain, both ethically and politically, in part because it directly impinges on dietary predilections, a matter that is at once profoundly private and inescapably public. Although animal rights involves much more than vegetarianism or veganism, it does tend to exacerbate the seemingly inherent self-righteousness of food politics, where puritanism is often mistaken for radicalism.<sup>2</sup>

It is nevertheless essential to face such misgivings squarely, in the hope of provoking a more thoughtful debate on the merits of animal rights. I view animal rights thinking as a specific kind of moral mistake and a symptom of political confusion. Much like its ideological cousin, pacifism, the political and moral theory of animal rights offers simple but false answers to important ethical questions. At the risk of collapsing competing versions of animal rights theory into one monolithic category, I would like to consider several of these questions from a social-ecological perspective in order to show why much of the ideology of animal rights

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<sup>2</sup> A further complication stems from the fact that many advocates of animal rights are also determined practitioners of an elusive eclecticism: When challenged on philosophical grounds, they quickly shift the terms of the dispute onto political territory. When their political claims are rebutted, they fall back on arguments about economics or religion or biology or personal health. Freely mixing empirical and normative claims, they cut a wide swath through anthropology, ethology, linguistics, psychology, and a host of other fields. This can make it difficult to assess what is at stake and why. I will try to take account of a variety of animal rights positions in my critique.

not consistently treat animals humanely until people — all people — are treated humanely.

None of these ethical potentialities can be realized, however, as long as we continue to replicate social institutions built around domination and hierarchy. Overcoming those structures will require a revolutionary transformation, ethically as well as politically. This momentous historical goal can only be reached by a movement that reclaims, not rejects, the uniquely human capacity for freedom. In their present form, the philosophy and politics of animal rights cannot guide us toward this goal.

is both anti-humanist and anti-ecological, and why its reasoning is frequently at odds with the project of creating a free world.<sup>3</sup>

As an attempt to extend traditional ethical frameworks to non-human nature, animal rights is simultaneously much too ambitious and much too timid. It fundamentally misconstrues what is distinctive about humans and our relation to the natural world as well as to the realm of moral action, and at the same time treats “higher” animals anthropomorphically while completely ignoring the vast majority of creatures that make this planet what it is. But the problem with animal rights thinking goes deeper still. The very project of simply extending existing moral systems, rather than radically transforming them, is flawed from the start.

Many animal rights theorists readily acknowledge that mainstream western traditions of ethical thought are unsatisfactory, but they focus their criticisms on traditional morality’s supposed anthropocentrism. This is unconvincing; the primary problem with the mainstream western tradition is not that it promotes anthropocentric ethics, but that it promotes bourgeois ethics.<sup>4</sup> The basic categories of academic moral philosophy are steeped in capitalist

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<sup>3</sup> My discussion is primarily based on the following texts: Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*; Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*; Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*; James Rachels, *Created from Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism*; David DeGrazia, *Taking Animals Seriously*; Gary Francione, *Rain Without Thunder: The Ideology of the Animal Rights Movement*.

<sup>4</sup> Anthropocentrism is an ideology that serves to mask the crucial divisions within humankind. Animal liberationists are not alone in misapprehending the function of anthropocentrism; this misunderstanding is widely dispersed throughout contemporary environmental philosophy. Social change movements often err by mistaking entrenched institutions for mere ideologies (consider, for example, the many critiques of racism that conceive of it as a collection of attitudes to be changed by appeals to conscience); this is the typical idealism of would-be reformers. The animal rights movement, along with much of ecocentric philosophy, has made the opposite error, and thus succumbed to a different sort of idealism. It mistakes the ideology of anthropocentrism for an actual institution, an embodiment of social practice. But there are no powerful anthropocentric institutions, only elitist ones hiding behind a universal veneer. Capitalism, patri-

values, from the notion of ‘interests’ to the notion of ‘contract’; the standard analysis of ‘moral standing’ replicates exchange relations, and the individualist conception of ‘moral agents’ obscures the social contexts which produce and sustain agency or hinder it.

