

How Shall We Live Together?

A Response to Paola Cavalieri¹

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Paola Cavalieri asks whether the animal rights/liberation (AR/L) movement should be 'self-sufficient and self-reliant',² and develop 'an autonomous presence both in the political arena and in the electoral process'³ rather than focusing on alliance building with the broader Left.

Cavalieri's hesitation about alliance-building is motivated by worries about diffusion and loss of focus, but also by the thought that 'humanism leads the worse-off to cling to their humanity to the detriment of animals'. Thus, acting 'as a full member of the family of social justice struggles' will lead either to wasting energy on alliances that never materialize, or to watering down animal liberation's radical aims in order to forge those alliances.

The failure of the Left to embrace AR/L is deeply frustrating, but I think it's too early to abandon the strategy of a broad Left alliance. I agree with Cavalieri that diffusion of energy and focus is a serious worry, and that it is crucial for the AR/L movement not to abandon its radical aims. But I also believe that careful alliance building can avoid these pitfalls, and is indeed essential for the growth and success of AR/L. This all depends on what one means by 'alliance-building'. For starters, we shouldn't view the choice between being an autonomous movement and alliance-building in dichotomous terms – just as it is unhelpful to view individual self-development as an either/or choice between autonomy and connection with others. Traditional conceptions of individual autonomy are based on problematic ideas of self-sufficiency and a controlling 'sovereign will' that fail to acknowledge the ways we are inevitably part of interdependent relations with others who help create, support and extend our autonomy. So,

too, at the communal level: insisting on self-sufficiency and self-reliance of the AR/L movement doesn't make us strong; it stunts our development. We can be true to our principles and goals, and indeed enrich them, through alliance with other justice groups even if those groups don't share our foundational commitments.

One form of alliance that needn't compromise foundational principles is a contingent alliance around specific shared goals in specific contexts. In recent years many environmentalists have finally opened their eyes to the multiple ecological catastrophes of animal agriculture and the fishing industry. There is no guarantee that organized campaigns to reduce these negative environmental impacts will be good for animals (rather than, say, promoting technological fixes to reduce methane emissions, or campaigns to replace cows and sheep with more chickens). However, there is a real opportunity here. Major structural changes to capitalist societies and economies are inevitable as we transition to a carbon-neutral future, including systematic shifts towards plant-based diets, and the rewilding of former agricultural lands and devastated oceans. Such developments offer meaningful opportunities to liberate countless animals.

Similarly, certain specific goals of anti-capitalist and anti-colonial movements (for example, protecting indigenous lands from extractive capitalism) can be shared by the animal movement. I agree with Cavalieri that achieving these goals won't in itself dismantle human supremacism, even as it forestalls additional violence and harm to animals. But I believe they can, in fact, 'already create, if possible, a little of that future freedom'. Working toward such shared goals *can* be transformative for animals if we are creative in shaping how these campaigns are narrated and interpreted – ensuring that they contribute to the project of destabilizing human-nonhuman hierarchy.

For example, we can work with the environmental movement towards certain shared goals (for example, dismantling subsidies for animal agriculture and fishing industries), while advancing our own claims about the meaning and trajectory of these changes (for example claims regarding animal sovereignty, animals' rights to place/territory, development for all instead of the few, and so on). In other words, we can share goals without sharing foundations, and while advancing different ideological narratives. Indeed, it seems crucial to be part of such broader

movements if we want to reshape ideologies and habits of mind. I should note that this kind of alliance strategy (discrete coalitions around specific goals) is consistent with the AR/L movement establishing an autonomous presence in the political arena and electoral process. Indeed, such a presence may be a precondition for establishing the AR/L movement as a viable coalition partner.

A second way we can – and must – be full members in the struggle for social justice is by refusing to advance our agenda in ways that contribute to the oppression of other subjugated groups (substituting ‘one hierarchy for another’). For example, AR/L should advance its theoretical claims for animals in ways that don’t disparage or instrumentalize persons with disabilities, should adopt political tactics that don’t reinforce sexism and racism, and should choose strategic targets that don’t fuel xenophobia by focusing on ‘cruel’ foreign or minority practices. Again, this way of being a good ally is consistent with the AR/L movement establishing an autonomous presence in the political arena and electoral processes. Being a good ally doesn’t mean devoting one’s energies to the agenda of other social justice movements, or sparing them from criticism concerning their position on animals, but it does mean refraining from giving comfort to their enemies, or causing harm to them by reinforcing oppression or prejudice. We can form an autonomous movement yet still feel an obligation to engage with other movements to make sure that we don’t, even unintentionally, deploy tropes that further marginalize the dispossessed.

Moreover, respectful dialogue with other social justice struggles can strengthen our understanding of AR/L. In my own work I have found that engagement with disability and children’s rights theory/advocacy has not only deepened my appreciation of these struggles, and of opportunities for shared analysis and alliance. It has also radically altered how I think about AR/L and the significance to animals of challenging adult-centric and ableist norms by emphasizing relational agency over individual self-sufficiency, and appreciating embodied forms of participation and communication. Far from being a distraction or deviation from the course of AR/L, it has, I believe, enriched my understanding of what that course should be (Donaldson and Kymlicka).

So, my first point is to stress the ways that alliance-building needn't compromise the goals of AR/L or diffuse its focus and energies. I would add that another positive dimension of alliance-building is that it forces us to be attuned not just to radical ends and utopian goals, or to ritualized debates about the relationship between reform and radicalism, but also to the political opportunities of the very particular epoch we are living in. Autonomist radical movements have a history of becoming inward-looking, monitoring and debating their ideological purity while losing touch with the shifting constellations of political forces beyond. Moreover, while it may be true that many theorists and strategists on 'the Left' have made an intellectual commitment to humanism (Kymlicka), the evidence suggests that the disadvantaged themselves often have greater empathy for animals (Deemer and Labao; Deemer), and there may be ways to tap this directly. We shouldn't let the Left's intellectual humanism blind us to the more embodied solidarities that are experienced on a daily basis, and that could be politically mobilized.

