

Animal Rights, Multiculturalism, and the Left

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In shorthand summaries of the preferred causes of the progressive Left in the past 40 years, one often finds a reference to animal rights, alongside gender equality, gay rights, the disability movement, and the rights of immigrants, racial minorities, and indigenous peoples. All are seen as paradigmatically progressive causes, fighting to emancipate historically subordinated and stigmatized groups, often subsumed under the label of “social justice struggles” or “citizenship struggles.” Yet the inclusion of animal rights in this list is misleading: the reality is that the animal question is virtually invisible within the Left. As Boggs notes, “Apart from its marginal leverage within the radical-ecology movement, animal rights discourse has scarcely entered into or altered the work of Left/progressive groups in the United States” (Boggs 2011, 73). Animal advocates are “orphans of the Left,”¹ championing a progressive cause that is shunned by other progressive movements.² Animal rights may receive a passing ritualized mention before being promptly ignored.³ Nor is this a new phenomenon: the same pattern held for the old Left, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Sanbonmatsu notes, “the Left with few exceptions has historically viewed human violence toward other beings with indifference” (Sanbonmatsu 2011, 13).

While this indifference is long-standing, its causes have arguably changed. Marx—who was contemptuous of animal rights movements⁴—shared the Kantian/Hegelian view that the intrinsic value of humanity derives entirely from what distinguishes “man” from animals and that nature (including animals) is simply the stage on which humans enact their unique Promethean species powers for self-conscious and creative cooperative labor. The result, in Benton’s words, is a “quite fantastic species-narcissism” (Benton 1988, 7).

This account of the human good, which rests on a dichotomy between higher human capacities and mere animal functions, is now widely discredited on the Left, not because it ignores the fact that many animals engage in conscious, intentional, and cooperative activity, but rather because it leads to a pernicious hierarchy among humans. The claim that the intrinsic value of humanity derives from the capacity to self-consciously transform the external world leads not only to privileging humans over animals, but also to privileging men’s productive labor over women’s reproductive labor, to privileging the able-bodied over people with disabilities, and to privileging European systems of intensive agriculture and property use over traditional forms of subsistence production. Not all groups or cultures were seen as equally capable of engaging in this Promethean mastery of

the external world, and the progress of history for Marx required allowing the most advanced of these masters to rule. If animals, as biologically determined beings, were unable to participate in the progress of history, so, too, Marx and Engels believed that there were “historyless peoples” whose conquest by great nations “is the right of civilization as against barbarism, of progress as against stability . . . [This] is the right of historical evolution.”⁵

After waves of feminist, disability, multicultural, and postcolonial critiques, the Left today almost unanimously rejects this picture that the intrinsic value of humanity lies in its capacity for rational self-conscious mastery of the external world, and in its transcendence of the merely “natural” or “animal.” There are multiple forms of human flourishing, multiple sources of value in our lives, all of which are deeply embodied, inescapably linked to our ontological existence as finite and vulnerable physical beings (i.e., as human animals).

This new picture of the good of human lives should have opened up the possibility for including animals in the Left’s conception of social justice. Humans are no longer disembodied Cartesian rational egos, and science has conclusively shown that animals are no longer mechanical automatons—rather, we are all conscious, feeling, communicative selves, bound to other conscious selves through various webs of relationship and dependency, each with our own subjective experience of the world. The human good is now continuous with that of other animals. If we look at a feminist ethics of care, for example, there is no conceptual or theoretical reason why its account of the good of human lives, and of the moral significance of caring relationships in promoting that good, cannot apply to animals. Similarly, if we look at “capability theory” in the global justice literature, there is no theoretical impediment to extending its account of the good of capabilities and of human flourishing, and the claims of justice it gives rise to, to animals. If we look at disability theory, there is no theoretical impediment to extending its account of the human good, and of the role of dependent agency in promoting that good, to animals. If anything, it is the refusal to extend these theories to animals that appears *ad hoc* and theoretically unmotivated.

Indeed we can find theorists who have drawn precisely these conclusions, extending feminist, postcolonial, and disability theory to include animals.⁶ And yet, as noted earlier, these pleas to include animals in the work of the Left have largely fallen on deaf ears. The vast majority of the Left—whether feminist, postcolonial, multiculturalist, critical race theory, disability, cosmopolitan, and queer—continues to view human violence against animals with complete indifference.

How can we explain this? Part of the explanation is the depth of our cultural inheritance. The Abrahamic religions all assert that only humans were made in God’s image and that animals were put on earth to serve human beings. Even people who disavow religious arguments, and purport to believe in evolution, often implicitly accept this premise. Another part of the explanation is that accepting animal rights can involve painful and inconvenient changes in one’s personal life: people may not be ready to give up their favorite meat dishes or leather shoes.

In order to avoid having to confront such challenges, they simply avoid thinking about animal ethics at all. Both the depth of the cultural legacies, and the difficulty of the personal sacrifices, are arguably greater in relation to animal rights than, say, gay rights or disability rights.

These familiar reasons help to explain why people on the Left resist animal rights, despite the logic of their own commitments. Put another way, people on the Left are not immune to either “species-narcissism” or self-interest—these are both “human, all too human” reasons for ignoring the claims of animals that cut across the ideological spectrum.

But there is also, we believe, a distinctively Left motivation for resisting animal rights: namely the perception that advocating for animal rights will end up harming the struggles of other disadvantaged groups. This is the perception that we wish to unpack and evaluate, to see whether indeed it offers a sound reason for the Left’s reticence regarding animal rights.

