

‘Animal Rights: Moral Crusade or Political Movement?’

Critical Perspectives on Animals in Society

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The question I seek to answer is this: Is animal rights a moral crusade or a political movement?

I will conclude that it is both; however, the animal rights movement currently sees itself more of a moral crusade than a political movement. I will make the case that this impedes our ability to achieve moral and legal rights for animals. The animal rights movement must understand itself as a social movement and be engaged with the mainstream political arena.

For the purposes of this talk, I use animal rights to mean a broad range of organisations, with varying ideological perspectives, and differing tactics and strategies. I work from the assumption that what unites them is a genuine concern for animals and a commitment to end animal cruelty and exploitation.

Everyone who I have met, who advocates for animals (except for those who are raised by vegan or vegetarian parents), has a compelling personal story of how they changed from being a meat eater to a vegetarian or vegan. My story began when I was a student in 1973, I worked in a chicken slaughterhouse. It led me to becoming a vegetarian in 1974 and a vegan in 1976.

Tom Regan describes in *Empty Cages* three types of animal advocates.¹ The Damascan, who has a startling revelation. The Muddler, who struggles with the challenge of animal rights throughout their life. The Davincian, who intuitively understood all along. My colleague at the Animals and Society Institute, Ken Shapiro, characterises animal advocates as Caring Sleuths, who discover, seek and embrace the suffering of animals.² These personality types help to illustrate who animal advocates are and how we each arrived from different places.

Regardless of any differences, each personal narrative is unique. Everyone experiences a personal transformative moment when, what was previously hidden from view and what we are trained not to see, reveals itself for what it is: institutionalised animal exploitation. We see meat, not as delicious steak, but as the charred remains of dead animal body parts.

The personal transformative moment is powerful. So compelling that it overwhelmingly informs the rationale of most of the animal rights movement’s current strategy to educate the public. This is why the animal rights calendar is full of media stunts, information dissemination, demonstrations, advertising campaigns, personal appeals by celebrities and so on. These are all attempts to influence people to go vegan. Not that there is anything wrong with that.

As a moral crusade, these public education campaigns are primarily seen as the only tool available in the tool box. Their importance becomes overstated. Consequently, they take on the

¹ Tom Regan. 2004. *Empty Cage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

² See Josephine Donovan & Carol J. Adams (eds.). 2007. *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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vicarious urgency of animal rights as a quick fix or a moral shock. Celebrities make animal rights ‘sexy.’ Living as a vegan is seen as a fashion statement, which could just as easily go out of fashion.

This is how animal rights becomes a moral crusade.

But not everyone will go vegan. Do we even have all the time needed to make progress one life at a time? So, concurrent with changing ourselves and inspiring others, we must also change society.

Any change in society is accomplished in a surprisingly small number of ways, such as politics, education, culture, competition, cooperation and, unfortunately, war. Fortunately, for most of us, we live in a democracy, however flawed it may be.

One of the most important ways we compel people to behave is with public policy. In other words, regulations and legislation. The assemblies, congresses and parliaments elected by the people pass laws. Some of us may not need laws to compel us to act in the interests of animals. But many, if not most, will need to feel the impact of pro-animal public policy to make them live in ways which do not harm animals even if they are not interested in doing so.

The animal rights movement fails to transform its moral crusaders into political activists. Presenting simultaneously the need for personal transformation with social and political objectives explains why vegan living is not only lifestyle choice but also an enduring political statement. There is a need for an animal rights movement which simultaneously functions as a moral crusade and a political movement.

The animal rights movement is a social movement. There are many similarities among social movements, including the animal rights movement, but there are two significant differences which makes our movement truly unique.

Animals can not organise themselves into their own social movement. Unlike humans, animals cannot be the agency of their own liberation. We have to do it for them on their behalf. This onerous responsibility makes it even more important for us to understand how to achieve animal rights.

Second, we have to tackle the complex issues of the benefits accrued from animal exploitation. I tend to think these benefits are over stated by the animal industrial complex. When the public think about their relations with animals they are reluctant generally to give up any pleasure (e.g., eating meat) or benefit (e.g., curing disease) they may feel is their entitlement. But as Barbara Noske asks ‘which human needs are being fulfilled and whose interests are promoted by the existing animal industrial complex?’³ Are all the products and services derived from animal exploitation, as well as all the other ways we use animals, truly essential for our survival? I think not.

