

Correspondence on animal rights

14 September 2004

I have read the [August 10] article by Julie Hyland entitled “Britain: Blair government outlines fresh attack on civil liberties.” I’m a daily *World Socialist Web Site* reader, but also an animal rights supporter. The aforementioned article stunned me as lacking understanding of the reasons behind the animal rights movement.

The text starts off with the following phrase: “the misanthropic outlook at the heart of animal rights extremism....” Later on, the author claims that “research involving animals is closely regulated in Britain.” That whole paragraph gives the impression that:

* the 2.7 million animals killed in laboratories every year serve a useful purpose (“such procedures—most of which were for research and drug development purposes—...”),

* the testing is nondestructive (“non-toxic testing accounted for 82 percent of all experiments”),

* “84 percent [of the experiments] were on rodents,” which seems to suggest that small animals (mice, rats, guinea pigs) suffer less than the big ones (primates, dogs, horses)

(by the way, rabbits are not rodents—I wonder if the 84 percent figure takes that into account),

* “dogs, cats, horses and primates account for less than 1 percent of animal experiments” —which is still a very considerable number, given that 1 percent of 2.7 million is 27 thousand.

Julie Hyland goes on, saying: “nonetheless, according to the *Observer* newspaper, the number of attacks admitted by animal rights activists has increased 40-fold over the last two years.”

There is a clear message in the sentence that there are no rational reasons for animal rights activists to organise the protests because animal research in Britain is ethical, scientific, justified and well within the boundaries of the (very strict) law.

I was very saddened to read these words on WSWs, which, I believe, is usually able to take the stand for the weak and the oppressed, against the misdeeds of greed-driven private interests.

I was quite surprised to see on WSWs this naive view of the biotech industry and at the same time to see the animal rights activists presented as extremists, with no sympathy for the movement whatsoever and no honest effort to try to present the animal rights situation objectively, in all its complexity. If there are activists who call for murder (which is, if I understand Julie Hyland correctly, an unproven quotation), they are few and far between.

The situation of laboratory animals in Britain (and elsewhere in the world), though ameliorating over time, is still very far from being ethical. I will not go into details here and now, but I would like to outline a few points on the subject.

* Huntingdon Life Sciences, mentioned in the article with a very neutral tone, has faced heated protests because of their (well-documented) record of cruelty, abuse, scientific records manipulation, etc.

* There is serious scientific doubt regarding the usefulness of many of the experiments conducted on animals. A lot of them are performed without enough scientific justification, as not all results obtained with animals can be applied to humans. Also, the progress of in vitro technologies, assay technologies, microarrays, etc., offers an alternative solution.

* Many experiments are repeated by various laboratories and sites, either regardless of the fact that their results are already publicly known or because of corporate secrecy rules.

* It has to be pointed out that for the employees and decision makers of many of those laboratories, animals are just like any other resource—and an inexpensive one. In many cases, there are no attempts to minimise the suffering of the animals or limit their number. The people involved simply do not have the empathy.

* One of the main reasons behind the protests is to raise public awareness of these issues, hoping for procedural and legal changes.

Just like with regard to the capitalist economy, the entities involved in animal research are motivated by profit, not by ethics. There are no reasons to believe that they will, by themselves and out of goodheartedness, abandon inexpensive procedures that their scientists are comfortable with and switch to modern and better, but also more expensive and requiring lots of training, procedures not involving animals.

I myself work in the biotech industry (in software, though) and therefore know the attitudes and the propaganda.

The world socialist movement tries to make people all over the globe aware of the fact that economy and finance are not just soulless machines, guided by universal laws, but are subject to ethical choices. Science is another of those ivory towers. Societies have to question the ethical basis of some branches of science, one of them being animal research. And to those claiming that violence is not the answer, I’d like to point out that at the very core of the socialist movement lies the idea of a revolution, necessary in order to abolish the capitalist system.

At the very end of my letter I would like to ask the WSWs editors for a longer elaboration on the socialist perspective on animal rights.

Best regards and thank you for WSWs, which is, I believe, the best source of left-oriented news on the Internet today.

MB

Dear MB,

A study of the literature of animal rights groups shows that the description of their views as “misanthropic” (defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as “dislike of mankind”) is quite restrained. Here is a fairly typical example, taken from an Animal Liberation Front website [1]:

“In the midst of our high-tech, ostentatious, hedonistic lifestyle, among the dazzling monuments to history, art, religion, and commerce, there are the ‘black boxes.’ These are the biomedical research laboratories, factory farms, and slaughterhouses—faceless compounds where society conducts its dirty business of abusing and killing innocent, feeling beings. These are our Dachaus, our Buchenwalds, our Birkenaus. Like the good German burghers, we have a fair idea of what goes on there, but we don’t want any reality checks. We rationalise that the killing has to be done and that it’s done humanely.”