1. Sources of Potential Conflict

We start by examining one manifestation of this anxiety—debates about the growth of animal studies within academia. As Arluke notes, disciplines such as sociology “grant legitimacy to a variety of area studies for groups that have been oppressed, including—but not limited to—African-American studies, women’s studies, Latino studies, disability studies, and gay/lesbian studies,” but attempts to add animal studies to this list have been met with resistance, not primarily from mainstream sociologists who object to all such oppressed group studies, but precisely from sociologists affiliated with oppressed group area studies.⁷ He speculates about the possible reasons:

Is it possible that advocates from these sociologically approved specialties see animal studies as an unwelcome interloper that will compete for university and foundation resources in an increasingly competitive financial environment of ever-shrinking budgets for research support? Is it possible that they see animal studies as a new competitor in a zero-sum game of status and power as various specialty studies groups vie for increasing visibility and clout in academe? Is it possible that they see animal studies as a parody of their specialty because interest in non-human animals tarnishes or cheapens whatever group they champion and somehow, in their minds, trivializes the very notion of oppression? (Arluke 2002: 370–71)

In this passage, Arluke suggests two grounds for concern, which we will call the displacement and trivialization concerns. We will argue that the heart of the matter lies elsewhere—in concerns about cultural imperialism—but let us start with Arluke’s two issues:

Displacement: This is the concern that if the Left commits time and resources to animals it will come at the expense of time and resources devoted to, say, fighting racism. This is a familiar objection that has been invoked in the past to

dismiss or defer many groups' claims. For example, defenders of the claims of women or racial minorities were for a long time accused of diverting time and resources from the class struggle. This argument is widely discredited now on the Left as struggles for justice are not zero-sum. Highlighting a new form of injustice need not distract attention from older injustices, but rather helps to strengthen the salience of justice more generally in society.⁸ Moreover, these injustices are typically interconnected, rooted in similar ideologies of domination, relying on similar processes of exclusion, silencing, paternalism, and coercion. Highlighting a new form of injustice typically helps to reveal another strand in this interconnected web of oppression, allowing more informed and effective advocacy. Indeed, this need for an "intersectional" analysis is at the heart of contemporary Left politics, as against older ideas of privileging one struggle while ignoring or deferring others, and advocates of animal rights view themselves as extending this fundamental insight of the contemporary Left.

Trivialization: The concern here is that including animals in the Left's pantheon of just causes will diminish the very currency of justice and thereby erode the moral seriousness with which human injustices are treated. If we add the liberation of animals from oppression and enslavement to the Left's causes, the result will be to debase the currency of "liberation," "oppression," and "enslavement" in human contexts.

It is worth distinguishing two different versions of this concern. One is a philosophical claim about the objective moral significance of different forms of injustice, and the existence of a steep hierarchy of moral significance between human and animal injustices. Applying concepts of oppression and liberation to animals trivializes these concepts because harms to animals are, objectively, of trivial moral significance (Staudenmaier 2003). At one level, viewed as a philosophical claim about a hierarchy of moral significance, this objection just begs the question. Linking human and animal oppression is insulting to humans only if one starts from a commitment to species narcissism, which assumes that the good of a human life is radically discontinuous with (and superior to) that of other animals. If one starts instead with a view that emphasizes our good as conscious, feeling, perceptive, communicative, and embodied beings, then our good is continuous with that of many animals, as are the harms and vulnerabilities we face, and there is nothing insulting or trivializing in attending to these commonalities.⁹ And as we noted earlier, this is indeed the view of the human good that the contemporary Left has broadly endorsed, rejecting both Marxian Promethean mastery and Judeo-Christian divine creationism. On what basis, then, can the Left view the linking of animal and human rights as trivializing?¹⁰

We can, however, interpret the trivialization concern not as a philosophical claim about the way animal rights flattens a hierarchy of moral significance, but as an empirical prediction about the impact of support for animal rights on the broader public's commitment to human justice. Someone on the Left might say: I personally do not find it insulting to link the oppression of humans and animals, given the continuities in their goods and harms, but if the broader public starts to

weaken the moral boundary between humans and animals, the result will be to weaken their commitment to upholding the fundamental rights of oppressed and disadvantaged humans. The status of privileged and powerful humans will be secure even if we extend rights to animals—no one is going to question the importance of their interests or dignity. But the status of disadvantaged groups, and their right to a dignified existence, is always vulnerable, and must constantly be defended. For such groups, a sharp moral hierarchy between humans and animals is a crucial resource. They can best assert their right to a dignified existence by emphasizing the moral significance of their humanity, and their categorical discontinuity with, and superiority to, animality.¹¹ Sharing in human supremacy over animals—in species narcissism—provides the most effective tool for disadvantaged humans, even if it cannot be defended philosophically.

Many people find this claim that species narcissism operates to the benefit of disadvantaged humans to be intuitively plausible. However, the evidence suggests otherwise. The more sharply people distinguish between humans and animals, the more likely they are to dehumanize human outgroups, such as immigrants. Belief in human superiority over animals is empirically correlated with, and causally connected to, belief in the superiority of some human groups over others. For instance, when participants in psychological studies are given arguments about human superiority over animals, the outcome is greater prejudice against human outgroups. By contrast, those who recognize that animals possess valued traits and emotions are also more likely to accord equality to human outgroups. Reducing the status divide between humans and animals helps to reduce prejudice and to strengthen belief in equality among human groups. Multiple psychological mechanisms link negative attitudes toward animals to the dehumanization of human outgroups (Costello and Hodson 2010).

So there is no compelling evidence for believing that challenging human supremacist ideologies will displace or weaken commitment to justice for disadvantaged humans. The proposed dynamics of displacement and trivialization are highly speculative. There is no empirical evidence for either dynamic, and much evidence against them. And this is what we should expect given the Left's own theoretical premises. As noted earlier, both the conception of the human good that underlies contemporary Left theory, and its commitments to intersectional analyses of oppression, push us in the direction of recognizing continuities between human and animal injustice. The idea that the treatment of animals should be excluded from our accounts of justice, power, oppression, care, flourishing, and democracy makes little sense, given the Left's own theoretical commitments.

