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Marxism and the Moral Status of Animals

ABSTRACT

Perlo’s engagement with the complex and ambiguous relationship between Marxism (and, more broadly, the socialist traditions) and the moral status of animals is very much to be welcomed. This sort of engagement is valuable for three main reasons. First, the more narrowly focused social movement activity—whether committed to animal rights, social justice in the workplace, or advancement for women—is liable to cut itself off from critical insights created in the context of other movements. I became aware of this, particularly during the 1980s in relation to radical green politics, as both deepening and widening the already existing socialist case against neo-liberal capitalism, just as the women’s liberation movement had done a decade or more earlier. Second, this sort of analysis is valuable because without it “single-issue” movements run a serious risk of advancing the claims of their own preferred social group at the cost of (usually unknowingly and unintentionally) deepening the oppression or exploitation of other groups. Third, where radical social movements campaign for changes that conflict with the interests of wealthy and powerful interests, and are committed to democratic values, they need to be able to bring public opinion with them. Single-issue movements rarely can do this on their own: Broad-based coalitions are needed. Moreover, the sources of radical thought and the range of justified grievances are now so diverse that the notion of a single, unified political party as the centralized vehicle of change is no longer viable (if it ever was). So, the broadly based coalition has to be diverse and difference-respecting. But can it be this while still maintaining enough unity of purpose and coordination of its actions to be effective?
In Agreement

My impression is that Perlo and I would agree about all this. What I particularly liked about the piece was its refusal to define and condemn the Marxist tradition because of undoubted contradictions and ambivalences on the question of the moral status of animals and the political validity of campaigns on their behalf. Though I am not a great advocate of the term “dialectics,” I think Perlo makes positive use of it in recognizing the ways in which these contradictions can be, and have been, re-worked to create new and more defensible acknowledgments of the moral and political importance of the struggles against human-imposed animal suffering. The paper also is right, it seems to me, in noting a tendency in more recent developments of Marxism to extend the circle of concern from the industrial working class to other oppressed, exploited, or stigmatized groups. Of course, this was most clearly the case in the transference of Marxism to third-world anti-imperialist struggles when the main social base for Marxist politics, in the absence of a large urban-industrial sector, was peasant farmers. However, I would take issue with Perlo’s tendency to see this extension of the circle of concern in terms of an ever-wider extension of the concept of class. I think it is better to maintain the relatively well-defined concept of class to denote exploitative socio-economic relations grounded in ownership/non-ownership of means of production, while giving full recognition to the moral and political importance of forms of inequality, oppression, or exclusion that are not reducible to class in this traditional sense. There are theoretical reasons for doing this, but also it has the pragmatic advantage of clearly favoring a difference-respecting coalition as against the classic Marxian notion of a single “vanguard” party.

Differences and Misunderstandings

However, other, deeper issues do separate Perlo’s and my thinking. In some respects, these have to do with misinterpretations of some of the things I have written, but in other ways they represent differences of overall position. Misunderstandings first. Two in particular need to be cleared up. One is the claim that I “attack” vegetarianism. I do no such thing. For reasons I’ll explain, I did not focus my discussion around the issue of diet. In fact, my book men-
tioned vegetarianism only twice—once in parentheses and once in a footnote. Neither statement could seriously be construed as an attack. In fact, I think the widespread shift in the direction of vegetarianism is very much to be welcomed for several reasons. My main point was to argue that the degree of integration in our industrialized system of food production and processing makes it virtually, if not actually, impossible to live without using or consuming products tainted by animal abuse. Not only are animal derivatives used in a massive range of non-meat products (such as sweets, medicines), but the environmental destructiveness of industrialized arable agriculture poisons both domestic and wild animals and systematically eliminates the habitats of the latter. Vegetarians may make a valuable and symbolic moral statement; but, as with green consumerism, political action to bring about social and economic change is still necessary.