The killing of animals for food, a practice going back to the beginnings of human society, and scientific experiments on animals, a practice going back for hundreds of years, is taken to be of a similar nature to the Nazi holocaust. In other words, according to animal rights campaigners, humankind throughout its existence has carried out the most appalling crimes. The Catholic condemnation of humans for original sin looks quiet mild in comparison. How can one construe such attitudes, hardly

uncommon in the world of the animal liberation movement, as anything but misanthropic? Are we not justified in calling such views extremist?

The figures on animal experiments were given to put the issue in perspective. That less than 1 percent of experiments are conducted on animals other than “small” animals, and that even 82 percent of these involved non-toxic testing, would surely imply for most readers of the WWS that on the scale of problems facing humanity today—such as the criminal war in Iraq or the huge growth of social inequality—the possible mistreatment of animals in experiments is a relatively minor one.

You obviously consider that we should not have mentioned Huntingdon Life Sciences, a British company specialising in the use of animals for laboratory experiments, without referring to animal rights protesters’ allegations of cruel treatment at this company. Again, this is a matter of perspective. Our view, and we believe it is one that most of our readers share, is that experiments on animals are of importance to medical researchers. We have no reason to believe that cruelty or neglect of laboratory animals is widespread, and we do not accept the argument of animal rights protesters that the cases of malpractice they focus on justify stopping all animal experiments.

In Britain, the focus of the article, the tight regulation of animal experiments is widely acknowledged amongst researchers. Professor Nick Wright, head of pathology at Cancer Research UK, gave an interview to the *Guardian* newspaper (April 24, 2003) setting out the various procedures and tests that a researcher must go through. This includes obtaining a personal licence showing that you are responsible, suitably qualified, and have been trained in animal research techniques. Then you must obtain a project licence, explaining every aspect of your experiment. If an animal could suffer any pain you must justify why this is necessary. This then goes to an ethics committee, usually chaired by someone outside your organisation and containing lay members to make sure you are doing things properly. If this stage is passed, it then goes to the Home Office, which conducts a further review before it can go ahead. Lord Winston, the distinguished fertility expert and producer of TV documentaries on medical issues, is quoted as saying that in Britain, “It is harder to carry out an experiment on an animal than on a human these days.” Winston says it takes so much time to get approval for the experiments on animals he needs in his research that he does most of them in the United States (the *Observer*, July 21, 2002).

You say in spite of being socialists we are encouraging a naïve view of the biotech industry. Any objective reading of our site will show that this is a spurious claim. On dozens, if not hundreds, of occasions we have pointed to the huge profits of the pharmaceutical corporations and the lack of adequate healthcare faced by the vast majority of people. We have referred many times to the fact that drugs are not being developed to tackle diseases that threaten people in the developing world because they are not profitable. Again, it is a matter of perspective—we are concentrating on the suffering of humans and not of animals.

We do not doubt that in the drive to minimise costs, pharmaceutical and other industries have been guilty of abuses in which cruelty and neglect of animals has taken place. There are cases where unsuitable people with sadistic tendencies have been employed. No doubt, alternative methods to animal experiments have not been developed because they are more costly. But we do not accept your view, however, that “in many cases” the scientists and workers in the industry “simply do not have the empathy” to minimise the suffering of animals involved. This view, implying that the majority of working people are unaffected by the suffering of animals and have to be jolted out of their apathy by shock tactics, is typical of animal rights protesters. The philosophy and politics behind this outlook is considered below.

We have no particular disagreement with those who want to demonstrate against cases of animal cruelty, and we uphold their rights to do so. This is hardly the same as the animal rights movement’s operations. Large-scale

damage to corporate property was rejected by the socialist movement 200 years ago as a retrograde measure. Similarly, there is nothing progressive about harassment and attacks on the personal property of scientists. Dr. Jerry Vlasak’s quotation is not “unproven” as you suggest. He was recently interviewed on BBC Radio 4 and did not withdraw his remark that the killing of a few scientists could save millions of animal lives. He said, “I am simply saying that it [violence] is a morally acceptable tactic and it may be useful in the struggle for animal liberation.”

Vlasak was invited to speak by Shac, the main animal rights group in Britain.

The provocative nature of such animal rights groups’ statements, their widely publicised attacks on property, and harassment of scientists has been used by the British Labour government. It has played into their hands to such an extent that if agent provocateurs were not operating in the animal liberation secretive cell organization, it would be surprising. But whether or not this is the case, the activities of the animal rights extremists constitute a political provocation and an attack not on “corporate interests” but on a section of the working class. The use of such provocations by the British Labour government to step up their repressive legislation was, of course, the focus of our article.

