

# Extending the Circle of Compassion: Socialism and Animal Rights

**Terry Liddle**

“Those who opposed slavery in the 19th century are those who today have stopped eating meat” boldly proclaims a poster produced by the *Cahiers Antispécistes* of Lyon and a number of other French and Spanish animal rights groups. It also calls for the 21st century to be the century of animal liberation. In his 1974 book *Animal Liberation* Peter Singer wrote: “The tyranny of human over non-human animals has caused and today is still causing an amount of pain and suffering that can only be compared with that which resulted from the centuries of tyranny by white humans over black humans. The struggle against this tyranny is a struggle as important as any of the moral and social issues that have been fought over in recent years.

“For sure, the enslavement of millions of Africans by Europeans and Americans from the late 15th to the mid-19th century merits close comparison with the position of non-human animals in today’s capitalist society. Cities like Bristol and Liverpool were built on slavery and it was capital derived from the profits of slavery that financed the industrial revolution. Is it any wonder that when Thomas Paine wanted to include abolition of slavery in the American constitution the rich plantation owners stopped him?

Slaves could of course revolt as they did in Haiti under the influence of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the French Revolution. For such revolts, or for trying to escape, slaves were beaten, mutilated or executed. The animals in today’s battery farms or vivisection laboratories, unless they are liberated by animal rights activists, cannot escape. Slaves were not bred for food nor were they subjected to horrific experiments which are scientific fraud. Millions of animals are.

Few people nowadays know where their food comes from. They do not associate the chicken nugget, burger or sausage on their plate or the ready-prepared joint in the supermarket with the

living animal. If people had to rear and slaughter animals for their own consumption one suspects there would be many more vegetarians. The demand for cheap food has resulted in animals being forced to live in entirely unnatural conditions. Close-packed into battery sheds they neither see daylight nor feel the wind or rain. Stuffed with growth hormones and antibiotics, which then go into the human food chain, they are bred for death. Male calves in dairy herds are killed at two days old; hunting dogs grown too old to hunt are killed and fed to their fellows. Cattle, natural herbivores, were fed on the remains of dead infected sheep, thereby passing on new and deadly diseases to humans.

Areas of the Amazonian rain forests have been destroyed to make space for rearing cattle. Within a few years the topsoil has blown away. In a hungry world grains and beans, instead of feeding humans, are fed to animals reared for meat. The McDonald’s diet based on large amounts of saturated animal fat, salt and sugar and very little fibre is far from healthy. It is also very profitable. The pay and conditions for workers in burger joints are far from good and their owners have fought hard to stop workers organising in trade unions. They have gone to great lengths to silence their critics, such as London Greenpeace.

Vivisection is also highly profitable. Last year there were 2.79 million animal experiments and the number is rising. Yet the differences between animals, even those such as chimpanzees who share much of our DNA, and humans are obvious. Animals do not smoke tobacco or drink alcohol, they do not suffer diseases such as arthritis and hypertension. Trying to find answers to these human problems by experimenting on animals is plain daft. Drugs such as digitalis which tested unsafe on animals have been highly effective when applied to humans. Drugs which tested safe on animals have had disastrous results when applied

to humans. Remember Thalidomide? There are many safe, natural, herbal medicines which even when they do little good do no harm. The animal-tested drugs produced by the pharmaceutical monopolies are those which are foisted onto the public. The motive, of course, is profit.

There are many other aspects to animal abuse and exploitation. The pursuit across country by upper class twits of foxes and stags to the point where they become exhausted and are dismembered by packs of dogs, and the rearing of game birds to be blasted from the skies, are one. The breeding or trapping of animals such as seals so that their skins may adorn the bodies of pampered women with more money than compassion is another. There is also the wicked lie of so-called freedom foods. Better treated when alive, the animals still end up dead.

Despite the efforts of pioneer socialists and animal rights supporters such as Henry Salt, the Left has largely ignored animal rights. With its activities often geared up to the next strike, the next paper sale or the next election, its concept of the struggle for liberation is often at best one-dimensional. At one time the Socialist Workers Party supported vivisection and held meetings on whether socialists should be vegetarians. One did not have to attend the meetings to know the answer. Nowadays, they would doubtless see opposition to the horrific Moslem method of ritual slaughter as Islamophobia.

Many animal rights activists are rightly suspicious of the Left which they see as manipulative and dishonest, interested not in furthering the cause but solely in recruiting to the vanguard party. They are not, however, misanthropes and terrorists despite all the scare stories.

Many are involved in other causes such as the peace movement and anti-fascism. Keith Mann, a spokesperson for the Animal Liberation Front, who was awarded a 14-year sentence for his animal rights activity, has said that "extremism" will stop if the vivisection laboratories will but open themselves up to public inspection. He feels that if the public knew the truth about the suffering and death inflicted behind locked doors there would be such an outcry that vivisection would be ended.

Socialism, if it is not to be tyranny in a new guise, must of necessity be an extreme and consistently democratic humanism. Yet humanism is not an end in itself. In realising itself it creates new qualities.

One such new quality is the extension of the circle of compassion beyond humans to the other living beings with which we share the planet. Discounting the notion of creation, humans and non-humans are products of a common evolutionary process. Because humans can reason they have a duty to apply that reason to the treatment of animals. We need to stop abusing, exploiting and killing animals for our own ends. We need to see nature as something to be worked with, not subjugated. We need to explore alternatives such as natural medicines and an emphasis on the preventative rather than the curative. We need to have the land and the tools to grow some of our own food. We need to stop polluting the land with artificial pesticides and fertilisers which damage wild animal habitats. We need to re-examine our diet and move away from one based on animal products to one based on grains, vegetables and pulses. We need to stop vivisection, hunting and the fur trade. We need to cherish life and let it thrive in all its forms.

The Green Party, which has a much better policy on animals than much of the Left, has an animal rights working group. The Labour Party has an animal welfare society, which has managed to get animal rights issues debated at party conference. However, Labour in government has prevaricated on banning hunting with dogs while threatening a crackdown on animal rights activists. Attempts to form an animal rights group for socialists outside of the Labour Party have had little success in a Left mired in myopic economism.

In 1907 there was a united front of anti-vivisectionists, socialists and feminists against attempts to demolish a statue in Battersea of a brown dog which had been erected as a monument to the victims of fraudulent science. Nearly a century later such a united front is urgently needed. On animal rights demonstrations one often hears the slogan "human liberation, animal liberation – one struggle, one fight". It is high time socialists woke up to its essential truth. ■

## **EMANCIPATION & LIBERATION**

Quarterly discussion journal published by the Republican Communist Network (Scotland)

Subscription rates (1 year, 4 issues): Britain £10, Rest of Europe £12, Rest of the World £14

Make cheques payable to "Record of Letter". Send to:  
RCN, c/o PO Box 6773, Dundee DD1 1YL