Yet these categories are the same ones that animal rights theorists ask us to apply to those creatures (some of them, anyway) that have typically been neglected by moral philosophy. In this way, animal liberation doctrine perpetuates and reinforces the liberal assumptions that are hegemonic within contemporary capitalist cultures, under the guise of contesting these assumptions. Indeed one of the chief reasons for the popularity of animal rights within radical circles is that it appears to offer an extreme affront to the status quo while actually recuperating the ideological foundations of the status quo.

Relying on a dubious analogy to institutionalized forms of social domination and hierarchy, animal rights advocates argue that drawing an ethically significant distinction between human beings and non-human animals is a form of ‘speciesism’, a mere prejudice that illegitimately privileges members of one’s own species over members of other species. According to this theory, animals that display a certain level of relative physiological and psychological complexity – usually vertebrates, that is, fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals – have the same basic moral status as humans. A central nervous system is, at bottom, what confers moral considerability; in some versions of the theory, only creatures with the capacity to experience pain have any moral status whatsoever. These animals are often designated as ‘sentient’.

Thus on the animal rights view, to draw a line between human beings and other sentient creatures is arbitrary and unwarranted, in the same way that classical racism and sexism unjustly deemed women and people of color to be undeserving of moral equality.

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archy, and white supremacy, to choose three prominent examples, certainly do not privilege humans as such, but rather some humans over other humans.

The dynamic which generated this wondrous profusion of life can be understood as a dialectic of cooperation and competition.<sup>24</sup> Humans are the first creatures capable of transcending this dialectic, which gave rise to us, by consciously advancing the moment of cooperation – that is, by structuring our interactions with each other and with other creatures along mutually beneficial lines. This cooperative potential has two distinct components: one interhuman and social, and the other interspecific and ecological.

Within the social sphere, the potential for cooperative relations is, in an important sense, universal. While it would be naïve to suppose that contradictory interests will disappear in a free society, there is no ‘natural’ reason for the persistence of large-scale social competition. In regard to the rest of the biosphere, on the other hand, this cooperative potential is notably circumscribed. It is not just impossible to eliminate competition among organisms over resources, habitats, and so forth; the very notion is profoundly incompatible with the basic parameters of living systems. The potentials for cooperation between humans and other animals are thus more modest and more particular.

An ecologically and socially credible effort to take animal interests seriously will dispense with the notion that killing and harm are wrong per se, and will surmount the dichotomy of sentient vs. non-sentient beings by integrating a concern for animal welfare into an inclusive appreciation for the well-being of whole ecological communities. In practice, this would likely result in a revival and refinement of the custom of humane treatment of animals, accompanied by the insight that cultivating humanist values is a component of, rather than a hindrance to, this endeavor. People will

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<sup>24</sup> This insight is anything but new; in its modern form it extends at least back to Kropotkin. Animal rights enthusiasts seem alternately to forget the competitive and the cooperative aspects of this process, and above all appear to ignore the fact that all creatures are eventually food for other creatures—a fate that is entirely fitting and not the least bit troubling. This is not nature red in tooth and claw, but the incomparable beauty of natural evolution.

mence behind animal rights discourse. When disconnected from an articulated critical social perspective and a comprehensive ecological sensibility, this abstentionist version of puritan politics can easily slide into a distorted vision of ethnic, sexual, or ideological purity.

A closely related trope is the recurrent insistence within animal rights thinking on a unitary approach to moral questions. Rightly rejecting the inherited dualism of humanity and non-human nature, animal rights philosophers wrongly collapse the two into one undifferentiated whole, thus substituting monism for dualism (and neglecting most of the natural world in the process). But regressive dreams of purity and oneness carry no emancipatory potential; their political ramifications range from trite to dangerous. In the wrong hands, a simplistic critique of 'speciesism' yields liberation for neither people nor animals, but merely the same rancid antihumanism that has always turned radical hopes into their reactionary opposite.

Rather than positing a static, one-dimensional moral landscape populated by humans and animals facing one another on equal terms, those drawn to animal rights ought to consider a more complex alternative: a variegated ethical viewpoint that encompasses a social dimension and an ecological dimension without conflating the two. Such an approach recognizes the crucial continuity between humankind and the rest of the natural world while respecting the ethically significant distinctions that mark this continuum. Incorporating a dialectical view of natural processes and entities, this alternative perspective comprehends the breathtaking abundance, sophistication, and diversity of life forms and living communities on the earth as an occasion for awe and as valuable in themselves.

