

INTERVIEW

Josh Harper discusses animal rights history, welfarism and “Star Wars”

Interviewed by Jon Hochschartner¹

A long time activist, Josh Harper spent three years in prison for his role in the Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) campaign. Now on probation, he's launched two projects chronicling the history of the animal rights movement. The Journal for Critical Animal Studies interviewed him July 4 2011.

Jon Hochschartner: Could you give a little background on your Conflict Gypsy website and the book project you're working on?

Josh Harper: Yeah, absolutely. Conflict Gypsy started because a friend of mine asked me if I had a complete collection of this old, British, Earth First! publication called “Do or Die.” And at one point I did have a full collection. But then a joint terrorism taskforce raided my home and took that and all of my other old publications.

When we started trying to piece together a collection of it again, we started realizing this is the story of our movement as told by the participants. So much of it though is printed on this really disposable medium. Between activist drop-out, police raids, and just the passage of time — these fragile items getting mold and mildew— we realized that our history was really dying. There was no serious academic attempt to really find and archive these items. Most of the attempts we had seen to get them back into people’s hands were for profit and you kind of had to already know what you were looking for.

For example, recently there was a compilation of old issues of “Underground” that was put together. Then the old A.L.F. press officer David Barbarash for many years ran a group called Black Cat Distro that took some of these old publications and put out sort of cheaply

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bound photocopies of them. We didn't really feel like those efforts were going to be sufficient to preserve these items.

Anyway, as we started getting more and more things for the site, Arissa Media (Group) contacted me and asked if I'd like to actually write a book about the history of radical animal rights activism in North America. I jumped at that opportunity. I kind of feel like I have the biggest homework assignment ever now (laughs). I'm a little bit nervous about it.

Jon Hochschartner: Have you ever written anything of a comparable length, or anywhere close?

Josh Harper: No. The longest thing I've ever written is about a 40-page chapter for a compilation book. This is going to be quite an undertaking. I don't come from any sort of academic background at all either. I'm not a history major. I know very little about research protocol. You know, I dropped out of high school in ninth grade. But I think what I do have that gives me an advantage maybe over people with that sort of that background is fifteen years of participation in the movement. So I think that not only am I going to have access to interview subjects and source materials that your average person wouldn't have access to. But I think that because of my history the information that people will be willing to share with me, and the time they will be willing to put into it, might exceed what you would otherwise see in a more academic approach. Then the other thing is that I've just done an awful lot of fundraising. So I'm going to hire research assistants that have the master's degrees (laughs). Hopefully that will help.

Jon Hochschartner: I see that you're starting the history in 1977. Why is that?

Josh Harper: Well, 1977 was sort of the date that I used on Kickstarter (fundraising website). To be quite honest, I haven't settled yet when I'm going to start it. But '77 was sort of watershed year for animal rights in North America. It wasn't just the year that we saw the first live liberation of animals in the United States. It was also the year that a lot of very influential activists began putting together groups and small conferences out on the East Coast. There was a rise of anti-fur activism that year. So just looking at my early notes, it seemed like a good, notable place to start, and a place that could also sort of draw readers in very rapidly. You know, liberating two dolphins from a laboratory is something that has a

degree of drama to it that wasn't really present prior in the movement. I don't know. But as the research continues and as I get more and more interviews back and also more access to source materials, that start date could change.

Jon Hochschartner: I know she's working with a different time period, but will your book be different in tone than Diane Beer's work? I don't know if you've read her history.

Josh Harper: Did she write "For the Prevention of Cruelty?" I did read that actually. I read that in prison. Yeah, it will differ. The thing is that I wanted, first and foremost, to tell the story of people who really put their lives on the line, who saw this as an issue that was worth taking deep physical risks for, the type of risks that could end in injury and then incarceration. That's the aspect of the story that is really fascinating for me. And not just because of some sort of adventuristic sense or glorification of direct action. But when you really consider the history of human and animal relations, to have this sudden turnaround where these people looked at the tide of history, thousands of years of domination and exploitation, and were so disgusted by it that they were willing to leap in and try to physically intervene. That to me is fascinating, that something like that could even occur after such a lengthy period of apathy towards animals.

I totally respect the work of the early welfarists. I also recognize that even back to the 1960s you had people who started talking about things in more of a rights context. But I also feel that their stories have been documented. I feel like that story has been told. Meanwhile, we don't know very much about the history of the more protest and direct action oriented movement in the United States.

Jon Hochschartner: Do you have any idea of when it would be finished, or no?

