

Animal Liberation and Human Liberation

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This article has some specifically Australian references. Please note that the aim of the article is to turn animal liberationists into anarchists — not the other way round.

A while ago, I was invited by S.A.R.A., a local animal liberation group, to speak at a talk with the Green politician Richard Jones, and Peter Singer. This article is an updated version of the talk I gave.

Peter Singer called his book ‘Animal Liberation’ for a very specific reason. The title was an echo of phrases which were around at the time — women’s liberation and animal liberation. The idea was that, if you supported these things, then you should support animal liberation as well. In other words, animal liberation was part of something, not something which existed on its own. This idea has been thrown away. Animal liberation groups wouldn’t dream of being ‘political’. This article is for anyone who wants the animal liberation movement to be (i) ethical, and (ii) effective — two things which it isn’t as long as it’s a single issue.

Most people are pretty snowed under. Most people are working longer hours than a few years ago, most people say they spend too much time at work and not enough with their families, most people are afraid their kids will have worse lives than they did, and so on. There’s a very simple reason why most people are indifferent or even hostile to animal liberation. In effect, animal liberation groups say this: “unemployed? We don’t have anything to say about that — we’re apolitical. Rising prices — no, we’re apolitical. Racism? No. Corrupt politicians? No. In fact we don’t have anything to offer you at all. Oh, and would you give up eating meat please?”. It’s no wonder that animal liberation is basically limited to the few people who do have the leisure to think about ethics.

There’s an ethical argument as well as a practical one. Animal liberation is based on the idea of equal consideration — the idea that every being has the same moral value. But, if you believe that, you have to believe it all the time — not just when it comes to animals. If you’re prepared to stand up for animal liberation but not, say, the liberation of people from a life of meaningless hard work, then you’re not consistent. If you want ordinary people to stop eating meat, but you won’t address their concerns in return, if in fact you’re only talking to uni students, then you’ll never achieve what you want.

You Got Any Better Ideas?

There’s no point criticising anyone unless you can come up with a better way of doing things. Which I think I can. It’s the same answer that the ‘McLibel Two’, who were sued by McDonald’s for giving out the ‘What’s Wrong With McDonald’s’ leaflets, would give. It’s the same answer that a lot if not most people in Food Not Bombs, the group who give out free vegan organic food to homeless people in at least six countries, would give. It’s the same answer that a lot of the ‘hunt sabs’ who sabotage fox hunts in England would give. It’s the same answer that Noam Chomsky would give. Nothing more or less than the idea of equal consideration applied without exceptions — against politicians and the rich as much as to the meat industry. In other words, anarchism.

I Can Hear Mocking Laughter

If you believe in animal liberation, it's a fair bet that you've had your ideas written off by someone, without them really thinking about them. The same way people used to laugh at the anti-slavery movement and the suffragettes. And for exactly the same reasons — it's easier to dismiss an idea than really think about it, especially if it threatens to change your ideas and make demands on you, which animal liberation does. And yet, I've heard animal liberationists do exactly the same thing to me, in the area of anarchism. I can't stop you reaching for the stereotypes of the terrorist and the crusty fashion rebel. In fact you'd be in good company. Peter Singer often writes statements along the lines of "of course anarchism is out of the question". But I can say this. If you do write anarchism off, then don't complain when someone does the same to you about animal liberation, and don't think you're any better than they are. It makes me very sad that Peter Singer, who can describe so well people's ability to justify hypocrisy, can do the same thing to anarchists — the only political stream which doesn't treat animal liberation as a kind of bad joke. He recently ran as a Green candidate for the Senate — presumably knowing that the Greens turn up to anti-racist rallies and also preference Australians Against Further Immigration because they share their policy of ending immigration. Ethical behaviour? Equal consideration? Being laughed at is better than being certain other things.

(For those who are interested, anarchism means: direct democracy, rather than rule by politicians, sharing the wealth, equality (for example anti-racism, anti-homophobia), emphasis on ordinary people, that is on those who aren't owners or managers, and self-defence, for example against intimidation by the police. If anyone tries to tell you anarchism is a matter of fashion, or terrorism, or whatever, then now you know more about it than they do.

Of course, again there's a practical argument as well as an ethical one. I won't try and bullshit you — anarchism is a pretty minor political force. But it's equally obvious that we're growing. You probably heard about the tour by the anarchist and ex-Black Panther Lorenzo Ervin. Would the anarchists have been able to organise a tour which 1000 people came to, in the face of government harassment up to the point of arresting him, even a year ago? I don't think so. The reasons why the anarchist movement has been stagnant for so long are important, but not really relevant to this article. For the moment I'll just say that we're waking up from a long sleep, where other movements seem to be running on the spot or even slowly fading away.

Certainly a lot of anarchists are uninterested in animal liberation — my group for example has both vegans and meat eaters. But, I've seen anarchists get interested in animal liberation 'as if by magic' — without anyone really trying to change them. Once you start thinking about equality in your own life, you're likely to start applying it to your dinner. However, the trick is to get people thinking about it in the first place, not by making demands and offering nothing, but by talking about problems in their everyday lives. Something that the animal liberation movement doesn't do.

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