The next logical step in expanding the circle of ethical concern is to overcome speciesism and grant equal consideration to the interests of all sentient beings, human and non-human.<sup>5</sup>

These arguments are seductive but spurious. The central analogy to the civil rights movement and the women's movement is trivializing and ahistorical. Both of those social movements were initiated and driven by members of the dispossessed and excluded groups themselves, not by benevolent men or white people acting on their behalf. Both movements were built precisely around the idea of reclaiming and reasserting a shared *humanity* in the face of a society that had deprived it and denied it. No civil rights activist or feminist ever argued, "We're sentient beings too!" They argued, "We're fully human too!" Animal liberation doctrine, far from extending this humanist impulse, directly undermines it.

Moreover, the animal rights stance forgets a crucial fact about ethical action. There is indeed a critically important distinction between moral agents (beings who can engage in ethical deliberation, entertain alternative moral choices, and act according to their best judgement) and all other morally considerable beings. Moral agents are uniquely capable of formulating, articulating, and defending a conception of their own interests. No other morally considerable beings are capable of this; in order for their interests to be taken into account in ethical deliberation, these interests must be imputed and interpreted by some moral agent. As far as we know, mentally competent adult human beings are the only moral agents there are.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The locus classicus for this line of reasoning is Peter Singer's book *Animal Liberation*, which is built around the idea that the social liberation movements of the 1960's lead naturally to the animal liberation movement and that the logical structure of racism, sexism and 'speciesism' are identical.

<sup>6</sup> Animal rights theorists like to respond that human infants and mentally disabled adults are not agents in this sense, a point which I take to be obvious and irrelevant to the question at hand. I am not arguing that moral considerability is restricted to moral agents, nor that there is a firm ontological divide between humans and other organisms. What the peculiar role of moral agents demonstrates

This decisive distinction is fundamental to ethics itself. To act ethically means, among other things, to respect the principle that persuasion and consent are preferable to coercion and manipulation. This principle cannot be directly applied to human interactions with animals. Animals cannot be persuaded and cannot give consent. In order to accord proper consideration to an animal's well-being, moral agents must make some determination of what that animal's interests are. This is not only unnecessary in the case of other moral agents, it is morally prohibited under normal conditions.

To grasp the significance of this difference, consider the following. I live with several people and a number of cats, toward whom I have various ethical responsibilities. If I am convinced that one of my human housemates needs to take some kind of medicine, it is not acceptable for me to force feed it to her, assuming she isn't deranged. Instead, I can try to persuade her, through rational deliberation and ethical argument, that it would be best if she took the medicine. But if I think that one of the cats needs to take some kind of medicine, I may well have no choice but to force feed it to him or trick him into eating it.<sup>7</sup> In other words, taking the interests of animals seriously and treating them as morally considerable beings requires a very different sort of ethical action from the sort that is typically appropriate with other people.

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is that some distinctions between different types of moral considerability are very much warranted, and that the mere equal consideration of interests fails to capture some fundamental facets of ethical action.

<sup>7</sup> To recognize the special status of competent adult humans in this sense is not an instance of privilege or prejudice. It is no more arbitrary than acknowledging that women have a special status in reproductive decisions, or that goalkeepers have a special status in soccer games, or that pilots have a special status in aerial transport. To cry 'privilege' in this context is analogous to condemning the 'injustice' inherent in the fact that only speakers of Hungarian may participate in a conversation in that language. Since cross-species 'translation' of this sort is impossible, the anomalous position of human moral agents is likely to persist until we encounter other beings who are capable of engaging in ethical discourse.

obligations toward them." The Nazi laws insisted on "the right which animals inherently possess to be protected in and of themselves."<sup>21</sup> These were not mere philosophical postulates; the ordinances closely regulated the permissible treatment of domestic and wild animals and designated a variety of protected species while restricting commercial and scientific use of animals. The official reasoning behind these decrees was remarkably similar to latter-day animal rights arguments. "To the German, animals are not merely creatures in the organic sense, but creatures who lead their own lives and who are endowed with perceptive facilities, who feel pain and experience joy," observed Goering in 1933 while announcing a new anti-vivisection law.<sup>22</sup>

While contemporary animal liberation activists would certainly do well to acquaint themselves with this ominous record of past and present collusion by animal advocates with fascists, the point of reviewing these facts is not to suggest a necessary or inevitable connection between animal rights and fascism.<sup>23</sup> But the historical pattern is unmistakable and demands explanation. What helps to account for this consistent intersection of apparently contrary worldviews is a common preoccupation with *purity*. The presumption that true virtue requires repudiating ostensibly unclean practices such as meat eating furnishes much of the heartfelt vehe-

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Luc Ferry, *The New Ecological Order* (Paris 1992; Chicago 1995), pp. 99–100. Sax gives a compact exposition of the same passage on pp. 121–2 of *Animals in the Third Reich*.

<sup>22</sup> Hermann Goering quoted in Sax, p. 111. For readers familiar with the philosophical literature on animal liberation, it is impossible to miss this passage's resonance with Regan's conception of sentient animals as "subjects of a life" and Singer's emphasis on their capacity for experiencing pain. The legacy of Nazi animal rights measures ought to be reason enough (if any more were needed) for animal liberation proponents to abandon their egregiously ill-considered comparisons between factory farms and the death camps.

<sup>23</sup> In fact a number of left advocates of animal rights are also active anti-fascists. My critique is not meant to impugn their political commitment but to draw attention to the philosophical and historical ambiguities involved in the attempt to combine social emancipation with animal liberation.

to animal welfare causes, and was a vegetarian and opponent of vivisection. His lieutenant Goebbels declared: “The Fuhrer is a convinced vegetarian, on principle. His arguments cannot be refuted on any serious basis. They are totally unanswerable.”<sup>19</sup> Other leading Nazis, like Rudolf Hess, were even stricter in their vegetarianism, and the party promoted raw fruits and nuts as the ideal diet, much like the most scrupulous vegans today. Himmler excoriated hunting and required the top ranks of the SS to follow a vegetarian regimen, while Goering banned animal experimentation.

The list of pro-animal predilections on the part of top Nazis is long, but more important are the animal rights policies implemented by the Nazi state and the underlying ideology that justified them. Within a few months of taking power, the Nazis passed animal rights laws that were unprecedented in scale and that explicitly affirmed the moral status of animals independent of any human interest. These decrees stressed the duty to avoid causing pain to animals and established extremely detailed and concrete guidelines for interactions with animals. According to a leading scholar of Nazi animal legislation, “the Animal Protection Law of 1933 was probably the strictest in the world”.<sup>20</sup>

A 1939 compendium of Nazi animal protection statutes proclaimed that “the German people have always had a great love for animals and have always been conscious of our strong ethical

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animal welfare sentiment often went hand in hand with racial mythology and authoritarian political and cultural beliefs.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Goebbels quoted in Robert Proctor, *The Nazi War on Cancer* (Princeton 1999) p. 136. It is important to recognize that Hitler’s vegetarianism was a matter of conviction, not merely the eccentric whim of a crazed dictator. I emphasize this not to embarrass contemporary vegetarians, much less to endorse the misguided search for the ‘good’ features of Nazism, but to point out the intellectual parallels at work here. Chapter 5 of Proctor’s book, “The Nazi Diet”, offers an informed assessment of Nazism’s food politics.

<sup>20</sup> Boria Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich* (New York 2000), p. 112. Sax’s book is an invaluable source on Nazi attitudes toward animals.

The failure to account for this salient feature of moral conduct is one reason why so many proponents of animal rights are hostile to humanist values. But an equally serious failing of animal rights thinking is its obliviousness to ecological values. Recall that on the animal rights view, it is only individual creatures endowed with sentience that deserve moral consideration. Trees, plants, lakes, rivers, forests, ecosystems, and even most creatures that zoologists classify as “animals”, have no interests, well-being, or worth of their own, except inasmuch as they promote the interests of sentient beings. Animal rights advocates have simply traded in speciesism for phylumism.<sup>8</sup>

Thus even on its own terms, as an attempt to expand the circle of moral consideration beyond the human realm to the natural world, animal rights falls severely short. But the problem is not merely one of inadequate scope. The individual rights approach, with its concomitant view of interests, suffering, and welfare, cannot be reconciled with an ecological perspective. The well-being of a complex functioning ecological community, with its soils, rocks, waters, micro-organisms, and animal and plant denizens, cannot be reduced to the well-being of those denizens as individuals. The dynamic relationships among the constituent members are as important as the disparate interests of each member of the ensemble.

