

STRATEGY AND TACTIC ANALYSIS

Strategic Oppositionality to the Animal Rights “Antis”: Identity-Building and the United States Sportsmen’s Alliance

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Abstract

The strategic formation of organizational identity is critical to the work of any social action organization. Like many such organizations which define their work as *in opposition to* rather than as *for* a cause or goal, the United States Sportsmen’s Alliance (USSA), founded in 1977, constructs itself largely in oppositional terms, strategically framing animal rights and animal liberation organizations as cultural or even terroristic threats against its constituents: hunters, trappers, and anglers. In this essay I draw on a critical animal studies framework to examine the USSA’s work and identity-building strategies. By analyzing its institutional literature, interviews of organizational insiders, and newspaper articles written by journalists sympathetic to its mission, I uncover the varied ways in which the USSA continues to grow its membership and its budget almost exclusively by framing itself in opposition to animal rights “antis.” Implications for animal rights and liberation movements are discussed.

Key words: animal rights, animal liberation, organizational identity

Introduction

Just as organizational identity is critical to progressive social action organizations (Meyer, 2007), so is it critical in the case of not-so-progressive social action organizations. So when a group of sportsmen founded the U.S. Sportsmen’s Alliance (USSA) in 1977 as the Wildlife Legislative Fund of America (WLFA), they sought an identity to distinguish themselves from other organizations that were fighting for the “rights” and interests of hunters and trappers. They found their identity, not by framing themselves as *for something*, but by framing

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themselves *against* organizations that are *for something*; namely, animal rights. The organization's history, as told by the organization itself, began with a board decision to position itself oppositionally. In this spirit, it took as its original mission "the defense of hunting, fishing and trapping in the face of the burgeoning animal rights organizations" (USSA, 2009a: 1). In fact, the entire history of the USSA can be understood as a progression of strategies and tactics aimed solely at protecting its members—the "all-American," "wholesome," "hard-working" family—from anti-science, anti-family, anti-American animal rights fanatics. The USSA continues to see itself as a thorn in the sides of the Humane Society of the United States, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, and other U.S. animal welfare organizations. And evidence suggests that, given its comparatively diminutive size and annual budget, it is a fairly effective thorn.

In this essay I examine the essence of the USSA from an animal rights perspective. I base my examination on a review of USSA materials and literature; analyses of literature—particularly newspaper articles—written about the USSA and its work by people sympathetic to the organization's mission; and published interviews with USSA insiders. I use as my lens critical animal studies (Best, Nocella, Kahn, Gigliotti, & Kemmerer, 2007), a theoretical point of entry which, in the tradition of critical studies, refuses the "insularity, detachment ... and profound limitations of mainstream animal studies" (2007:3) and chooses, instead, an explicit advocacy of animal liberation and justice.

I begin by providing a brief overview of the USSA. I then discuss its primary strategies and major policy battles. I end by considering the future of the organization and its possible implications in regard to the struggle for animal rights.

Brief Overview of the USSA

Just over thirty years old, the USSA was organized to coordinate a media blitz opposing an amendment to the Ohio state constitution which would have banned trapping in the state. After raising more than a million dollars in this effort, and finding quick success with the strategy of framing animal rights advocates and anybody who supports them as family-hating “antis” (Gentile, 1987), the USSA formalized itself (as the WFLA) and began raising money to defend its constituents—hunters, trappers, fisher-people—against any legislation that might limit their abilities to pursue their hobbies unabated. By the early 1980s the USSA had expanded beyond Ohio’s borders, lending their numbers and fundraising capabilities to legislative fights all over the United States. Interestingly, the first chairman of the USSA was G. Ray Arnett, former director of the California Fish and Game Department and former president of the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) (USSA, 2009a). This might indicate that the USSA recognized the need to have a wildlife “insider” on its side. It could indicate, as well, that Arnett, who had run one of the biggest, and one of the most *conservative*, wildlife organizations in the world (having been founded, itself, by sportsmen) in the NWF, respected the organization or its potential enough to bring his considerable expertise to bare on its behalf.