2. Cultural Imperialism and Racial Bias

If displacement and trivialization were the only grounds for the Left's indifference to human violence against animals, we might be able to quickly overcome these concerns. But there is another factor at work here, namely the specter of

cultural imperialism and racial privilege. Animal advocacy may be aimed at protecting a particularly vulnerable and powerless group, but many people worry that in practice it will end up reaffirming the privileged status of white middle-class Westerners while stigmatizing and disempowering minority groups and non-Western societies. The concern here is not simply that it will displace attention from other groups or cheapen the currency of justice—those are the displacement and trivialization concerns discussed in the previous section. The concern, rather, is that animal advocacy will operate to relegitimize racial hierarchies. Animal issues will become a measuring stick that operates to signify white/Western cultures as uniquely humane and civilized while stigmatizing minorities/non-Western cultures as backward or barbaric.

In one sense, the idea that the treatment of animals could be invoked to support Western superiority is puzzling, given that the West is responsible for inventing and then diffusing the techniques of industrial-scale animal exploitation, whereas many non-Western societies have historically had more respectful relations with animals. If the scale of animal exploitation is increasing in India, for example, it is the result of the incursion of Western corporations and Western lifestyles, not of local religious or cultural traditions.¹² Respect for animals is clearly not the exclusive property of any one race, culture, or civilization—and certainly not the West.

Nonetheless, there is a risk that animal issues will be racialized. Dominant groups have long justified their exercise of power over minorities or indigenous peoples by appealing to the “backward” or “barbaric” way they treat women, children, or animals. Consider William James’s claim in 1876 that “Among the many good qualities of our ‘Anglo-Saxon’ race, its sympathy with the feelings of brute animals deserves an honorable mention” (James 1987, 18). As Lundblad notes, insofar as animal advocacy at the time was tied to such claims, it “became a new and flexible discourse for claiming superiority over various human ‘races’, reinforcing the logic that only the more ‘civilized’ groups had evolved enough to treat other groups ‘humanely’ ” (Lundblad 2011, 77).¹³

Similar racial dynamics are at work in contemporary debates around animals. If we consider the sorts of animal harms that are targeted for public scrutiny, minority practices often seem to be singled out. One can quickly generate a long list of such cases:¹⁴

- (i) Indigenous peoples and the seal hunt/whale hunt;
- (ii) Jews/Muslims and ritual slaughter;
- (iii) Santeria and ritual sacrifice;
- (iv) Chinese Americans and the live-animal market in San Francisco’s Chinatown, or the sale of shark fin soup in Chinese restaurants;
- (v) Mexican Americans and horse tripping;
- (vi) African Americans and dog fighting; and
- (vii) Korean Americans and eating dogs.

In these cases, we have racialized minorities being told that their practices are cruel. The intention in highlighting these practices may be to improve the treatment of animals, but the effect may be to reproduce long-standing prejudices—for example, that minority groups are not really “one of us”; that they are irredeemably foreign; that they are not worthy of full membership; and that they cannot be trusted to be decent and humane, and so cannot be trusted to govern themselves (or to share in governing society generally).

There is a serious worry here, exacerbated by a perceived selectivity in the focus on minority practices. Dominant groups typically ignore the ways in which they are complicit in the abuse of billions of captive and enslaved domesticated animals, while complaining about the hunting practices of rural communities and indigenous peoples, or the ritual use of animals by religious minorities, even though these latter practices represent only a tiny fraction of abused animals overall. This selectivity may operate to justify the reproduction of existing power relations, and to reaffirm the dominant group’s sense of superiority over other peoples and cultures, all in pursuit of what seem like comparatively small and selective gains for animals.

It is important to note, as discussed below, that these high-profile debates about minority practices are rarely the result of campaigns by animal rights organizations in the strict sense—that is, organizations founded on the principle that humans do not have the right to harm animals for our benefit. (Hereafter, we will use “AR” to refer to animal rights groups in this strict sense.)¹⁵ These organizations, such as PETA, Farm Sanctuary or the Animal Liberation Front, and many others, focus on the institutionalized and commercial exploitation of animals, including the use of animals as food or in scientific research, fur farms, circuses, zoos, or puppy mills—none of which are primarily associated with minorities.

Indeed, the existence of high-profile debates on the cruelty of minority practices can be seen, not as the result of effective AR advocacy, but rather as evidence of the failure of such advocacy. From an AR perspective, eating dogs is no better or worse than eating pigs: they both violate the fundamental rights of animals to life and liberty.¹⁶ The broader public, however, endorses the principle that humans do have the right to harm and kill animals for our benefit, so long as we avoid “cruel” or “unnecessary” harm. It is this principle that opens the door to bias since perceptions of what is cruel or unnecessary are culturally variable (Deckha 2012, 537). The idea that it is cruel to eat dogs and horses but not cruel to eat pigs and cows is a cultural idiosyncrasy. So, too, the idea that it is cruel to kill chickens for religious sacrifice but not cruel to kill chickens to enjoy the taste of their flesh, or the idea that it is cruel to hunt foxes but not cruel to cage foxes in a fur farm. That the public mobilizes around these distinctions, often to the detriment of minorities, is evidence that AR principles and organizations have made virtually no inroads on public opinion.