As our article explains, the animal rights movement’s actions are allowing the government to identify them with terrorism. If you follow our website you must be fully aware of how the justified and widespread revulsion at Al Qaeda’s methods is being manipulated by Prime Minister Tony Blair, following the lead of the Bush administration, to justify every reactionary political initiative under the slogan of “war against terrorism.”

You appear to be confused into thinking that because we “stand for the weak and the oppressed, against the misdeeds of greed-driven private interests,” we share the same outlook as animal rights campaigners. But opposing cruelty to animals does not in any way challenge the present social setup, the profit system. Our fundamental concern as socialists is the growing social polarisation of society on a world scale and the ownership and control of production by a tiny handful of billionaires while the vast majority of working people face an increasingly insecure existence. Yet, politicians who slavishly support free market economics can express their concern over animal cruelty.

To divert attention from its war-mongering and the destruction of welfare measures affecting the human population, the British Labour government has probably paid more attention to the welfare of animals than any government in history. This not only includes a bill to ban fox hunting (the amendment to completely ban fox hunting was passed by 362 votes to 154, compared to the vote supporting the government over the Iraq war of 412 to 149 votes), but also new legislation against animal cruelty put forward by Ben Bradshaw, the animal health and welfare minister. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) is said to be delighted: “Getting this new welfare offence on the statute books has been the RSPCA’s prime objective and will represent the single most important piece of legislation affecting captive and domestic animals since 1911, when the Protection of Animals Act became law.”

Perhaps you would argue, like many animal rights protesters do, that they are not just opposing cruelty to animals within the framework of animal welfare like the RSPCA and the Labour government but taking a stand against all animal exploitation. But there is nothing about this outlook either that is fundamentally opposed to the capitalist order. “The American Left Should Support Animal Rights: A Manifesto,” on the website of law professor and animal rights campaigner Gary Francione [2], is quite open about this: “most of the large (and rich) national groups quite intentionally avoid speaking about other social issues [than animal rights—CT] lest they offend their conservative donors.”

Francione admits that only one animal rights group opposed the Gulf War in 1990-1991.

Professor Peter Singer, probably the best-known advocate of animal liberation, in his article in the *New York Review of Books* [3], looking back over 30 years from when he first put forward his views as practically a lone voice, simply finds it “curious” that even those with the most rabid right-wing views can now support animal rights. Singer points to a book by Matthew Scully that he calls an “eloquent polemic against the human abuse of animals, culminating with a devastating description of factory farming.” Scully is a leader of the Christian right, past literary editor of *National Review* and a speechwriter to George W. Bush.

More fundamentally, there is a vast difference between our socialist, Marxist outlook and that of the animal rights movement. The use of the term “rights” by the animal rights community, first popularised in the book *Animal Liberation* [4] written by Peter Singer in 1975, is that of “interests,” in the sense of capacity for suffering and enjoyment. (Singer avoided the use of the word “rights,” but it is in this sense that the term is now used by animal rights campaigners). Let us accept that because many species of animals undoubtedly possess a nervous system and parts of the brain that are similar to humans, there is no doubt that they experience suffering in some sense. Some, like the great apes, can apparently develop rudimentary language. Many animals operate at a social level. On these grounds, animal rights campaigners demand that animals be granted equality with humans, in the sense that they should not be killed, harmed or exploited. Anyone disagreeing with this is said to be “speciesist.” Whilst they may recognise that humans have some rights not enjoyed by animals, it is this view of “interests” or “rights” that is at the heart of animal rights philosophy.

Our position, on the contrary, is that human society is a unique phenomenon amongst all the animal species. Humans can labour with their hands and brains, can plan and develop productive techniques, and have amassed centuries of culture and knowledge that have enabled them to control and hold dominion over the rest of nature. Moreover, we hold that humans have the ability to change and develop not only the natural world in a conscious and planned way, but also human society itself—that, after all, is the central tenet of socialism. In our view, therefore, humans have infinitely more to them than the ability to experience pleasure and pain on a biological level. We disagree with the underlying conception of Singer, Tom Regan and others that the essential nature of humans can be found in their individual and biological characteristics. In other words, we oppose the view of human society that sees it as nothing more than a collection of individuals with their own “human nature” and interests.

Our position (i.e., the Marxist viewpoint) grew out of the traditions of the eighteenth century Enlightenment that championed the idea of using science and technology to make social progress, against the predominant feudal and religious conceptions that saw the hierarchical society of the time as permanent. It is true that such a viewpoint is now regarded as untenable and wildly optimistic in many intellectual and political circles.

Over the past 50 years, especially, following the experience of two world wars and fascism, all sorts of ideologies, including animal liberation, but also the related positions such as that of the ecology movement, have become fashionable. Based on very one-sided interpretations of Darwinian biology (in areas such as sociobiology and evolutionary psychology), many now deem it unacceptable if not impossible for human society to base itself on such an ability to change the natural and social world.