By 2007, the USSA had a membership of 1.5 million and an annual budget of \$3 million (Freedman, 2007). It also had a more robust mission statement with four primary foci:

To protect and advance America's heritage of hunting, fishing and trapping. We do this by uniting sportsmen to:

- Protect against legal and legislative attacks by the animal rights movement.
- Win public support for outdoor sports.
- Ensure the future of this heritage in involving families in the outdoor experience.
- Promote the sportsman's stewardship role in the scientific management of America's fish and wildlife. (USSA, 2009b)

An examination of the USSA's battles, and the strategies and tactics employed in those battles, shows that they are most focused on the first of these four points; that they define "outdoor sports" and "the outdoor experience" as hunting and trapping; and that, as described below, the "heritage" and "scientific management" aspects of their mission do not describe their programs so much as their strategy for fighting any threat of "movement" by the animal rights movement. These conditions, alone, provide important points for critical analysis. "Whose *heritage* and whose *outdoor experience*?" one might ask, noticing that all fifteen members of the USSA's board of directors appear to be white, as does every individual pictured in the organization's 2009-2010 annual report.

But what I am most interested in here is the way in which the USSA constructs and maintains an oppositional identity in order to garner collective support for what it identifies as its primary purpose: to "protect" hunters and other sportsmen from animal rights "extremists".

USSA, Collective Identity, and Oppositionality

According to its Web site (2009c: 1)

[The USSA] provides direct lobbying and grassroots coalition support to protect and advance the rights of hunters, trappers, anglers, and scientific wildlife management professionals. The USSA is the only organization exclusively devoted to combating the attacks made on America's sportsman traditions by anti-hunting and animal rights extremists. This is accomplished through coalition building, ballot issue campaigning and legislative and government relations

This statement, as well, contains much potential fodder for critical rhetorical analysis: the strategic inclusion of "scientific wildlife professionals" among its self-defined constituencies, language such as "grassroots coalition," and so on. But most telling, perhaps, is how this

statement serves as yet another indication of the USSA's conscious oppositional positioning against animal rights groups—or what it calls “anti-hunting and animal rights extremists.”

In Beers's (2006) language, the primary “bogeymen” against whom the USSA aligns itself are the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and PETA (Freedman, 2005, 2007; Morris, 2008; Oldenburg, 2004). In virtually every interview of a representative of the organization I found, one of these two organizations was mentioned with consternation. Rick Story, USSA's senior vice president, has been particularly blunt on this front, saying in a 2007 interview that HSUS and PETA were becoming “more and more onerous” (Freedman, 2007, 5). Beth Ruth, USSA director of communication, has said of HSUS president Wayne Pacelle, “He is enemy number one” (Oldenburg, 2004, 4).

Aligning action with these sentiments, since the early 2000s, the USSA has rallied its members in protest of any organization that enters into a partnership with the HSUS, even when the purpose of the partnership is to raise money for animal shelters and other service-related programs. Since 2002, the organization has organized boycotts against, and complained publicly to, Accor Economy Lodging (Mueller, 2002), Build-a-Bear Workshop (Mueller, 2002), Iams (Mueller, 2004a), and Michelin (Davis, 2004), among others. Oftentimes these actions have been successful. According to Mueller (2004c), several organizations—General Mills, Pet Safe, Sears, and Ace Hardware, to name a few—have terminated relationships with the HSUS due to the USSA's complaint campaigns.

The organization similarly has gone after politicians who advocate for these organizations. New Jersey governor James McGreevey was the victim of a particularly harsh USSA attack campaign due to his support of SPCAs and his decision not to investigate claims of financial wrongdoing among several of these organizations in the state (*The Beaumont Enterprise Staff*, 2002).

If these examples of oppositional identity are not enough to illustrate the organization's conscious efforts to define itself in terms that are oppositional to animal rights organizations, in 2008 the USSA organized, under its own umbrella, a group called "Sportsmen Against HSUS." Obviously, the purpose of Sportsmen Against HSUS is to fight the organization that the USSA considers to be the world's top anti-hunting group (Frye, 2008). Its priorities are to "(1) mount national campaigns to educate the media, elected officials, the public, sportsmen and others targeted by the animal rights group, and (2) fund the campaigns that combat the lobbying efforts initiated and supported by the HSUS" (Frye, 2008: 4).