However, the charge of racial bias has also arisen in relation to AR organizations and to the way they promote their principled vision of a world without animal exploitation. Racial bias has been seen in the AR movement’s expectations

of lifestyle or consumption choices. The AR movement, particularly in its vegan outreach activities, implies that anyone with modest efforts can lead a vegan lifestyle, ignoring the possibility that such choices may be very costly in social or material terms for certain groups. The assumption that a vegan lifestyle is easily accessible to all, critics claim, is an assumption that could only be made from a position of cultural, racial, and economic privilege.¹⁷

In both of these ways—the broader public’s targeting of “cruel” minority practices and the AR movement’s promoting of a vegan lifestyle—contemporary animal politics is often seen not just as presupposing a privileged white perspective, but also as reaffirming or relegitimizing those racial privileges, treating white perspectives as normative while ignoring the extent to which those perspectives are made possible by the oppression of others. Animal advocacy, in short, is seen as performing whiteness.¹⁸

This perception that animal advocacy involves performing whiteness informs the Left’s moral anxiety about animal rights.¹⁹ There is arguably no greater sin on the Left in North America today than performing whiteness, and progressive organizations will avoid associating with any cause that they suspect will be accused of doing so. Mainstream feminist, gay, disability, or anti-poverty groups have faced their own accusations of performing whiteness and have undergone wrenching internal debates to include racial minorities in their work. Having created what are often still fragile alliances with racial minorities, they are reluctant to embrace any cause that might jeopardize those links.

In some cases, this purported concern about performing whiteness is simply an excuse for people on the Left to avoid thinking about animal rights. There are some on the Left who, for sincere and principled reasons, avoid complicity with organizations and discourses that they see as reproducing racial bias. But we suspect that there are also many people on the Left who invoke this perception of racial bias as a rationalization for persisting in their indifference to human violence against animals. As noted earlier, the long-standing justifications for the Left’s indifference—Marxian conceptions of the human good, and empirical claims about displacement or trivialization—are difficult to sustain. The Left’s own theoretical commitments push in the direction of linking human and animal injustice. The one remaining politically legitimate excuse for ignoring animals is the claim that animal advocacy somehow enacts racial bias and cultural imperialism, and so this has become a preferred rationalization for anyone on the Left who wishes to ignore the issue.²⁰

Whatever the mix of sincere belief and insincere rationalization, the perception of animal advocacy as performing whiteness operates to keep AR advocacy as the orphan of the Left. If the Left is to embrace animal rights, this worry needs to be addressed. In Kim’s words, we need to overcome “the belief, already established among many progressive race activists and scholars, that the animal liberation movement is white, politically speaking—that is, that it is composed of white people who are indifferent to and ignorant of racial justice struggles and whose activism reinforces white privilege” (Kim 2011, 332).

In short, animal advocacy must acknowledge and be held accountable for its impact on racial hierarchies. But we would also insist that advocacy for racial equality must acknowledge and be held accountable for its effects on animals.

3. Toward a Multiculturalist Zoopolis

What would this mean in practice, for the sorts of disputes listed above? As a first step, we need to distinguish different dynamics of cultural imperialism and racial bias, and the different remedies they may require.

One dynamic is the intentional instrumentalization of animal issues—that is, the deliberate invoking of animal welfare as a pretext in order to bash minorities. An example of this is the way far-right anti-Muslim parties in Europe, such as the English Defence League, have jumped on the issue of the cruelty of ritual slaughter, solely as a way of telling Muslims they are not welcome and do not belong (Bob 2012; Lelieveldt 2012).²¹ These parties have no track record of concern for animals, and in many cases they only picked up the animal issue when other options for provoking Muslims had proven a dead end (e.g., when attempts at banning burqas or minarets were ruled unconstitutional).²²

In this context, animal welfare is invoked, not out of a good-faith concern for the animals, but to justify the exclusion of minorities. Animal welfare is being used instrumentally and selectively to reaffirm a sense of superiority over other peoples and cultures, and to legitimate injustice between humans.

Members of minority groups often assume that all criticisms of their animal practices fit this picture of dominant majorities using hypocritical double standards to exercise oppressive power over weak minorities (Kim 2007). But as we noted earlier, it would be implausible to ascribe such motives to contemporary campaigns by AR organizations in North America. Their main focus has been majority practices—the treatment of animals within the mainstream society and in particular by powerful corporations. As Kim notes, “Precisely because they challenge some of the most powerful forces in U.S. society—multibillion dollar interests such as the meat and dairy businesses, pharmaceutical and biomedical research companies, and the entertainment industries—animal activists are ridiculed, marginalized, and criminalized” (Kim 2007, 239–40).

Moreover, when asked to comment on high-profile debates over minority practices, they often explicitly denounce attempts to link the upholding of AR principles with justifications for xenophobia, or with claims about minorities’ eligibility or worthiness for membership. In the live-animal market debate, for example,

Charged with racism by Chinese merchants, animal advocates explicitly disavow any animus toward the Chinese people or culture. Animal advocates really don’t sound like cultural imperialists. They do not trash Chinese culture, make comparisons that valorize American culture over Chinese culture, or call for the destruction of Chinese culture. They do not suggest that live animal markets are central to Chinese culture and somehow revealing of its essential barbarity. (Kim 2010, 59)²³

Of course, insofar as AR groups raise the public profile of animal issues, it opens the door for their instrumental use, as with the English Defence League. And even where this deliberate instrumentalization does not occur, we can expect that the majority society and the media will often unconsciously filter AR campaigns through the lens of inherited cultural hierarchies, picking up those features of these campaigns that apply to minorities, while ignoring those aspects that apply to themselves. In societies with deeply entrenched racial and ethnic hierarchies, such effects are predictable, and animal advocates need to be accountable for them.