Whatever may or may not be at risk, the benefits we do accrue from not relying upon animals to produce food and manage disease are considerable. History shows that social movements are accused routinely of seeking change which will adversely impact society if they achieve their

³ Barbara Noske. 1989. *Humans and Other Animals*. London: Pluto Press.
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objective. But it rarely, if ever, turns out to be true. Indeed, it is any wonder that we have made the social and economic progress that we have, given these outrageous claims.

Those who maintain we must use animals to produce food and fight disease will say any rights animals may have must be subordinate to dominant human interests. This frames human and animal interests as a competition. A strategic dichotomy all too prevalent in human history: men superior to women; whites to blacks; natives to immigrants; heterosexuals to homosexuals; and so on. In our case, it is humans are superior to animals, which is called speciesism. As society evolves and we become aware of our superiority prejudices, we seek to resolve them, as we become more aware of the resulting injustices. We readjust, accommodate and move on, in all likelihood, all the better for it.

The same, I have no doubt, will be true for animal rights; particularly when we understand that, if we want to feed the world’s population and encourage well-being, animal exploitation in factory farms and research laboratories are not only fundamentally problematic, but also significant contributing factors to aiding famine and disease. This is why it is vital animal rights is understood as part of a progressive agenda of social justice alongside other liberation movements. The animal rights movement must learn, including from other social movements, how social justice is accomplished.

Animals are already in the political arena. It is their representatives whom we should be concerned about. Powerful commercial interests that profit from animal exploitation from the animal industrial complex are well established political players. Their involvement in the political process helps to maintain the status quo, adopt regulations and pass laws that help animal users more than the animals. This political bias in favour of animal exploitation is reinforced by our continued institutionalised, commercial use of animals as property and disposable commodities. There is a lot of money to be made from animal exploitation and many other non-financial gains. It is, therefore, not surprising that most of the present regulations and laws relating to animals is more about protecting our interests in what we do to them than in us defending them from our actions. Animals are represented in public policy by those who benefit from the power and control they exert over them. Animal researchers (not anti-vivisectionists) and factory farmers (not vegans) are more likely to be members of the policy-making networks which determine regulations and laws governing our relations with animals. Consequently, animal-related public policy is more about how to use animals than protecting them from us.

I came to the conclusion that social movements pass through five stages from public ignorance to public acceptance. The five stages are

1. Public education, when people are enlightened about the issue and embrace it into their lives
2. Public policy development, when political parties, businesses, schools, professional associations and other entities that constitute society adopt sympathetic positions on the issue
3. Legislation, when laws are passed on the issue

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4.Litigation, when laws are implemented and enforced on the issue

5.Public acceptance, when the issue is embraced by the majority of society

This is the lifespan of a successful social movement, as it emerges from obscurity to acceptance. It is possible to determine which stage is reached, what is next, and why some organisations and issues fail, stagnate or succeed. We can discover the lifespan of a successful social movement and anticipate what happens next.

The moral crusade of personal lifestyle choice and the political movement for institutional societal change are very different approaches in a complex, long-term process. Most issues start in stage one and expand to the others, but not always in a clear sequential order. Life is very complicated. Everything never fits neatly into any analysis. Simplistic schemes are problematic. Nevertheless, they help to determine where we have come from and where do we go from here.

For any social movement to achieve its mission it must pass through each of the five stages and maintain an active engagement in each one. In doing so, its ability to resist setbacks, obstacles and opposition from opponents is diminished more and more. In other words, as a social movement expands its presence in each stage while maintaining activities in each one, the power and control that any opposition may wield against it is increasingly weakened.

The five stages are personified in the transition animal advocates must make from moral crusader to political activist. We can never assume a growing collective of personal lifestyle change automatically leads to institutional, societal change. The capriciousness of human nature is subject to change. Institutionalised regulations and laws are much more entrenched expressions of society’s values.

Presently, I conclude the animal rights movement is mostly in Stage One (Public Education) with some presence in Stages Two (Public Policy), Three (Legislation) and Four (Litigation). If Stages One and Two are the moral crusade, Stages Three and Four are the political movement. In contrast, the animal industrial complex is resolutely entrenched and fully engaged in all five stages.

To conclude: The animal rights movement’s present strategy reveals our political naivety. Actions frequently occur in isolation and absent any long-term strategic, organised political vision or mission. They do not make a coherent long-term, macro-strategy to achieving institutional change. Surely, the mission of the animal rights movement is to encourage individual change and work for institutional societal change.

Animal rights is more than just a moral crusade. It is a political movement, too. Thank you.