Certainly, the strategy of claiming an oppositional stance in order to engender and rally support under a "collective identity" (Wieloch, 2002) is not unique to the USSA or to those opposing animal rights. For decades scholars have detailed ways in which collective identity and counter-identity have played important roles in social movements across the political spectrum. In fact, Cerulo (1997) reviews much of this history *within progressive movements*, detailing how such tactics have been operationalized in order to rally constituents around calls for coalition-building against racism, sexism, economic injustice, and other forms of oppression. She refers to this brand of identification strategy as "collective agency" (1997: 393). A critical component of collective agency, whether defined *for* or *against* something, is that, in Cerulo's words, it is "enacted in a moral space" (1997: 393). The trick for pulling people into the collective is in confirming potential constituents' needs to feel that their worldviews, shared by others in the collective, are "right and good" (Taylor, 1989) or morally righteous (Aho, 1994). This can be accomplished by focusing upon what is righteous about the collective identity within a movement. It can be accomplished, as well, by nurturing the oppositionality of the collective identity (Wieloch, 2002). Although some social movement organizations lean considerably to one extreme or the other, most define

themselves publicly in the former way and draw on strategies across the self-as-righteous and other-as-unrighteous continuum. For example, Taylor and Whittier (1992), in their study of lesbian feminist mobilization, found that collective identity within the movement grew out of the former, but was solidified by the latter.

Key to fomenting mobilization, they found, was in collective oppositionality against domination (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Such oppositionality is achieved most effectively through an unambiguous identification of a *dominator* at which (or at whom) to direct collective scorn (Drury, Reicher, & Stott, 2003). This practice—unambiguous dominator identification—is common in the animal rights movement. Some of the clearest examples are those PETA campaigns—Kentucky Fried Cruelty, McCruelty, and Bloody Burberry, for example—for which mobilization materials (Web sites, pamphlets, and logos, for example) are designed explicitly to point collective scorn at particular corporations. However, although substantial scholarly attention has been paid to these sorts of dynamics in PETA’s campaigns (see, for example, Griffiths & Steinbrecher, 2010), considerably less attention has been paid to how organizations like the USSA, created to oppose the animal rights movement, employ them.

Battling the “Antis”

Framing itself in opposition to the HSUS and other animal rights organizations allows the USSA to rally its constituents and foment their scornful gaze with an overwhelmingly clear message. *The “antis”* (those opposed to hunting, trapping, and angling) *are out to get us. The antis want to take away our rights. The antis want to smear our heritage. We must stand up to the antis.*

“The antis” encompass any organization or individual attempting to place limitations on hunting, trapping, or angling. One of the USSA’s chief strategies is to essentialize animal rights organizations so that it appears as though their only missions are to eliminate hunting, trapping, and angling—to take these hobbies, unrighteously, away from real “Americans.” So just as the USSA targets the HSUS and PETA whenever possible, it also takes every opportunity to reframe these and other animal rights organizations as “anti-hunting” and “anti-sportsmen,” to reframe the entire animal rights movement as an anti-hunting movement (Freedman, 2005, 2007; Frye, 2005; Moran, 2003; Morris, 2008; Mueller, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; Roussan, 2007). For instance, Story (cited in Frye, 2005), speaking at a seminar in Alexandria, Minnesota, clarified that the role of the USSA is “to meet, beat, defeat and knock the living daylight out of the anti-hunting movement” (2005:5). In a 2007 interview, Story (cited in Freedman, 2007) explained, “We’re in business to combat the anti-hunting groups. That’s all we do” (2007:2). Similarly, in a 2004 interview, USSA president Bud Pidgeon (quoted in Davis, 2004), explaining the organization’s campaign against Michelin for entering into a partnership with the HSUS, said, “Sportsmen must make Michelin aware that every dollar corporate America provides to fund animal rights groups’ programs represents money that is freed up for use in national campaigns to end hunting and trapping” (2004: 6).