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<sup>8</sup> Technically the phylum Chordata includes animals that have a central nervous system regardless of whether they have a fully formed spinal column; it is the closest taxonomic approximation to the sort of animals that animal rights theorists consider “animals”, although many animal rights proponents focus primarily on the even smaller class of mammals. While prominent spokespeople for animal liberation like Peter Singer have explicitly defended the view that no other organisms have any kind of moral standing, this position is not necessarily shared by all animal rights philosophers. Tom Regan, for example, acknowledges that non-sentient life forms may have inherent value which could be accounted for within a broader environmental ethic. But a rights framework is patently unsuited to such a project; a meaningful ecological ethics cannot be based on the interests of individual organisms, whether sentient or not.

To focus on the interests of singular animals (and on the small minority of sentient ones at that), and to posit a general duty not to harm these interests or cause suffering, is to miss this ecological dimension entirely.<sup>9</sup> Conflicting interests are part of what accounts for the magnificent variety and complexity of the natural world; the notion of granting equal consideration to all such interests is incoherent in evolutionary as well as ecological terms. This would remain the case even in a completely vegetarian society populated solely by organic subsistence farmers; food cultivation of any sort means the systematic deprivation of habitat and sustenance for some animals and requires the continuous frustration of their interests. Extending the individual rights paradigm to sentient animals simply obscures this fundamental facet of terrestrial existence.<sup>10</sup>

Animal rights thus degrades, rather than develops, the humanist impulse embodied in liberatory social movements, and its basic philosophical thrust is directly contrary to the project of elaborating an ecological ethics. As a moral theory, it leaves much to be

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<sup>9</sup> The emphasis on suffering is questionable in any case. That physical comfort involves an aversion to pain is a truism, but this tells us little about its moral significance. Especially in its utilitarian variants, animal liberation unproblematically treats pain as a moral bad and pleasure as a moral good. Such a straightforward identification is implausibly simplistic even within the social realm; there are not a few instances in which pain is a moral desideratum, as well as cases in which pleasure should be discouraged rather than fostered. The ethical import of sense experiences is entirely context-dependent.

<sup>10</sup> The conception of rights as individual attributes that function as a sort of moral trump evolved in conjunction with the reciprocal notion of *responsibilities*; each was held to entail the other. These ideas were moreover developed in a social context that emphasized democratic deliberation and the contestation of competing claims, in the course of which rights-bearers continually refined and modified their moral claims. This context cannot be transferred to human-animal interactions. There is no meaningful sense in which animals can be expected to attend to their responsibilities; and their claims to rights can only be advanced representationally, via human intermediaries. Trapped as it is within a liberal conceptual framework, animal rights is inevitably paternalistic.

Russian youth group “Moving Together”, an ultranationalist and sexually repressive organization, has made animal protection one of the central planks in its platform, while the Swiss “Association Against Animal Factories” wallows in antisemitic propaganda. In Denmark, the only party with a designated portfolio for animal concerns is the anti-immigrant Danish People’s Party, while the far-right British National Party boasts of its commitment to animal rights. The contemporary neofascist scene in Europe and North America has shown an abiding interest in the theme as well; over the last decade many “National Revolutionaries” and “Third Positionists” have become actively involved in animal rights campaigns.<sup>17</sup>

Although this widespread overlap between animal liberation politics and the xenophobic and authoritarian right may seem incongruous, it has played a prominent role in the history of fascism since the early twentieth century. Many fascist theoreticians prided themselves on their movement’s steadfast rejection of anthropocentrism, and the German variant of fascism in particular frequently tended toward an animal rights position. Nazi biology textbooks insisted that “there exist no physical or psychological characteristics which would justify a differentiation of mankind from the animal world.”<sup>18</sup> Hitler himself was zealously committed

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some cases, and in others, dealing out justice to those guilty of destroying it.” See [www.faqs.org](http://www.faqs.org) and [www.fortunecity.com](http://www.fortunecity.com)

<sup>17</sup> The National Revolutionary and Third Position currents trace their lineage back to leading Fascists from the 1920’s and 1930’s, especially to “dissident” Nazis like the Strasser brothers. For a firsthand example of this increasingly common trend and its wholehearted embrace of animal liberation politics, see [autarky.rosenoire.org](http://autarky.rosenoire.org) The flirtation between neofascists and animal liberationists has not been a one-sided affair. Jutta Ditzfurth provides an excellent overview of the upsurge in extreme right views among animal rights groups in Germany in her book *Entspannt in die Barbarei* (Hamburg 1996), esp. Chapter 5.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Louis Snyder, *Encyclopedia of the Third Reich* (New York 1976) p. 79. This stance had a long history within right-wing circles in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period when vegetarianism and



Such examples are far from rare. In fact, animal rights sentiment has frequently served as an entry point for rightwing positions into left movements. Because much of the left has generally been reluctant to think clearly and critically about nature, about biological politics, and about ethical complexity, this unsettling affinity between animal rights and rightwing politics — an affinity which has a lengthy historical pedigree — remains a serious concern.

While hardly typical of the current as a whole, it is not unusual to find the most militant proponents of animal liberation also espousing staunch opposition to abortion, homosexuality, and other purportedly ‘unnatural’ phenomena. The “Hardline” tendency, which in the 1990’s spread from North America to Central Europe, is perhaps the most striking example.<sup>16</sup> But the connections to reactionary politics extend substantially further. The recent

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<sup>16</sup> The “Hardline” faction grew out of the Straight Edge movement in punk culture, and combines uncompromising veganism with purportedly “pro-life” politics. Hardliners believe in self-purification from various forms of ‘pollution’: animal products, tobacco, alcohol, drugs, and “deviant” sexual behavior, including abortion, homosexuality, and indeed any sex for pleasure rather than procreation. Their version of animal liberation professes absolute authority based on the “laws of nature”. The “Hardline Creed” reads in part: “The time has come for an ideology and for a movement that is both physically and morally strong enough to do battle against the forces of evil that are destroying the earth (and all life upon it). ... That ideology, that movement, is Hardline. A belief system, and a way of life that lives by one ethos – that all innocent life is sacred, and must have the right to live out its natural state of existence in peace, without interference. ... Any action that does interfere with such rights shall not be considered a “right” in itself, and therefore shall not be tolerated. Those who hurt or destroy life around them, or create a situation in which that life or the quality of it is threatened shall from then on no longer be considered innocent life, and in turn will no longer have rights. Adherents to the hardline will abide by these principles in daily life. They shall live at one with the laws of nature, and shall not forsake them for the desire of pleasure – from deviant sexual acts and/or abortion, to drug use of any kind (and all other cases where one harms all life around them under the pretext that they are just harming themselves). And, in following with the belief that one shall not infringe on an innocent’s life – no animal product shall be consumed (be it flesh, milk or egg). Along with this purity of everyday life, the true hardliner must strive to liberate the rest of the world from its chains – saving lives in

desired. But what of its political affiliations and its practical implications? Here as well skepticism is in order.

All factions in the animal rights camp appear to share a profound faith in the revolutionary potential of purchasing decisions and consumer choices: If enough people stop buying meat, factory farms will go out of business. This commitment to consumer politics is a classically voluntarist approach to social change which further highlights animal liberation’s debt to liberalism. It also reveals an elementary misunderstanding of the structure of capitalist economies.<sup>11</sup>

Even within the narrow confines of ‘ethical shopping’, however, an animal rights perspective frequently confuses the relevant issues. Instead of investigating the social and ecological conditions under which bananas and coffee, for example, reach shopping carts and kitchen tables in Seattle and Stockholm, the myopic focus on sentience asks us to cast a suspicious eye on locally raised free-range poultry.

This regressive shift from the political economy of food production to the pangs of conscience of individual consumption is testimony to the underlying class bias and cultural insularity that run throughout much of the animal rights tendency. Animal rights takes the range of nutritional choices typical of a narrow socio-economic stratum and elevates it to a universal virtue, while stigmatizing the sources of protein commonly available to economically deprived urban communities, rural working class families, and peasants in the global south.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> That production, not circulation, is the decisive sector in market economies has been a mainstay of radical analyses of capitalism since the first volume of *Capital* was published in 1867. But this insight is hardly unique to Marxists. Even mainstream economists concur that consumer spending “is not a driving force in our economy, but a driven one.” Robert Heilbroner and Lester Thurow, *Economics Explained*, New York 1998, p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> Kathryn Paxton George’s book *Animal, Vegetable, or Woman? A Feminist Critique of Ethical Vegetarianism* (Albany 2000) provocatively criticizes this elitist cultural and physiological model, along with its curiously myopic nutritional as-

The unexamined cultural prejudices embedded deep within animal rights thinking carry political implications that are unavoidably elitist. A consistent animal rights stance, after all, would require many aboriginal peoples to abandon their sustainable livelihoods and lifeways completely. Animal rights has no reasonable alternative to offer to communities like the Inuit, whose very existence in their ecological niche is predicated on hunting animals. An animal rights viewpoint can only look down disdainfully on those peasant societies in Latin America and elsewhere that depend on small-scale animal husbandry as an integral part of their diet, as well as pastoralists in Africa and Asia who rely centrally upon animals to maintain traditional subsistence economies that long predate the colonial imposition of capitalism. These are not matters of “taste” but of sustainability and survival.

Forsaking such practices makes no ecological or social sense, and would be tantamount to eliminating these distinctive societies themselves, all for the sake of assimilation to standards of morality and nutrition propounded by middle-class westerners convinced of their own rectitude. Too many animal rights proponents forget that their belief system is essentially a European-derived construct, and neglect the practical repercussions of universalizing it into an unqualified principle of human moral conduct as such.<sup>13</sup>

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sumptions, as an expression of masculine bias. In a similar vein, Michael Pollan’s article “An Animal’s Place” diagnoses animal rights as a quintessentially urban ideology that reflects a detached and distorted relationship with the natural world. Pollan’s article can be found at [www.organicconsumers.org](http://www.organicconsumers.org)

<sup>13</sup> It is certainly true that many non-western cultural traditions have cultivated a markedly more respectful attitude toward animals. Indeed many Europeans and Euro-Americans have come to vegetarianism through an encounter with Eastern spiritual traditions, usually refracted through an orientalist and Romantic lens. My point is simply that the full-fledged philosophy of animal rights is ultimately a reaction against the western heritage’s comparative lack of attention to animals – a reaction which itself stands well within the boundaries of that heritage.

Nowhere is this combination of parochialism and condescension more apparent than in the animus against hunting. Many animal rights enthusiasts cannot conceive of hunting as anything other than a brutal and senseless activity undertaken for contemptible reasons. Heedless of their own prejudices, they take hunting for an expression of speciesist prejudice. What animal rights theorists malign as ‘sport hunting’ often provides a significant seasonal supplement to the diets of rural populations who lack the luxuries of tempeh and seitan.

Even indigenous communities engaged in conspicuously low-impact traditional hunting have been harassed and vilified by animal rights activists. The campaign against seal hunting in the 1980’s, for example, prominently targeted Inuit practices.<sup>14</sup> In the late 1990’s, the Makah people of Neah Bay in the northwestern United States tried to re-establish their communal whale hunt, harvesting exactly one gray whale in 1999. The Makah hunt was non-commercial, for subsistence purposes, and fastidiously humane; they chose a whale species that is not endangered and went to considerable lengths to accommodate anti-whaling sentiment.

Nevertheless, when the Makah attempted to embark on their first expedition in 1998, they were physically confronted by the Sea Shepherd Society and other animal protection organizations, who occupied Neah Bay for several months. For these groups, animal rights took precedence over human rights. Many of these animal advocates embellished their pro-whale rhetoric with hoary racist stereotypes about native people and allied themselves with unreconstructed apologists for colonial domination and dispossession.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> On the anti-sealing campaign and its impact on Inuit (Eskimo) society, see George Wenzel, *Animal Rights, Human Rights: Ecology, Economy and Ideology in the Canadian Arctic* (Toronto 1991).

<sup>15</sup> For an incisive early analysis of the Makah whaling conflict, see Alx Dark’s article “The Makah Whale Hunt” at [www.cnie.org](http://www.cnie.org)