Josh Harper: (Exhales loudly, then laughs.) Part of the problem right now with coming up with a timeline is that I'm still on probation, which means that I can't travel. I'm going to have some very able research assistants. And of course between everyone having cell phones and the internet nowadays, I'm certain there's a lot of information I'm going to be able to gather from home. But next year, when I get off of probation, I do think a lot of the finishing touches on the book will come from me being able to travel and personally interact with people. And then the other thing that I've learned from Conflict Gypsy is that a lot of people

say they'll put things in the mail, but they don't (laughs). So I'm thinking that one of the tasks that'll probably have to be undertaken to get certain very rare source materials is that I'm going to have to go and get them in person.

Jon Hochschartner: Speaking of Conflict Gypsy, what are your favorite items in that collection so far?

Josh Harper: Oh man. I was really excited to find this one zine called "Homo Milk" that was produced by these two very radical queer vegans in the 1980s. One of them, Todd Meszaros, is such a fascinating figure, and one of those people who has just been totally lost to our movement. Kids nowadays have no idea who he is. There was this time when he had never met a vegan. He didn't know anybody who did it. He didn't know if it would be healthy or anything like that. But because he had this animal rights philosophy, he was like, "I can't exploit animals for their meat, or secretions, or anything anymore." So he just went vegan, having never met anybody. He went on to do all these really fascinating things. He was roommates with Rod Coronado and Jonathan Paul. He was a hunt saboteur. He played in a band called Pollution Circus that traveled all over and spread veganism to the subculture that they catered to. I don't know. I could really go on and on about this guy for hours. He and his boyfriend in the 1980s put out this zine called Homo Milk. It was part of a series of really militant, controversial zines that they had done. And finding one of those was just so amazing. Anyway, his boyfriend, Tom Scut, is also a really fascinating guy and I'm sure he's going to get a lot of coverage in the book as well. So that was one of my favorites. And then of course there are the things that really influenced me when I was younger. "No Compromise," "Strong Hearts," "Memories of Freedom," those were the publications that I was reading when I initially became active. So tracking those down has been really wonderful.

I'd say that probably from a purely academic, historical-importance perspective, though, probably Richard Morgan's book "Love and Anger." It was an organizing handbook that was written in 1980. The first edition was published in 1981. It spread all across the world. I've found reviews of it in publications from New Zealand and Australia. Basically this guy laid the groundwork for animal rights organizing and protesting. Many of the people who were initially influenced by him, like George Cave, went on to do things like the first civil disobedience for animal rights in New York at Macy's in 1984. This guy really kind of

launched what we now know as the animal rights movement in the U.S., the aboveground protest-oriented portion of it. And almost no one knows who he is. So getting both editions of it—and we found autographed copies—and getting those scanned and online was really amazing.

I've actually been considering lately hiring a private investigator to track him down and find out if he's still alive. He would be in his 60s now. He disappeared from the movement in about 1985. I've spoken to a few people who were friends of his in the 1970s and early 1980s and no one knows where he went or what happened to him. Norm Phelps, when he was writing "The Longest Struggle," actually tried to track him down as well and was unsuccessful. So I'm kind of hoping that I'll get lucky and I'll be the one to find him or at least find out what happened to him.

Jon Hochschartner: Going through these documents, what differences do you notice between the 1970s, the 80', the 90s, and whatever we're calling the past decade, the 2000s?

Josh Harper: Well, you know, I guess what I see in the 1970s was this very young and hopeful movement that wanted to grow. There was really this drive to build mass, but also not to water down the message or to back away from controversial tactics. But of course the world was a very different place then. You were coming out of the 1960s and the more radical 1970s. Americans were more used to seeing militant protests on television and magazines and it didn't really have the image that it has now. So in the 1970s, these sort of loud protests and even the liberation of animals, it didn't get the negative media coverage that we see nowadays.

In the 1980s, the efforts of the people in the '70s to grow and build, it came to life. You started seeing this explosion of activism. In the United Kingdom there was this sense that really they were on the cusp of a revolution for animals. We never quite reached that level in the United States, but there were points where you'd see all across the U.S., thousands of people attending days of action. And for Fur Free Friday, you would see 3,000 people in New York, 3,000 people in L.A., 2,000 people in Chicago. We haven't really seen anything like that since.

The downside of the explosion in that popularity though is that suddenly you had a huge

fundraising base. An awful lot of groups, and then really people who I don't think gave a damn about animals, they started developing these offices and salaries. All of a sudden they had this tremendous overhead. And they couldn't really risk the fundraising effort by doing anything controversial.

The American Medical Association definitely saw the precipice that some of these big groups were walking and decided to basically make an ultimatum: "If you support radical action, we're going to come after you. We're going to vilify you. We're going to harm your fundraising efforts."

A number of groups that had previously even really glorified Animal Liberation Front actions in their newsletters—I mean, you had groups that would have pictures of their founders getting arrested on the covers of their newsletters. In a very brief period, all of a sudden that stopped.

Of course toward the end of the 1980s, you had the crackdown. It was kind of like the "Empire Strikes Back" (laughs).

Jon Hochschartner: Got to love the "Star Wars" reference.

Josh Harper: You got to get a "Star Wars" reference in.

Jon Hochschartner: Josh, can I just interrupt you for a second there? You'd probably include PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) in there too?

Josh Harper: Oh yeah, absolutely.

Jon Hochschartner: Didn't they provide you with a grant at some point?

Josh Harper: They did, yeah. In the 1990s, I was facing a grand jury investigation in Portland, Oregon, and I refused to appear and to testify. So I was actually charged with a felony count. At that time, I sent out fundraising letters to a number of people one of the people working for my defense committee actually approached (PETA founder) Ingrid Newkirk at a speaking engagement that she did here in Seattle. So when she got back to

Washington she wrote a check for five thousand dollars and sent it off to my support committee. Where it was then cashed and immediately went to my attorney (laughs).

Jon Hochschartner: So they haven't sold out completely. Would that be fair to say?

Josh Harper: Oh, there's a lot about PETA that I really love and appreciate. And I'm not trying to knock them in any way. I understand that that overhead is there, that there are things that they need to fundraise for, and that they do very valuable things with the money that they get. One of the reasons that they cannot be as vocal, and I think really as honest, as they would like to be about their feelings on direct action is that after they gave me and Rod Coronado and a few other people money towards legal defense, there was actually a congressional hearing about revoking their non-profit status. Non-profit groups are not allowed to participate or even really advocate for illegal tactics. They had to look at really doing harm to their other efforts if they continued to openly give support to radicals. I'm not angry about that. But that is the reality of the situation. That's the direction that things went.

Jon Hochschartner: I totally understand the criticisms against PETA. I just feel like sometimes it's not balanced.

Josh Harper: Absolutely. I'm also not talking solely about PETA. If you look at groups like In Defense of Animals, and so on — a number of groups in the 1980s, as things went into the 90s, sort of pulled back their support for all types of direct action, including voluntary arrest and civil disobedience.

Jon Hochschartner: OK, I'm sorry. I totally interrupted your chronology of the different decades you're covering in your book.

Josh Harper: The 1990s was really fascinating because it was coming out of the repression of the 1980s. It took several years basically for the fear to subside, also for enough young people, enough new blood, to come into the movement that were unaware of the repression for things to begin to really bloom again.

I think one of the big differences in the 1990s was tone. There wasn't the same sense of hope that we had seen in the 1970s and '80s. And a lot less emphasis was put on movement

building. You had all of these hardcore bands that had really intelligent lyrics like, “Stop talking, start revenging.”

So there was more of a sense of “Fuck you. We aren’t waiting anymore. We’re going to take it. We’re going to move forward with or without the rest of society.” And of course that’s a mistake. That abandons billions of animals to a terrible fate. Movement building is difficult. Convincing the public at large is a very tremendous task. But it’s one that we absolutely have to incorporate into our strategies if we’re going to see the type of success that we need. Unfortunately, a lot of the direct action that we began to see in the 1990s and 2000s was very ugly. The rhetoric turned very macho, and I think wasn’t likely to really draw in a lot of new participants expect for maybe angry young men who had power fantasies.

Jon Hochschartner: The crossed straightedge guns.

Josh Harper: Exactly. You also saw some very almost cult-like groups that sprouted up during that time period. You had Hardline that incorporated a lot of various bizarre religious ideas into its ideology. Initially Taoism, but then later with all the weird fractures in the group, various members became Islamic, some of them became Baha’i, some of them actually became Rastafarians strangely enough (laughs). So anyway, that was the negative side of it. I guess the positive side of it though is that there was this tremendous upswing in activity. A number of people who got involved then did stay involved, continued to develop their analysis and their strategy. And a lot of the best activists that we have right now, I think people would be shocked to find out about their militant origin. There are a number of people working at HSUS (Humane Society of the United States) who I guess to put it bluntly used to be hard as fuck (laughs). But really number of groups that started in the 1990s, like Compassion Over Killing — they’ve become more moderate over time. But their roots really did lie in that upswing of youth participation in the 1990s.