The current era of political destabilization across Western democracies is unprecedented in the 50-year history of the modern AL/R movement. Many of these political dynamics are deeply alarming, but they also represent opportunity. What are the trends, openings, and dangers? Is the AL/R movement creative and nimble enough to steer a course amidst the challenges of resurgent populism, nationalism and the environmental crisis towards a better future for animals (including the human variety)?

For example, we might ask whether resurgent nationalism represents an opportunity for broad-appeal animal advocacy. And at first glance, the answer might be a resounding 'no'. There are many disturbing examples in which (alleged) concern for animals is instrumentalized by chauvinistic and xenophobic groups – for example, attacks on Halal slaughter by opponents of Muslim migrants in Europe (Lelieveldt), the BJP's instrumentalization of concern for sacred cows to attack Muslims in India (Narayanan), or the outcry in Australia about the cruelties done to 'our' sheep by Middle Eastern countries (Dalziell and Wadiwel; Probyn-Rapsey). When animal activists participate in these campaigns, we give succor to the right in precisely the problematic ways discussed above, allowing the animal question to be used to further stigmatize disadvantaged groups.

Should we therefore concede the territory of nationalism to the right, and disavow any advocacy strategy that appeals to ideas of group identity or self-determination? Perhaps the disturbing examples above are not evidence of the intrinsic dangers of nationalism, but of the dangers of leaving it to reactionaries to speak for ‘the nation’, ‘the people’, or ‘the community’.⁴ Nationalism – a ‘battery, a reservoir of power’ (Canovan) – is a powerful motivating force for collective action. It can be deployed in profoundly negative ways, but it is also crucial for the realization of positive projects, helping to overcome inertia, petty differences, and self-interest in order to create national social programs and public works, for example, or to organize collective defence and emergency response, or to mobilize the fight for freedom and self-determination. (‘We Are Citizens of Hong Kong, not China’ in the recent Hong Kong protests.) Can the power of ‘we’ identities motivate political action for animals?

Catalonia is an interesting case, where an opportunistic alliance of animal rights groups and Catalan secessionists against a common foe – the Spanish state and its promotion of bullfighting – may, over time, lead to genuine internalization of a pro-animal Catalan identity (as suggested by Barcelona’s recent ground-breaking decision to transition its zoo in an ‘animalist’ direction).⁵ In this case, unlike populist attacks on Muslim minorities, the linking of animal advocacy and (Catalan) national identity arguably serves to bolster both human and animal justice: an oppressed national minority justifies its claims to greater autonomy in part by showing (or at least claiming) solidarity with oppressed animals.

Allying animal advocacy with legitimate nationalist mobilization is a powerful strategy that we shouldn’t dismiss out of hand. If the terrain of nationalism is monopolized by right-wing xenophobes, then it is virtually inevitable that nationalism will serve as a battery of colonization and genocide (in settler state contexts) and/or migrant exclusion. However, animal liberationists and left allies could try to direct the energies of nationalism towards projects such as indigenous resurgence, rewilding, and provision of safe haven for climate refugees. For example, what would an inclusive Canadian project, built foremost on respect for indigenous and non-human sovereignties, look like? This may sound paradoxical insofar as nationalism is often seen as built around ideas of unitary peoplehood and exclusive sovereignty. But in reality,

nationalisms around the world have adapted themselves to the realities of diverse populations and plural authorities, and if a multicultural nationalism is possible, then so too perhaps is a multispecies nationalism. Rather than vacating nationalist terrain to right-wing reactionaries, AR/L theorists should think carefully about how to mobilize this ‘reservoir of power’ for animals and a broad social justice vision.⁶

I agree with Cavalieri that a ‘philosophically informed political praxis’ should guide our choices about how to ‘capitalize on current ethical and legal contradictions and on the energies liberated by concurrent crises’. But I think it must go further, elucidating the possibilities (and limitations) of strategic alliance, and of mass mobilization based not just on narrowly cognitive strategies (such as contradiction and dissonance), but on much wider imaginative and affective appeals concerning who we want to be, and how we want to live. We must place the animal question at the heart of a broader project of social, economic and democratic transformation.

Notes

¹ This commentary was part of an ‘Open Peer Commentary’ process. This involved sending a lead essay (in this issue see Cavalieri) in identified form to two high-standing scholars in the field for their feedback on suitability for publication, and for their short commentaries which would be published alongside the lead essay (aside from this commentary see also Calarco in this issue). This approach was undertaken with the consent of the author and peer reviewers. The Guest Editors, with the consent of the Chief Editor of the *Animal Studies Journal*, pursued this approach because of the high probability that the essay would be identifiable to reviewers in the conventional double blind review process, particularly as the author responds to and builds on their own theoretical work. In addition, the guest editors were attracted to emerging open models of peer review which put an emphasis on public debate, an approach that was deemed relevant for this special issue.

² Unless noted otherwise, all quotes are from Paola Cavalieri's 'Animal Liberation: Pathways to Politics'.

³ Cavalieri is paraphrasing Smulewicz-Zucker here.

⁴ Some people prefer to reserve the term 'nationalism' for problematic group identity, and 'solidarity' or some other term for progressive forms of group identity. Whatever the terminology, we need to distinguish good and bad forms of 'we' group mobilization.

⁵ The Catalan case is discussed by Lelieveldt; and Clifford. For the Barcelona zoo initiative see ZOOXXI.

⁶ See Tam for a broader discussion of 'we' identities and social norm strategies in animal advocacy.

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