But this danger is not unique to the issue of animal rights. We see similar forms of instrumentalization in relation to other progressive causes, such as women's rights, gay rights, and children's rights. Indeed, it is often the same right-wing parties that instrumentalize these issues. Right-wing nativists who have no track record of concern for women's rights or gay rights have suddenly embraced these causes, at least rhetorically, as a pretext to denigrate Muslim immigrants.²⁴

Given these parallels, it is interesting to compare the Left's response in the two contexts. In relation to women's rights and gay rights, the Left's response to the risk of instrumentalization is not to weaken their commitment to these rights or to disown their universality. The Left's response, rather, is to denounce right-wing efforts to instrumentalize the issue and to take pro-active steps to divorce the universality of moral principles from claims of superiority for particular cultures. For example, advocates for women's rights emphasize the contestability of beliefs and heterogeneity of moral sources within every society, as against essentialist and reifying views that gender equality is somehow part of the cultural DNA of some groups while absent from the cultural DNA of other groups.²⁵ Advocates also work to establish checks and balances to minimize the potential for selectivity and double standards. For example, they emphasize the need to create forums in which all groups can participate equitably in debating and shaping the relevant principles, conscious of the fact that "supposedly neutral spaces of dialogue and debate have roots formed and facilitated by the privileging of Western viewpoints and peoples," and aware that "discourse emanating from elite spaces in the West (academia, news sources, think tanks, governments) enjoys support from colonial imaginaries that are not easily refuted" (Deckha 2007, 220). This requires conscious efforts at inclusion, dialogue, cross-cultural learning and listening, a commitment to consistency and self-reflective inquiry, and epistemic humility, and equally conscious efforts to avoid tokenism, essentialism, and exoticism.

In these and other ways, progressives on the Left work to defend the emancipatory goals of gender equality from the risks of instrumentalization and cultural imperialism—in short, to create a postcolonial or multicultural feminism.²⁶ In principle, one could imagine the Left similarly embracing the struggle for a postcolonial AR agenda. And indeed various authors have offered principles and toolkits for such an agenda, drawing on the lessons of postcolonial feminism, exploring how to connect the struggles against human and animal oppression

(Gaard 2001; Deckha 2007). There is no reason to believe that these strategies would be any less effective in relation to animal rights than in relation to human rights.²⁷

Yet, as we've seen, the Left has been indifferent to these calls to include animal rights in its analysis of, and struggle against, intersecting oppressions. The explanation cannot be the risk that animal issues will be employed to relegitimize racial and cultural hierarchies since this risk applies to all of the Left's causes. In relation to human injustice, the Left's response to this risk is to make conscious efforts to defend the progressive aims of these causes against the danger of instrumentalization and cultural imperialism. It is only in relation to animal rights that this risk is invoked as grounds for weakening or deferring or simply ignoring the injustices involved. And the explanation for this asymmetry, it seems, is simply that the Left does not believe that these injustices are of any real significance. The asymmetry presupposes the Left's indifference to human violence against animals.

Indeed, invoking cultural imperialism as grounds for indifference to animal rights is not only theoretically arbitrary, but counter-productive. If our goal is to reduce the political space for the instrumentalization of animal issues, then the worst possible outcome is to maintain the status quo, with its conceptual framework of "cruelty" or "unnecessary suffering." This framework is catastrophic for animals, but is also bad for minorities.

As noted earlier, the concepts of cruelty or unnecessary suffering invite—and make inevitable—culturally biased mobilizations of animal issues. This is particularly clear in the legal context, where practices that are customary in the mainstream society are, by definition, exempt from potential charges of cruelty. Laws prohibiting animal cruelty explicitly exempt "generally accepted practices,"²⁸ and so by definition can only target minority practices or individual psychopathy. Majority practices are inherently immunized from moral and political scrutiny.²⁹

Of course, if we move outside the legal context and look at broader public discourse, we can find examples where animal advocates have condemned majority practices on grounds of cruelty. For example, the discourse of cruelty was part of the mobilization behind the 2008 referendum on Proposition 2 in California, which addressed three types of farm animal confinement: veal crates, battery cages, and sow gestation crates. Indeed, the proposed act is called The Prevention of Farm Animal Cruelty Act. There is nothing incoherent about such efforts to apply the concept of cruelty in an even-handed way to both majority and minority practices.

But this attempt to mobilize the discourse of cruelty and unnecessary suffering against majority practices faces an uphill battle. After all, virtually all human violence against animals is unnecessary in the strict sense. Since humans can lead flourishing lives without eating meat, or wearing leather, or visiting caged animals in zoos or circuses, none of the suffering involved in these practices is necessary. But the discourse of cruelty does not intend to eliminate "unnecessary suffering"

in this sense. Rather, it seeks to ban those forms of animal suffering that violate widely shared social norms about what is *acceptable* suffering to impose in the pursuit of human enjoyment of animal products and services. As Francione (2000) and others have argued, the resulting standards of cruelty are theoretically arbitrary. There are no credible grounds for saying that confining hens for the entire duration of their life in a 500-cm² metal cage is cruel, but that confining hens for their entire life in a 750-cm² cage is not cruel. Cruelty, in this context, is not defined by reference to an account of the good of animals. We do not start with some account of the good life for hens and then ask what forms of treatment harm the constitutive elements of that good. Whatever the good life is for a hen, confinement in a metal cage, unable to socialize or to play or to explore or to care for chicks, and forced to lay eggs until she is spent and killed, is radically incompatible with it, whether that cage is 500 or 750 cm². To claim that the smaller cage is cruel and the larger cage is not cruel is a statement about what forms of treatment of hens the majority in a society at a given time finds discomfoting or distressing. There is no content to the idea of cruelty in this context apart from this appeal to majority sentiment.

The passage of Proposition 2 shows that majority sentiment may sometimes condemn the particular practice of a particular industry. And as a result, the political discourse of cruelty can have a critical edge that is missing from the legal definition of cruelty, which explicitly exempts “generally accepted practices.” But the framework of cruelty or unnecessary suffering is nonetheless biased against minorities. Insofar as cruelty appeals to majority sentiments of discomfort, it is inevitably going to be triggered more by those (minority) animal practices that are unusual or unfamiliar than by (majority) practices that are customary and familiar. “Necessary suffering” is likely to be whatever we the majority do to animals, whereas “unnecessary suffering” is what you the minority do to animals, particularly if we are not so keen on you the minority in the first place.

Anyone who cares about racial and cultural hierarchies should be concerned about this bias in the function of existing animal cruelty laws and norms. And yet, remarkably, the Left has no response to it. The Left worries that embracing animal rights will involve complicity with racial bias, and so remains silent about animal oppression. In reality, it is the opposite: by remaining silent, the Left helps perpetuate a legal and political framework that is inherently biased against minorities.

Of course, embracing an AR agenda would mean that both minorities and majorities would be required to give some ethical justification for their treatment of animals. And it is clear that minorities, as much as majorities, are reluctant to do so. This is one of the most striking features of the current (non-)debate on animal rights in North America—how rarely either majorities or minorities make any attempt to give an ethical justification for their treatment of animals. The framework of unnecessary suffering operates to immunize majority practices from ethical scrutiny, since customary practices are the default from which cruelty is measured. But in a perverse way, it also gives defenders of minority animal

practices an excuse to avoid ethical scrutiny. Minority practices may be selectively targeted, but precisely because it is selective, the minority's reaction is typically to point out the arbitrariness and double standards involved. They do not respond by explaining why their treatment of animals is ethically justified; they simply respond by saying that it is no worse than various majority practices, and so should not be singled out. Having interpreted criticisms of their practices as an exercise of arbitrary majority power over the minority, defenders of minority animal practices feel no need to provide any justification for the way they in turn exercise power and violence over animals. In this context, "multiculturalism goes imperial" (Kim 2007)—that is, it operates as a cover to immunize the exercise of power from ethical accountability.

In short, neither majority nor minority is called upon today to justify how they exercise power over animals. Embracing a postcolonial, anti-racist AR agenda—what we call a Multicultural Zoopolis—would have, as its first task, challenging this conspiracy of silence.³⁰ Such a conversation would be uncomfortable for both majorities and minorities, since animal exploitation is built into the fabric of contemporary societies. But there is no reason to assume that such a conversation must erode multiculturalist commitments, at least not the sorts of multiculturalist commitments that have been embraced by the Left. A Multicultural Zoopolis agenda would be inconsistent with conservative or communitarian conceptions of multiculturalism that endow communities with the right to maintain and reproduce their cultural traditions untouched, regardless of the ethical content or justifiability of those traditions. But this conception, which would accord minorities a right to maintain practices of forced arranged marriages, or honor killings, has never been embraced by the Left. Rather, the Left has embraced a transformative conception of multiculturalism, rooted in social justice, human rights, and citizenship, aiming to contest status hierarchies that have privileged hegemonic groups while stigmatizing minorities. This progressive conception of multiculturalism, at its best, operates to illuminate unjust political and cultural hierarchies, to de-center hegemonic norms, and to hold the exercise of power morally accountable.³¹ Viewed this way, multiculturalism and animal rights are not in conflict, but flow naturally from the same deeper commitments to justice and moral accountability, and there are strategies for defending progressive causes, whether animal rights or human rights, against the danger of instrumentalization and cultural imperialism. Embracing a postcolonial AR/Multicultural Zoopolis agenda would be uncomfortable for minorities (as for majorities), and would require dramatic changes to their established animals practices (as for majorities), but it is not therefore anti-multiculturalist.

Moreover, a Multicultural Zoopolis-based conversation would be more open to cross-cultural learning than our current framework of cruelty and unnecessary suffering. The current framework predefines the customary practices of the majority as the default. But an AR-based framework would delegitimize these majority practices and would immediately set us on a search for new ethical frameworks regarding human–animal relations. For centuries, Western societies have defined

animals as property, and all of our current concepts and categories for discussing animals (e.g., “pets” and “livestock”) are deeply imbricated in this property framework. We need entirely new categories for thinking about human–animal relations, and non-Western cultures and societies are a rich source of ideas.³² Nor is there any evidence that the desire to end animal exploitation is limited to whites. The vast majority of the world’s vegetarians are not white, and even within North America, there are no significant racial or ethnic differences in support for vegetarianism. If anything, whites are somewhat less likely to embrace vegetarianism.³³ Both the conceptual foundations of, and support for, an AR agenda are as likely to come from minorities and non-Western societies as from whites in Europe or North America.

An AR agenda would require a radical transformation of minority animal practices, but it is not therefore anti-multiculturalist. Like any defensible account of multiculturalism, a Multicultural Zoopolis agenda would de-center and denaturalize majority practices, open up space for cross-cultural learning, guard against the instrumentalization of progressive causes, and above all would shine a light on forms of power and privilege that have been immunized from ethical accountability. In this respect, as in many others, animal rights flow naturally from the normative and methodological commitments of the Left, and it is increasingly difficult to see any credible grounds for the Left’s persistent indifference to human violence against animals.

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Notes

¹ In Blaire French’s academic novel *The Ticking Tenure Clock*, the protagonist hopes to get tenure on the basis of her book on animal rights activists entitled *Orphans of the Left* (French 1998).