Strategically, the USSA’s work to embed this “us/them” binary and code it into the lexicon of its constituency allows it to impose even harsher frames on its adversaries. And it does so, riding the hegemonic discursive wave of the Animal Enterprise Protection Act and the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, regularly referring to animal rights *terrorism* (Kelly, 2002; Moran, 2003; Roberts, 2002), a ploy to marginalize animal rights and environmental activists which became popular after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States (Best & Nocella, 2004; Lovitz, 2010; Phillips, 2004). Like corporations that engage in vivisection, factory farming, and other violence against animals, this tactic enables the USSA

to frame its constituents as the victims or targets of this terrorism (Roberts, 2002), as Tony Celebrezze (quoted in Mueller, 2005), USSA director of states services, illustrated in a 2005 interview: "...anti-hunters will have a field day ensuring that sportsmen are prosecuted on animal cruelty charges" (2005:3). This framing has helped the USSA rally its membership to lobby legislators to treat direct action animal rights activism as domestic terrorism (Kelly, 2002; Moran, 2003). In fact, in 2003 the organization drafted the Animal and Ecological Terrorism Act, calling it "model" legislation for combating animal rights terrorism. They promoted passage of this act in all 50 states (Moran, 2003). This, along with action by the National Rifle Association and other pro-hunting groups, helped facilitate the passage of the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act in 2006 (McPhall, 2007), making it easier to prosecute animal rights activity as domestic terrorism (Lovitz, 2010).

The USSA employs many other classic strategies to galvanize its base and discredit the animal rights movement. Like many organizations opposed to social or political change, the USSA often mocks the HSUS, PETA, and individual animal rights advocates as "silly" and their concerns as "ridiculous" (Morris, 2008; Berg, 2005). Like many "conservation" organizations that oppose animal rights groups (Beers, 2006), the USSA defines part of its work, and the hobbies it defends, in scientific terms, as *wildlife management*, while labeling animal rights concerns as unscientific (USSA, 2007). It warns that animal rights groups are dangerous because they block important scientific research (Roberts, 2002). In doing so, the organization implicitly frames itself as *pro-science*.

It also appears as though the organization has a network of journalists employed as sports writers for right-leaning newspapers who regularly and explicitly support its causes. These journalists frequently write articles that advocate explicitly for the USSA, refer to animal rights groups as "antis," and portray them as extremists who want to rob hunters and trappers of their rights. Among them are Mueller (2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2005) at the

Washington Times, Moran (2003) at the *New York Post*, and Freedman (2005, 2007) at the *Chicago Tribune*. In several instances, these journalists, not even feigning journalistic objectivity, provided readers with information on how to join or contribute to the USSA or how to protest animal rights campaigns. It is interesting, too, that each is a sports writer, and every newspaper article I found that favored the USSA was in a sports section. This might be a strategy employed by the organization to reach its base as directly as possible through the “Outdoors” sections of sports pages, rather than going through other sections of newspapers, which could raise counter-attention by people who are not hunters or trappers (and so who may be less likely to read the “Outdoors” section of their newspapers).

But without question, the organization’s primary and most successful strategy has been framing itself and its constituents as victims of animal rights terrorism. When people are afraid that they might lose something to which they have grown entitled, and when politicians and corporations fear losing the support of a considerable portion of the population, they become much easier to scare into compliance. The USSA knows this, and has become Roveian in its ability to understand its sociopolitical and sociohistorical context—one in which the “terrorist” label carries particular weight—and to take advantage of this context, a key skill in the development of sustainable collective identity (Moghadam, 1994; Wuthnow, 1989).

This can be an indication, as well, that the USSA understands its constituents. Their brand of oppositional stance in which collective identity is built largely through the demonization of “the other” speaks to the same hyper-masculinity that drives predominantly boys and men (Herzog, 2007) into hobbies like hunting and trapping in the first place. Just as the National Football League sells itself largely on hyper-masculine violence and sex (in the form of cheerleaders), and not on the athletic artistry and grace of world-class athletes, the USSA sells itself through hyper-masculine conflict—a sort of war game between opposing social and political interests. This, again, is a reflection of informed strategy on the

organization's part. Littlefield and Ozanne (2009), who, through their study of consumer socialization among hunters, identified four "subgroup" hunter identities (traditionalists, gearheads, experientialists, and transcendentalists), found that an elevated sense of masculinity was central to each of them. Similarly, Oleson and Henry (2009) found an elevated sense of masculinity, in the form of high levels of what they called "power motivation," among men who were indifferent to the mistreatment of animals.

And, of course, at the basest level, a vast majority of hunters are men overall. In the U.S., men represent close to 85% of hunters (Herzog, 2007). Men are over-represented, as well, in images adorning USAA materials. In fact, sixteen of the eighteen hunters depicted in the organization's 2009-2010 annual report (USAA, 2010a) appear to be boys or men. According to the same document, twelve of the organization's fifteen board members are men.

USAA's Campaigns

The USAA has applied these strategies to a variety of campaigns. It shares on its Web site an impressive list of victories in a variety of situations across the U.S. (USAA, 2009c). For the most part, though, in addition to its political campaigns against animal rights groups and those who support these groups, the USAA employs its tactics in two major ways: (1) representing hunters' and trappers' interests in state and federal law suits (Marshall, 1990; Roussan, 2007; USAA, 2006, 2007), and (2) bringing legislation against animal rights groups to fight "animal rights terrorism" (Kelly, 2002; Roberts, 2002). In most of these battles, the USAA collaborates with at least one other organization that advocates for hunters, trappers, or anglers (USAA, 2006, 2007), such as the Fur Takers of America and the National Shooting Sports Foundation.

One of the organization's proudest and profoundest victories came through its advocacy for legislation to ease age restrictions on hunting (Berg, 2005; Freedman, 2005; Pyne, 2005). Between 2004 and 2005, the USSA built a coalition with the National Wild Turkey Association and the National Shooting Sports Foundation to counteract animal rights groups' advocacy for increasing the minimum hunting age. This coalition resulted in "Families Afield," a program that once again framed hunting and trapping as wholesome American "family" recreation and organizations attempting to impose stronger age restrictions on these activities as anti-family and un-American (Pyne, 2005). As of 2007, the coalition has been successful in easing hunting age restrictions in eleven states. Haas (2007) estimates that, as a result of these victories, five million additional children have been enabled to hunt with their parents or guardians.

Another victory, of sorts, is the organization's continued mainstreaming of itself. Even as hunting becomes less popular nationwide (Freedman, 2005), the USSA has grown more vibrant and increasingly mainstream. Evidence of this is its representation on the panel that publishes *Outdoor Life's* annual Sportsmen's Voting Guide (Absher, 2008) as well as the steadiness of its membership through economic turbulence. This may be an indication of the effectiveness of its strategy of engendering oppositional collective identity in members and potential members. For example, on the "Membership" page of its Web site, the USSA urges people to join in order to "protect against legal and legislative attacks by the animal rights movement" (2010b: 2). Further down the page, the organization continues with this sort of rhetoric, positioning itself clearly as the righteous "dominated":

By joining the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance today, you will be helping on the frontlines to defend your rich American traditions of hunting, fish and trapping. Your financial contribution and personal dedication plays an important role in the protection of your right to enjoy the outdoors today and for generations to come. (2010b: 3)

The USSA has been least successful when it has ventured out of its priority areas, attempting to reach beyond its scope. It has lobbied since 2000, so far without success, for reforms to the Endangered Species Act that would require the Department of the Interior and the Commerce Department to consider how changes to the Act would impact hunters (Holsman, 2000). It has been equally unsuccessful in its attempts to resist stricter puppy mill laws by arguing that they would adversely affect hunters who are raising hunting dogs (Laepfle, 2007). Overall, the USSA is more successful advocating for or against legislation that is more directly—or less indirectly—tied to its core constituents than it is advocating for policies that, like the former, transcend this scope or, like the latter, concern only a small fraction of its constituents. It is interesting to note, as well, that in both of these cases the “antis” were not defined as HSUS and other animal rights organizations per se.