The other misunderstanding concerns the quotation Perlo uses to imply that I advocate satisfying human needs at the expense of those of animals where these conflict (p. 16). In fact, all this quotation says is that on either of the views of justice that I had been discussing, it is possible to give such preference to humans. That I do not endorse this, but regard it as a problem for these views of justice, is made clear in the next sentence: “The thesis of moral obligation to animals is required to offset any tendency to abuse the licensing of differential treatment...” I also conclude the paragraph with the following: “This is, admittedly, a sketchy and merely preliminary gesture in the direction of a solution of some of these problems. Further development of the position in the face of critical responses will be required...” Benton (1993, p. 215). I draw attention to this because my book and the articles it drew on were in some respects pioneering attempts to engage with these issues, and I was quite explicit about their status as an exploratory enquiry rather than as delivering definitive solutions.

So, on to the residual differences of position. I was a bit disappointed that Perlo chose to engage with my work through selected out-of-context quotation—rather than presenting the general line of argument—but this is understandable and probably my fault: complicated and dense, the book probably tried to do too much at once. My main aim was to add a further dimension to the already up-and-running dialogue between greens and socialists—consideration of the moral status of animals and the relation of animal rights
struggles to the other two social movements. So, the first point is that I was trying to relate socialism with both green and animal rights issues at the same time, whereas Perlo doesn’t really deal with the complexities and dilemmas that arise when animal rights and wider green issues are put into dialogue with each other. Second, the notion of dialogue, like Perlo’s own use of “dialectic,” implies reciprocity. For me, this meant using each of the “corners” of the triangular debate as a standpoint from which to call into question assumptions made by the others. Whereas Perlo takes her stand with an unquestioned animal rights position, of which vegetarianism seems to be the crux, my investigation used insights from both Marxism and socialist moral thinking to raise questions about the best way to defend animal well-being, while at the same time using the animal rights perspective as a basis for critiquing “orthodox” Marxism. (I had already attempted to do the same thing in relation to Marxism and green thought in a series of articles and book chapters).

**On Animal Rights**

Although Perlo seems to think I oppose the rights-view, in fact I defend Tom Regan’s rights-case from the standard philosophical criticisms of it. I do think it makes sense to assign rights to nonhuman animals, and pressing this case morally and in legal reform can benefit some categories of nonhuman animals. This is not in dispute as far as I am concerned. My point was more to do with the *limits* of liberal rights as applied to nonhuman animals. Most philosophical discussion of the issue remains at the conceptual level, whereas I drew on a long legacy of radical (including both Marxist and feminist) critique of liberal rights in relation to humans. The core of this is that there is a huge gap, on the one hand, between formally assigning universal rights and, on the other, enabling the subjects of rights to effectively exercise those rights. Ironically, the poorest and least powerful in society are those most in need of the protection of rights, yet also the least able to enforce respect of them. The abstract individualism of liberal rights theory makes it difficult to see this as a problem. I argued that the problem is still more profound in the case of nonhuman animals because their vulnerability to abuse is greater than that of oppressed humans and their ability to enforce rights on their own behalf non-existent. My argument, therefore, was that we need to supplement the liberal rights approach with a more structurally sensitive (socialist)
concept of rights, combined with other moral and political arguments for deep level social and economic change.

A second limitation of the rights approach has to do with its scope and logical underpinning. For Regan, only those animals who can be regarded as “subjects of a life” qualify for rights. Ethically this is problematic, since it extends the circle of moral concern to individuals of other species in virtue of their sharing psychological attributes with us: In short, the position remains residually anthropocentric despite its intentions. There are related problems about scope: In so far as rights offer de facto protection at all, they do so only to a small sub-set of animals—generally the cuddly, furry ones. What if our resistance to anthropocentrism takes us to a moral concern for the well-being of fish, reptiles, amphibians, invertebrates, and even, in the light of green sensibilities, of plants, habitats, and eco-systems? Talk of rights increasingly looses persuasive power here, and we clearly need a more differentiated moral vocabulary. The trouble with Perlo’s unexamined reliance on the notion of rights is that it doesn’t address this diversity among nonhuman animals. Despite its intentions, it remains locked into the monolithic human/animal dichotomy. This allows of no other options but submergence of human difference into an undifferentiated category of the animal or preservation of the traditional western hierarchy, with humans lording it over the animals.

**Emphasis on Kinship and Interdependence**

A central part of my argument was to emphasize kinship and interdependence between humans and other species, while recognizing the specificity of the mode of life and conditions for well-being proper to each species. A reasonable moral implication to draw from this is that we need a differentiated moral vocabulary to deal with the specifics of our encounters with other species. At the very least, this means being able to differentiate between the moral requirements on us when we deal with other apes, with farm animals, companion animals (pets), dragonflies, orchids, and wild-flower meadows. In part, this is a matter of the nature and needs of different sorts of animal (and plant). Neither dogs nor dolphins could do anything with the right to vote. But dogs are members of human societies in ways that dolphins are not. This is another dimension of difference—a social relational as distinct
from ontological one. My argument here differentiates quite strongly between the two sorts of case. Justice to dogs implies an obligation to look after their interests, to establish and maintain benign relationships with them. Cruelty and neglect are the main categories of moral offence against them. By contrast, justice to dolphins implies getting off their backs—it means interfering with their lives and affecting their habitats as minimally as possible, simply letting them be.

**Conclusion**

Perlo seems to assimilate all my argument to the former sort of case, whereas she tends to universalize the latter, wishing to abolish practices in which animals have been rendered dependent on human care as inherently exploitative. As I’ve just tried to show, I think it is important to recognize both types of case as issuing in different sorts of moral obligation. To oversimplify, the two sorts of case correspond roughly to the contrast between wild and domesticated species. Justice to the former entails taking their interests—most especially their habitat requirements—seriously in relation to the competing demands we make on land and resources. I guess Perlo would agree with this, though she doesn’t engage with issues at this level of concreteness. It is over the treatment of domesticated species that we differ. Her perspective is one of retaining only “benign, voluntary, and autonomous associations.” The problem with this is that domestication over millennia has so altered the nature of domesticated varieties in line with human purposes that the notion of “autonomous choice” has little or no purchase on their situation. Their “niche” in the human socio-economic structure has become their habitat. The same is true of a wide range of non-domesticated species that have become adapted to human-shaped ecosystems—from feral rock pigeons to the Adonis blue butterfly. The other side of this same argument is, of course, that the natural habitats from which the wild ancestors of our domesticated varieties came largely have been destroyed or deeply transformed by past human “development” practices (including intensive production of vegetable crops!). So, the big question for the “abolition” argument is what to do about the many millions of animals now currently in domestication with nowhere to go and biologically unequipped to survive there anyway. The long-term solution might be to re-create lost habitat, and “re-selectively breed” current
domesticated varieties to re-equip them for life in the wild. But would such a eugenic program meet the strict requirements of the rights philosophy?

Finally, I consider the point of having such dialogues between social movement perspectives. For me, the point was to provide some analytical and philosophical underpinnings for meaningful dialogue and practical cooperation in a diversity-respecting coalition. This strategic priority meant foregrounding commonalities between movements, while not forgetting the need to respect the distinctive agenda of the different parties to coalition-building. This is one of the reasons I didn’t make the issue of vegetarianism central to the debate. For example, many of the activists in the struggles against live exports were socialists, trade unionists, feminists, and new-agers. Many, if not most, were meat-eaters. This didn’t stop their making common cause against a manifestly abusive practice. To have demanded doctrinal and lifestyle purity as a condition of participation would have destroyed the movement. Notably, the Scottish Socialist Party manifesto, quoted with approval by Perlo, is not committed to vegetarianism nor even to outright banning of animal experiments—only “unnecessary ones.” The point about a difference-respecting coalition is that it allows us as broad a basis as possible for common action, without requiring individual movements to abandon their more far-reaching and particular objectives.

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References