² As Calarco notes, “animal rights has been largely abandoned by many progressive Leftists, who often see animal rights as a political issue of secondary (or tertiary) importance” (Calarco 2008, 8). For example, “none of the major feminist organizations in the United States devotes committee or internet space to or has polices dealing with vegetarianism . . . or animal rights issues” (Aimee Dowl quoted in Cavalieri 2011, 59). See also Benton and Redfearn (1996).

³ To take just one example, Isin and Turner open their *Handbook of Citizenship Studies* by saying: “From aboriginal rights, women’s rights, civil rights, and sexual rights for gays and lesbians to animal rights, language rights and disability rights, we have experienced in the past few decades a major trend in Western nation-states toward the formation of new claims for inclusion and belonging” (Isin and Turner 2003, 1). But animal rights quickly disappear from their story, and the rest of the handbook is resolutely anthropocentric.

⁴ He included “members of societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals” alongside “temperance fanatics” in his list of pointless moralistic campaigns (Marx and Engels 1978, 496).

⁵ For further discussion and quotes, see Kymlicka (1995, 69–74).

⁶ For feminist theory and care ethics applied to animals, see Adams (2000), Donovan and Adams (2007), and Luke (2007); for disability theory applied to animals, see Dolgert and Arneil (2010)

and Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011, chap. 5); for capability theory applied to animals, see Nussbaum (2006); for postcolonial theory applied to animals, see Wadiwel (2009) and Deckha (2007, 2012); for analysis of animals as a working class, see Hribal (2007).

⁷ Other animal studies scholars report similar hostile reactions (Deckha 2007, 195–96).

⁸ For this issue in the context of the “recognition versus redistribution” debate, see Banting and Kymlicka (2006).

⁹ On the ethics and politics of comparisons between human and animal enslavement, captivity, torture, and genocide, see Szttybel (2006), Spiegel (1996), Patterson (2002), and Kim (2011).

¹⁰ There are some on the Left who cling to the Kantian idea that only beings who are able to rationally evaluate moral propositions possess intrinsic moral status. We discuss the implausibility of this view, and its pernicious effects for human rights as well as animal rights, in Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011, chap. 2).

¹¹ See Kim’s discussion of how the Black civil rights movement has invested in “the sanctification of species difference” (Kim 2011, 330).

¹² Surveys suggest that 32–40 percent of Indians are vegetarian—a figure that dwarfs the number in any European or North American society (Yadav and Kumar 2006).

¹³ Elder, Wolch, and Emel (1998) discuss how dominant groups in the United States interpret the way minorities treat animals “through their own lens” and thereby “simultaneously construct immigrant others as uncivilized, irrational or beastly, and their own actions as civilized, rational and humane” (82).

¹⁴ In this paper, we focus on domestic cases, but a similar dynamic exists internationally in which predominantly Western animal rights NGOs pressure states in the Global South to improve their animal welfare laws (Casal 2003). International campaigns regarding bear bile farming in China (Hobson 2007) or against eating dogs in Korea (Oh and Jackson 2011) are often seen locally as forms of cultural imperialism that reassert Western civilizational supremacy and non-Western backwardness. When a Chinese academic wrote an article defending animal rights, he was promptly accused of “defaming their own motherland and catering to the interests of the West in its desire to dominate non-Western civilizations” (Li 2006, 113).

¹⁵ In everyday discourse and media debates, the term “animal rights” is often applied to any position that seeks to improve the treatment of animals, even if that position explicitly denies that animals have rights to life or liberty, or the right not to be harmed for human benefit. We need to distinguish such “welfarist” positions, which endorse human supremacist ideologies, from philosophical animal rights positions (e.g., Francione 2000; Cavalieri 2001; Regan 2004). See Yates (2004) on the confusion caused by the widespread use of the phrase “animal rights” by animal advocates who do not in fact espouse a rights position.

¹⁶ We argue elsewhere that such practices also violate the membership rights of domesticated animals. Having brought these animals into our community through domestication, we owe them membership rights, in addition to the fundamental rights owed all sentient beings (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011).

¹⁷ “Animal rights takes the range of nutritional choices typical of a narrow socio-economic stratum and elevates it to a universal virtue, while stigmatizing sources of protein commonly available to economically deprived urban communities, rural working class families, and peasants in the global south” (Staudenmaier 2003). For a classic exposition of this argument, see George (1994), the responses in Gaard and Gruen (1995) and Gaard (2011), and the discussion in Bailey (2007), Harper (2010), and Deckha (2012). See also Harper’s discussion of the “geopolitically racialized consumption and production of vegan products.” She notes that some purportedly “cruelty-free” vegan products are made using child labor or slave labor, as in the case of chocolate from Ivory Coast. Insofar as vegan activists ignore this, she argues, “mainstream vegan praxis simultaneously creates socio-spatial epistemologies of whiteness that remain invisible to most white identified people” (Harper 2010, 12).

¹⁸ According to Wise, the AR movement “is perhaps the whitest of all progressive or radical movements on the planet” (Wise 2005). The extensive literature on animal politics and whiteness

includes Lundblad (2011), Harper (2010), Deckha (2012), Kim (2011), and Bailey (2007). But see note 31 below for evidence that questions the connection between vegetarianism and whiteness in the North American context.

- ¹⁹ As noted earlier, we do not view this as the main explanation for the Left's indifference to human violence against animals. From a sociological perspective, cultural legacies that denigrate animals, personal tastes for animal products and services, the role of meat in the social construction of masculinity, and other explanations are surely more important. But these are not moral grounds for resisting animal rights. The idea that AR advocacy might have unacceptable moral consequences is, we believe, primarily tied to fears of cultural imperialism.
- ²⁰ Some people on the Left dislike the language of "rights" in general and so would object to an "animal rights" agenda just as they object to a "human rights" agenda. They believe that we do not need the concept of rights to protect individuals from being harmed for the benefit of others (e.g., we do not need rights to block proposals to subject some individuals to invasive experimentation to benefit others). We are sceptical that other concepts can provide adequate safeguards, but for the purposes of this paper, what matters is not the concept that is used, but whether these safeguards are applied to animals as well as to humans (e.g., whether animals as well as humans are protected from invasive experimentation). Insofar as Left theories apply their ethical safeguards in non-speciesist ways, and so deny that humans can harm animals for our benefit, we consider them as adopting an AR agenda, even if they disavow the language of rights for both humans and animals. In reality, those on the Left who disavow the language of rights are just as likely to endorse human supremacist ideologies as those who embrace the language of rights.
- ²¹ The ethnic coding of an animal issue need not take the form of denigrating minorities. The struggle to ban bullfighting in Catalonia, for example, succeeded in part by coding bullfighting as a practice of the hegemonic Castilian majority, which the minority Catalans have renounced, such that banning bullfighting became a way of asserting Catalan self-government against the dominant central state (Beilin 2012; Bob 2012; Lelieveldt 2012). This discourse involved the claim that the Catalans were more advanced and civilized than the Castilians who enjoy cruel and backward bullfighting, but the aim was not to uphold existing power hierarchies, but to challenge them.
- ²² This echoes ritual slaughter debates in nineteenth century Germany. According to Judd (2003), the original humane slaughter laws in (pre-unification) German states were promoted by critics of traditional slaughtering techniques used by butchers in the majority Christian society and were not related to hostility to Jews. But after 1880, the idea of humane slaughter was picked up by anti-Semitic parties as a tool for excluding Jews from the German moral community.
- ²³ While Kim is critical of the way AR organizations fail to attend to the unintended effects of their campaigns on racial hierarchies, she emphasizes that this problem is not rooted in the denigration of minority groups. AR groups "neither trade in stereotypes about Jews or blacks nor seek to denigrate Jews or blacks through association with animals" (Kim 2011, 325), and "Animal advocates are no more interested in trashing immigrant cultures than they are in celebrating their native culture . . . [the discourse of animal advocacy] does not make a comparative assessment or assert that the majority culture is superior to the minority culture. Animal advocates do not stand within the majority culture passing judgment on the minority culture, but stand apart from and challenge the practices of both, on behalf of animals who cannot defend themselves" (Kim 2007, 240).
- ²⁴ Or consider the way women's rights were invoked by neo-conservatives as a pretext to justify invading Muslim countries.
- ²⁵ See Bielefeldt (2000) for a critique of this "acorn to oak tree" model of human rights, according to which human rights are part of the cultural DNA of the West, present in the acorn of Western civilization, and so destined naturally to grow into a strong oak tree, whereas human rights are absent from the seeds of other societies, and so can only emerge as an artificial graft onto a tree that grows naturally in other directions.
- ²⁶ For surveys of postcolonial feminism, see Narayan and Harding (2000) and Mohanty, Russo, and Torres (1991).

- ²⁷ One complexity of the AR case is that we must find ways of attending to the voice and agency of animals themselves, to identify what sorts of relationships they wish to have with us. This is central to the co-citizenship model developed in Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011, 2014). This is a serious challenge, but is not unique to the animal context. Not all humans are capable of articulating their interests and aspirations in propositional form. The challenge of enabling voice, agency, and representation across differences in capacity is one we already face.
- ²⁸ For the law in Canada, see Bisgould (2011, 189–91). For the resulting bias, see Deckha (2012, 538).
- ²⁹ Indeed, this is a central purpose of so-called animal welfare laws. Their goal is not to protect animals, but to provide legal cover to those who benefit from harming animals. These laws exempt most harmful practices (and most animals!) from any scrutiny, and are almost never monitored and enforced, yet allow exploiters to claim that their practices are in compliance with animal welfare laws. These laws “are so favourable to the interests of those ostensibly restrained by them that scientists and flesh food producers would fight for exactly these laws if they did not exist. Such laws provide them with ample coverage to inflict horrendous suffering while wearing the mantle of complying with state and federal laws that purport to protect animals” (Bryant 2010, 62).
- ³⁰ Deckha describes her project as pursuing a “postcolonial posthumanism” (2007, 2012). We share her goal but avoid the term posthumanism, which is closely associated with the work of Donna Haraway, who defends eating animals and experimenting on animals, among other violations of animal rights. For an AR critique of Haraway, see Weisberg (2009). Since we have elsewhere described the goal of animal rights as a “zoopolis,” in which animals are recognized not just as sentient individuals, but as members of political communities, we will use the term Multicultural Zoopolis to cover what Deckha calls postcolonial posthumanism and what Harper calls anti-racist and color-conscious vegan activism (Harper 2010).
- ³¹ For a discussion of these different conceptions of multiculturalism, and a defense of the progressive conception, see Kymlicka (2007, chap. 4).
- ³² For example, North American visitors to Latin America are often puzzled by the existence of village dogs who are domesticated yet not owned. There is potential to learn here about forms of membership in mixed human–animal communities, and forms of interdependence, outside the property framework. We explore ways that AR and indigenous views of human–animal relations might constructively engage each other in Kymlicka and Donaldson (2014).
- ³³ For recent polling data, see Stahler (2012), showing that the percentage of vegetarians in the United States (defined as those who never eat meat, fish, seafood, or poultry) by race is 3 percent White, 6 percent Black, and 8 percent Hispanic. It also shows that the likelihood of being vegetarian does not vary by income except for those with more than \$100,000 income who are much less likely to be vegetarian. The perception of vegetarianism as the diet of affluent whites is not borne out by the data.

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