Reflections and Conclusion

Despite the fact that it positions itself in direct opposition to the HSUS, PETA, and other animal rights organizations, there is little indication of these organizations reciprocating the USSA’s oppositional obsession. In fact, it appears, based on my examination of materials from HSUS and PETA, that they, the two primary “villains” in the oppositional identity of the USSA, are content, for now, to ignore the USSA, at least publicly. I was unable to find any specific response campaign from either the HSUS or PETA other than a brief statement about the USSA on a page buried fairly deeply within the bowels of the HSUS Web structure. And this might be the most strategic course of (in)action, as responding directly could provide fodder for the USSA’s strategy of building collective identity in opposition to these and other animal rights “dominators.” However, although the USSA is relatively small, whether measured by membership or annual budget, it remains a formidable thorn in the side

of the animal rights movement, as evidenced by its ability to disrupt partnerships between the HSUS and other organizations. If the leaders of any particular legislative animal rights campaign that targets hunting or trapping does not have the USSA on their radar, it might be in for a tougher-than-expected battle.

It is important to note, then, that although there exists a growing body of scholarship on the construction of collective identity and the reconstruction of corporate-protectionist hegemony in *opposition to* animal rights organizations (Lovitz, 2010) by groups like the USSA and by corporate-friendly legislators, there exists very little scholarship on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of various responses to these discursive techniques by organizations concerned with animal rights or liberation. Certainly the oppositionality strategy is not new; nor is it unique to the USAA or to organizations hostile to animal liberation more generally. However, as Klein (2007) detailed, when employed in a sociopolitical context manipulated by the very corporate interests that have an economic stake in abolishing social movements that threaten profit margins, appeals to fear can be particularly effective. This, unfortunately, is the context in which we find ourselves today (Klein, 2007): a neoliberal context, the very framing (*post-9/11*) of which reminds us to be afraid, to identify enemies, and to refuse to allow *those people* to win by altering *our way of life*.

As animal rights and anti-speciesism movements in the U.S. continue to shift away from mere “protection” and toward “liberation,” and as they attempt to win support for more serious sociocultural changes such as the elimination of sport hunting, socio-capitalist conditions suggest that the USSA likely will grow and become an even more formidable counter-force. It has a sort of hegemonic sentimentality on its side—one that is consistent with the anti-Obama fervor, power gains by Tea Partiers, and the recent increase in gun sales in the U.S. And already it is organized *against* organizations that stand for the same spirit of

“change” that Obama, hegemonic as *he* may be, rode into the White House. In addition, the USSA has strong working relationships with other powerful lobbying groups like the NRA. It can, like those groups, lean on the “protect your heritage” paradigms that traditionally have worked so well in swaying mass white working class sentiment (Prasad, Perrin, Bezila, Hoffman, Kindleberger, Manturuk, Powers, & Payton, 2009)—a sentiment it attempts to exploit, for instance, through the many father-son hunting photographs appearing in its materials. In fact, according to the AFL-CIO, 70% of the 4.6 million union members in the U.S. enjoy hunting and fishing (Egan, 2009). The USSA has demonstrated over the past 30 years a propensity for mobilizing these masses and keeping them mobilized by employing perhaps the greatest change-resisting tool: fear.

The deep, reflexive, analytical nature of critical animal rights scholarship, in addition to framing the problem of animal exploitation in critical, global capitalist terms and providing analyses of interconnections among liberation movements, makes it a potentially potent tool for examining these conditions and responding to both theoretical and practical questions about their implications for animal liberation activism: How might organizations and activists understand oppositional (and other) strategies within a larger socio-capitalist context of neoliberalism and disaster capitalism? How might such a context require new responses from activist communities?

If we fail to do the work to understand them in this larger socio-capitalist context, these strategies may represent a growing threat to already-fledgling solidarities within and among animal liberation movements. After all, organizations like the USSA justify their oppositional stances in part by suggesting connections between various organizations. Some animal rights organizations (such as PETA) are being pressured, publicly and privately, to disassociate from and publicly renounce others (such as the Animal Liberation Front).

Critical animal studies can play an important role in explicating the implications of these pressures in light of larger socio-capitalist conditions.

This is, in part, about knowing one's "opponents"—about understanding how the USSA and other organizations enact strategy to meet their objectives. But it also is about understanding the hegemony of speciesism and how exploiters take advantage of sociopolitical conditions in order to reify it and to justify exploitation, particularly as neoliberalism conditions the masses to relinquish the notion of the "public good".

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