Because the imperialist powers developed the atomic bomb and what are now called weapons of mass destruction, because corporations and governments have caused ecological disasters and now even threaten the future of the whole planet, science itself—rather than the type of society that uses or abuses it—is increasingly called into question. You appear to have accepted some of these ideas when you refer to science as “another of those ivory towers” and say that society has to “question the ethical basis of some branches of science.” We do not deny that abuses of science

can take place, but that is absolutely no reason to denigrate the unparalleled achievements of twentieth century science and technology.

What lies behind such pessimistic views is not, fundamentally, a response to science and technology. Above all, it was the development of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China that gave rise to the retrogressive outlook that became widespread in the last few decades and characterises that of animal liberation. The series of criminal betrayals of the working class movement carried out under Stalin’s leadership in the 1920s and 1930s, the murder of hundreds of thousands of socialists and intellectuals in the show trials and gulags, paved the way for the victory of fascism, world war, and the Holocaust, and created enormous ideological confusion that still reverberates throughout intellectual life. If Stalinism was the same as socialism, a view that many (including Peter Singer) have uncritically accepted, and this was the inevitable outcome of the Marxist movement, then all theories of social progress and even theories of human society become suspect.

Some have concluded from this the impossibility of developing any rational philosophy at all—the postmodernists. Animal liberationists have concluded that man as a species must be indicted for all the “crimes” of the twentieth century—“crimes” that are defined as including everything from fascism, militarism and war to pollution, excessive consumption and environmental degradation, and of which other animal species are either innocent or helpless victims. A moral imperative not to do damage to other animal species, a theory of human society as a mere collection of biological individuals essentially no more important than any other species, is the most we can aspire to.

Our movement is in a unique position to challenge this confusion created by the identification of Stalinism with socialism and Marxism. We are the movement, the Trotskyists, that opposed Stalinism from the start, and that tirelessly defended the programme of socialist internationalism against the reactionary utopia of creating socialism in a single country.

Our website is dedicated to the struggle to revive the traditions of Trotskyism in the working class internationally by demonstrating the superiority of a Marxist analysis of political as well as cultural, philosophical and scientific developments.

Marxism teaches that modern capitalist society is a society of antagonistic classes. In defending democratic rights and fighting for social equality, our movement is advancing the interests of the broad mass of the population, the working class. We understand “rights” and “ethics” from this standpoint. This is not the standpoint of individual ethical choice, an outlook that historically developed with the rise of capitalist property ownership and is used to defend bourgeois interests, albeit usually in a dishonest and hypocritical manner. Singer’s philosophical views, for example, are taken from the eighteenth and early-nineteenth century philosopher and social reformer Jeremy Bentham. His views on the interests of individuals, hardly original ones, were about how to make the capitalist society of the British Industrial Revolution work more smoothly, avoiding excessive cruelty to the poor (and animals) and opposing the widespread corruption amongst the aristocracy. They were the views of the aspiring middle class and had nothing to do with the working class (that was only in its early stages, and its own views were to develop later in the communist international).

If such an individualist ethical outlook is taken up 200 years later, but emphasising equality with animals, how can we assess it in class terms? Only that it is the outlook of a disoriented and backward-looking section of the middle class that has lost all confidence in the mass of the human population, the working class. That it has seen a temporary increase in support, in Britain at any rate, testifies to the present confusion and lack of political direction in society as a whole, confronted with the undermining of a socialist political culture and consciousness by Stalinism and the ascendancy of the reactionary policies of New Labour in Britain and the Bush administration internationally. When the working class begins to

develop its own political standpoint again, we are convinced that the backward, non-scientific and—yes—misanthropic nostrums of the animal rights movement will be swept to the political margins where they belongs.

One final comment. Your identification of “violence” with the revolutionary traditions of the Marxist movement only shows that you do not understand our history or what is at stake in the struggle for socialism. Marxists have never identified terrorist violence with social revolution, and if you read our statements on the attack of September 11, or more recently in North Ossetia, you will see that we have condemned such methods as utterly reactionary and expressing the most demoralised and anti-working class political outlook.

This does not mean that we are pacifists. We recognise that in developing a movement that seeks the democratic control and ownership of production, we will be opposed by the tiny minority of extremely wealthy people that currently own the transnational corporations and financial institutions. There is every likelihood that they will develop fascistic movements and use repressive state measures to inflict violence on the working class majority. In such a situation, we have always reserved the right of the majority to defend itself. This has nothing to do with advocacy of violence for its own sake, a position advocated by anarchists, animal rights protesters and other middle class tendencies that have lost all confidence in democratic politics based on the working class majority.

Yours sincerely,
Chris Talbot



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact