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Humane Liberation: Incorporating Animal Rights into Critical Pedagogy

Adam Ortiz

The field of higher education is one in which, historically, acts of progressive social change have been both initiated and supported. At the moment, many academics and student affairs professionals in colleges and universities across the United States are using their resources to help students understand social justice concepts utilizing the practice of Critical Pedagogy.

While exploring power, privilege, and oppression related to human identities has resulted in overwhelming positive social change, there is a population that continues to suffer, largely without attention from scholars or other members of the academic community: animals. Some educators have asserted that the goal of Critical Pedagogy, which is to “help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action,” (Giroux, 2010, para. 1) is most effective when incorporating animal rights into educational curricula. This article is an exploration of animal rights issues, how animal exploitation affects humans, animals, and the environment, and how learning about animal rights can contribute positively to the goals of Critical Pedagogy.

Animal rights and student affairs are rarely seen as related topics. Since entering the University of Vermont’s (UVM) Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program in 2008, I have found that discussions of animal rights in the context of student affairs have been virtually non-existent. This is understandable, given that the primary goal of student affairs is supporting students through their personal and professional development – not liberating animals from laboratories and factory farms. Yet, one crucial aspect of supporting student development is understanding how social identity functions, which allows us to engage students in social justice issues such as privilege and marginalization. By understanding our social identities and the social identities of others through

Adam Ortiz is a House Director at Hampshire College. He earned his bachelor’s degree from Wheaton College (MA) in 2005 with a major in English and his master’s degree from the University of Vermont’s HESA program in 2010. Adam’s main focuses are economic class, maleness and masculinity, multiracial student development, and animal rights. He is the advisor for the campus group Men Against Patriarchy, facilitates conversations on economic class at Hampshire, and is the Publications Coordinator for the Multiracial Network.

the practice of Critical Pedagogy, we can learn how best to navigate the world in a manner that helps us counter established systems of oppression.

As student affairs practitioners invested in Critical Pedagogy, many of us in the field of student affairs feel an obligation to consistently search for ways to address oppression both in the context of our institutions and in United States (US) culture. However, through my personal experience, I have learned that the majority of people I know have little understanding of the extreme brutalities inherent in animal exploitation. Given the overwhelming amount of misinformation produced by groups that exploit animals, the normalization of animal cruelty, and the ways in which violence towards animals is oftentimes hidden from public view, this lack of information is understandable. Yet, copious evidence demonstrates that animal exploitation has a devastating effect on the animals themselves, human beings, and the environment. As a result, I believe that incorporating animal rights into Critical Pedagogy curricula would improve the quality of education, helping students further foster critical thinking skills, compassion, and respect for people, animals, and the environment.

My Animal Rights Journey

When I process animal rights from an academic vantage point, the first person I think of is Peter Singer, who published the influential text *Animal Liberation* in 1975. In the text, Singer offered a cogent philosophical argument that the oppression of animals is the result of “speciesism,” which is every bit as tangible as any other form of discrimination. In his estimation, denying animals the basic rights of freedom and welfare by virtue of their species is just as oppressive as denying people the same rights because of their social identities. According to Singer, the reason all humans and animals deserve the rights of freedom and welfare is the shared ability to suffer and experience commensurate levels of pain. While Singer’s work was no doubt met with controversy, it has influenced many people to take the issue of animal rights seriously and explore systemic animal oppression.

My introduction to both animal rights and Singer’s philosophy took place on an evening when I was 14 years old and casually browsing websites. Fortuitously, I found myself on the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) website and was intrigued by the bold statement, “Animals Are Not Ours to Eat, Wear, Experiment On, Use for Entertainment, or Abuse in Any Way.” Like many people, I was raised within a family that ate meat, went to zoos and circuses, and had plenty of clothes made of wool and leather. My mother taught my siblings and me to be compassionate to other people, but because of my own innate humanity, I never thought about the world from the perspective of the animals.

The night I found the PETA website, my perspective changed. The content of

the site was horrifying, detailing the very real ways in which animals suffer for the benefit of humankind. We do in fact wear them, eat them, use them for entertainment, experiment on them, and, in doing so, abuse them in ways that I found so egregious that I was jolted to tears. For hours, I clicked through hundreds of photographs and stories about factory farms, animal testing laboratories, circuses and zoos, and fur farms, which enlightened me to the fact that my life was made more pleasurable because of the enslavement and suffering of billions of animals (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals [PETA], n.d.). I went to bed that night convinced that the only way I could alleviate even a small portion of the guilt I endured was through a pledge to both become a vegan and disseminate the details of animal exploitation to others.

When I enrolled in the HESA program at UVM, I started to think about animal rights in the context of Critical Pedagogy and social justice. Where social justice is concerned, I cannot speak more highly about my experience in the HESA program. UVM was the place where I learned how to name and articulate the concepts of privilege and oppression, as well as how to support students by understanding their complex social identities. It was also the first place where I heard people speak candidly about the pain of oppression they experience on a daily basis. This sharing of stories and practical application of theory all made me feel more deeply connected with people around me than I ever had before. Still, I could not stop thinking about the animals' role in all of the identity work that I engaged in. The more I learned about social justice, the more I started to believe that learning about animal rights may help students further understand the concept of oppression and ways it can be challenged by praxis. My own history of animal rights activism helped me understand how and why hierarchical systems function, the history and context of hierarchical beliefs, the interconnectedness of all life forms, and how one's actions have a direct impact on other humans, animals, and the environment. I also learned about ways in which the desire for profit can trump human welfare. As a result, I have never been able to view animal rights and social justice as wholly separate. Exploring ways in which animal exploitation impacts humans, the environment, and the animals themselves will help students understand the consequences of activities to which most of us contribute.

Impact of Animal Exploitation on Animals

Incontestably, the group most affected by animal exploitation is the animal population itself. Instead of having the freedom to pursue their own interests and exist in a manner conducive to their natural instincts, exploited animals live under the control of humans (McGee, 2005, p. 9). According to Dunayer (2001), more than nine billion animals are killed each year for human consumption. In addition to confinement and slaughter, exploited animals also face agonizing cruelty during the span of their short lives. Numerous organizations, such as PETA and

the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), have produced literature that details the extent to which animals suffer in all areas in which they are exploited.

Myriad undercover investigations have found that animals in factory farms typically spend their lives crippled in cages and pens so small that they have no room to freely move around - all the while experiencing extreme temperatures, violent handling, and noxious fumes (Marcus, 2000). In addition, they are commonly alive and fully conscious while enduring their brutal deaths, which range from being plunged in boiling water tanks to having limbs sawn off (Foer, 2009). Animals used in entertainment, particularly circuses, are frequently beaten and terrorized by their trainers. Within the past year, PETA investigators released video footage of baby elephants being torn from their mothers, hit hard with sharp bull hooks, and burnt with cattle prods while being forced to perform (PETA, 2010). Animals used for clothing are brutalized on fur farms by their handlers, forced to live in extremely small cages, and sometimes skinned while still alive (PETA, n.d.). Animals used for science have a documented history of being experimented on without regard for the immense pain and suffering they experience (PETA, n.d.). While this is just a brief snapshot of the horrific practices that take place in the industries that exploit animals, it should also be noted that inhumane treatment of animals is the norm in these industries and not the exception.

Impact of Animal Exploitation on Humans

One pervasive myth is that exploiting animals - while unfortunate for them - is advantageous for human beings. Evidence demonstrates that this is not true, particularly in the context of eating animal products. We live in a culture where we are bombarded with the messages that drinking another species' milk is a necessary component of healthy human childhood, that vegetarians are frail and weak, and that getting all the vitamins and minerals one needs to survive on a strictly plant-based diet is impossible. Yet, there is a significant link between animal consumption and cancer, obesity, and heart disease (Robbins, 1987). The negative impact that animal products have on the body are prompting the American Heart Association, the World Health Organization, and the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute to call for a reduction in dietary saturated fat, the main sources of which are meat, dairy, and eggs (McGee, 2005).

In non-smokers, the primary cause of atherosclerosis is eating meat (Lyman, 2001). Eating meat has been linked to breast cancer, lung cancer, prostate cancer, and colorectal cancer. Animal-based diets have been linked to impotence, asthma, gallstones, kidney stones, arthritis, gout, intestinal disorders, ulcers, diabetes, and osteoporosis (Lyman, 2001; Robbins, 2001). According to the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention, every year between 6.5 million to 8.1 million people suffer from food poisoning, which results primarily from animal

consumption (Eisnitz, 1997).

Personal health aside, another devastating effect animal consumption has is its contribution to world hunger. According to Tim Kunin and Greg Heterberg (n.d.), 24 thousand people per day die from hunger or related causes (para. 1). Out of that amount, only 10 % of those deaths are the result of war, famine, or similar catastrophic events; 90% are caused by mal-distribution of food resources, such as the immense amount of grain and water used in meat production (McGee, 2005). The amount of wasted food resources resulting from meat production is staggering. According to Robbins (2001), it is estimated that cattle consume twice the amount of grain as human beings in the United States. Cattle in the meat production industry alone consume a food quantity equaling the caloric needs of 8.7 billion people (McGee, 2005). While there is no guarantee that worldwide vegetarianism would mean that the food wasted on animals would be given to starving humans, it certainly could, and should, be.

In a world populated by a staggering amount of humans who suffer from disease and hunger, it is unfortunate that we are often misinformed about the devastating effects that consuming animal products has on both ourselves and our fellow global citizens. Every year, thousands of human deaths and injuries result from factory farming and eating animal products alone, yet animal agriculture industries continue to perpetuate the distorted messages that their products are superior for human health (Foer, 2009). Exploring the detrimental impact that consuming animal products has on human beings is an exemplary circumstance where teaching students about animal exploitation is advantageous to both humans and animals, and would, no doubt, contribute to the goals of Critical Pedagogy.

Impact of Animal Exploitation on the Environment

In his book, *Eating Animals*, Jonathan Safran Foer (2009) made the bold statement that, “Most simply put, someone who regularly eats factory-farmed animal products cannot call himself an environmentalist without divorcing that word from its meaning” (p. 59). According to Foer and others, the impact of factory farming on the environment is catastrophic. Studies recently conducted by the United Nations (UN) and the Pew Commission have discovered conclusively that animal agriculture contributes 40% more to global warming than pollution from all of the cars, trucks, planes, trains, and ships in the world combined. Factory farming is responsible for 65% of anthropogenic nitrous oxide and 37% of anthropogenic methane, which provide respectively 296 times and 23 times the global warming potential of CO₂. This and other data collected have demonstrated that omnivores contribute seven times the volume of greenhouse gasses to global warming than do vegans (Foer, 2009).

In addition to the overwhelming contribution to global warming, animal agriculture also advances deforestation, loss of water reserves, soil damage and erosion, pollution of water, loss of wildlife habitat and food, loss of species, and the loss of natural landscapes (Compassion in World Farming, 2009). For example, the staggering amount of feces produced by factory farms is typically dumped into rivers and streams, or spread on fields where it will eventually end up in public water sources. The water is then polluted with ammonia, bacteria, and nitrates, contributing to ten times the amount of pollution in the United States caused directly by the human population (Lyman, 1998). Another jolting fact is that the largest cause of rainforest destruction is the clearing of land for cattle and their food for human consumption (Robbins, 2001). This information all leads to the conclusion that factory farming, which is one of the most widespread and normalized forms of animal exploitation, is having a devastating effect on the Earth's ecosystem.

The Role of Hegemony in Animal Exploitation

Despite the evidence, we continue to perpetuate animal exploitation at the expense of all parties involved. While using animals for food, fashion, science, and entertainment may seem immediately advantageous for humans, the disastrous effects of animal exploitation will contribute to the human struggle for survival in a world ravaged by ecological degradation, human starvation, and violence. How does this system perpetuate itself? And why do so many of us remain unaware of how much suffering our exploitation of animals is causing on innumerable lives of innumerable species?

McGee (2005) argued that the answer lies in the concept of cultural hegemony. The concept of cultural hegemony, developed by Marxist critic Antonio Gramsci, dictates that ways of thinking about reality are fundamentally created by a dominant group and perpetuated through various systems “mediated by well-intentioned people who, usually unconsciously, act as agents of oppression by merely going about their daily lives” (Bell, 2007, p. 10). These systems may be apparent and tangible, such as policies, laws, and business practices, or abstract and more difficult to identify, such as language, historic depictions, and advertising. Hegemony serves the purpose of normalizing oppression and allowing it to become entrenched in social reality. Hegemony, through numerous operations, makes oppression seem normal, natural, and necessary. According to Bell (2007), “Through hegemony, a dominant group can so successfully project its particular way of seeing social reality that its view is accepted as common sense, as part of the natural order, even by those who are in fact disempowered by it” (p. 10).

In the case of animals, one can easily identify ways in which hegemony serves the purpose of normalizing exploitation. One consistent hegemonic myth that we

are confronted with, for example, is the idea that milk is a necessary component of a healthy diet, particularly for children. Elementary schools often perpetuate the idea through providing milk in cafeterias and displaying posters that tout the health benefits of consuming dairy. Media perpetuate the idea through advertisements such as the famous milk mustache campaign. Some doctors perpetuate the idea because of limited knowledge about the dairy-free diet. As a result of these factors, we, as a culture, are bombarded with images of happy children drinking milk from cows on sprawling farms and the idea that consuming dairy is necessary for survival. From dairy, we are told, we receive protein and calcium that is vital to our health. These myths and images are perpetuated by people who yearn for their good health and the good health of their children.

What we rarely learn, however, is that the dairy industry spends a massive amount of money perpetuating the belief that dairy is a natural and necessary part of a healthy human diet (Robbins, 1987). In 2000, the National Fluid Milk Processor Promotion Board and the Milk Industry Foundation were investigated by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) on allegations of disseminating purposefully harmful, deceptive, and scientifically unsubstantiated advertising, including the celebrity milk mustache campaign (McGee, 2005). The presidents of the PCRM concluded that the dairy industry did, and continues to, mislead the public about the supposed healthy benefits of milk while ignoring its side effects, which include increased risk of cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and obesity (Robbins, 2001). cursory dietary investigation of food products reveal that calcium and protein – and all other nutrients in an animal-based diet – are readily available in vegetable and fruit form without all of the harmful side effects of dairy.

As long as hegemony continues to perpetuate these myths and others like it, cruelty and exploitation will continue to be normalized and viewed as common sense for the profit of industries that commit egregious acts against humans, animals, and the environment.

Humane Education

At the moment, the topic of animal rights is largely absent from the practice of Critical Pedagogy. However, it is discussed in the context of higher education in other fields, such as philosophy, law, and human relations. Two universities even offer master's degrees in Humane Education (McGee, 2005). Humane Education originated with educators from animal protection organizations going into schools and teaching students about responsible pet care. Today, Humane Education is much broader and includes animal rights, human rights, and environmental sustainability. Rae Sikora and Zoe Weil [as cited in McGee, 1999] define Humane Education as “an educational experience that helps students develop the skills to: respect themselves and others, develop critical thinking skills, and inspire

empathy and compassion” (p. 60). Humane Education educators seek to help students understand their impact on the world by critically examining their habits, their beliefs, and their assumptions. Teachers of Humane Education are also cognizant of the impact that government and corporate entities have on human beliefs as well as how these beliefs can support certain products and values that may be detrimental to human and animal welfare. Humane Education educators challenge the acceptance of consumerist and materialist values that many corporations perpetuate with little or no regard to human, animal, or environmental consequences (McGee, 1999).

David Selby (1995), designer of Humane Education curricula, acknowledges that there are numerous forms of education that explore issues of oppression and exploitation. These include: Environmental Education, Social Justice Education, Peace Studies Education, Development Education, and Human Rights Education. Selby believes that Humane Education is the intertwining of all these programs into one form of pedagogy with the ultimate goal of developing critical thinking skills, respect, and compassion for all people, all animals, and the environment [as cited in McGee, 2005]. Humane Education transcends focusing anti-oppression education on one specific field and instead asks students to critically engage oppression in all facets of their lives, which will hopefully lead to the eradication of oppressive ways of navigating the world. Within Humane Education, species is every bit as much an intersecting identity as any other, and the privileges inherent become equally valid.

Taking Action Against Animal Exploitation and Opportunities for Further Praxis

Glen T. Martin (2005) stated in *Millennium Dawn* that one of the necessary elements of revolutionary praxis is to “everywhere and in every situation, strive to educate others, with sensitivity and thoughtfulness, about the possibilities and processes and necessity of human and planetary liberation” (p. 388). I have been asked numerous times what connection animal rights could possibly have to student affairs. My response to this question is that if we as student affairs practitioners and social justice educators are to incorporate the act of revolutionary praxis into all facets of our lives, we must not ignore the violent oppression that is so often inherent in the choices we make regarding the food we eat, the fashion we wear, the science we support, and the entertainment we attend. If supporting students is a holistic process and we are to incorporate Critical Pedagogy into student affairs for the sake of revolutionary praxis, learning about animal exploitation is imperative.

Students of Critical Pedagogy have the opportunity to learn about issues such as racism, sexism, and classism. If they also learn about how these systems of oppression are directly linked to the exploitation of animals for human profit, they

will become aware of more practical choices they can make to challenge privilege, power, and profit. Because animal rights issues are so deeply entwined with our personal lives and the decisions we make, learning about animal exploitation will consistently challenge both students and teachers to reflect on their assumptions, biases, and beliefs. The end result does not necessarily have to mean that all people would embrace an animal rights perspective, but would hopefully give people a deeper understanding of ourselves as human beings, how the choices we make affect others, and why exploring all forms of oppression is vital to liberation.

Conclusion

Within the field of Critical Pedagogy, the topic of animal rights is largely absent. Yet, scientific research has demonstrated undeniable proof that the exploitation of animals – particularly in the context of consuming animals for food – has a devastating effect on animals, human beings, and the environment. As a result of cultural hegemony, most of us contribute to animal exploitation that is linked to racism, classism, and other forms of violence and hierarchy. Humane education, with its focus on critical analysis of hegemony, personal impact of actions, respect and compassion for all living creatures, and eradication of oppression offers methods for dismantling the violence and systems of hierarchy within our culture. If Critical Pedagogy educators were to incorporate the animal rights aspect of Humane Education into their curriculum, students would have additional tools for developing critical thinking skills, learning about personal responsibility, consistently questioning perspectives and assumptions, making positive choices, and challenging systemic forms of oppression.

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