And then of course the story of the 2000s I think is a little bit better known. Unfortunately, for the early part of the decade the ugly rhetoric really did continue. I think we’re still dealing with a lot of the harm that that rhetoric caused. Even the fear that people talk about nowadays — you know, the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, the prosecutions of myself and my co-defendants. I think a lot of people haven’t yet realized. To a degree it wasn’t the action that

brought on the repression. The rhetoric is what really helped fuel the repression. It's what gave police, FBI and federal prosecutors, so much of the fuel that they were able to use to convince judges that this was a desperate issue, to convince legislators that someone was going to get killed.

It wasn't because anyone was arming themselves (laughs), or that there was really any move within the movement to begin using violent tactics. It was because you had a number of people who were speculating.

Jon Hochschartner: On the internet.

Josh Harper: Exactly. So, anyway, certainly with the SHAC campaign we made a lot of mistakes. I have to say we made mistakes because we were constantly active. You're not going to hit the bull's eye every single time. None of us are born with the skill set that's needed to knock out an international corporation. But really those errors didn't sink us nearly so bad as the no-censorship policy on the website. Basically anything that came in, if it was HLS (Huntingdon Life and Sciences) related, if it had something to do with an action against HLS, it would go up on the website. Of course the danger of that was that if you're providing a venue for every nut-case to basically vent their anger and frustration at the world, you're going to find some people who are less sincerely motivated by the actual plight of animals, and then some people who just really don't have a great analysis yet, some people who might be tremendously good at liberating animals, but don't exactly have a knack for the written word (laughs). All of that was going up on the site. And it made us look — I don't even really know how to say it. It created an atmosphere of just ugliness and borderline ignorance that I don't think we ever really recovered from.

There were some amazing things about the anti-HLS campaign. And I'm so proud to have been a part of it. I think that there were thousands of really, really good people doing really, really good things to try and shut that place down. And I also think there were a few people who we never should have been a mouthpiece for.

Jon Hochschartner: Do you think you would have done these projects if you weren't on probation?

Jon Hochschartner: You know, probably not. I have to say that the thing that really appealed to me since I began my activism in the 1990s — at least my animal rights activism — I was doing human rights stuff I guess dating back to the '80s or the more early '90s. I was one of the people who really did want to intervene. I was one of the people who couldn't stand the thought that these things were happening. They were happening so close to me and to all these beings that I felt such an affinity for.

I grew up in Oregon and I lived in a lot of small towns. I watched the decline — you know, Great Blue Heron, fox populations, bears, and all these other creatures. I lived amongst trappers, hunters and breeders. So to have all of it right there and then to have the knowledge that I had about animals' ability to socialize, to feel joy, to feel pain — I wanted to do something. I wanted to intervene. And I still feel that. That's still where my heart lies. So I guess if probation and prison hadn't taken me out of the game to the degree that they have, I'd say yeah, it's quite likely that I would be involved in more aggressive forms of protest. And I probably wouldn't have had the time to take these projects on. So I guess maybe that's the only hidden benefit (laughs).

Jon Hochschartner: So this question is kind of off the top of my head. But I've been reading a lot about in-vitro meat recently, and the potentials of that. Do you think a vegan society is possible? And if so, what do you see as the pathway to getting there?

Jon Hochschartner: I think that there's a pretty broad chasm between possible and likely. Do I think that it's possible? I absolutely think that it's possible. But my participation over the years has kind of led me to one very unfortunate conclusion. And it's that the majority of people who become involved in the animal rights movement — the ones that have enough compassion left in them to even go vegan — most of them are still not going to have the level of commitment, awareness, and self-sacrifice that it's going to take to really cause the types of changes that we need for animals. I wish that that were not true. And I hope that that changes.

But there is not some endless well of people willing to go out and take on that warrior role. I think what that means is that we have to be conscious of the fact that ideology can't blind us to the reality of certain situations. There are times when veganism is not the bottom line. Animals are the bottom line. Animal liberation philosophy, animal rights philosophy, animal

welfare philosophy is not the bottom line. I'm certain that a lot of people will be shocked by this, and call me incrementalist and say that I'm compromising.

Jon Hochschartner: You welfarist (laughs)!

Josh Harper: You're a potluckist! But anyway, the fact of the matter is that there are times that if you demand 100 percent, you end up with zero. And that of course is tremendously unfair to the billions of lives that need us. I'm disgusted by the idea of in-vitro meat. Ultimately there are still animals at the start of that chain that are suffering and dying. But I also know that, given what I've seen in this world, that's not an area I'm going to put my efforts into opposing. I think that other activists would be bright to continue to critique the situation, to continue to try to pull people in the truly right situation. But I think to spend a tremendous amount of time fighting the growth of things like in-vitro meat would be a mistake. Just as I once wasted a tremendous amount of my activist energies in the 1990s fighting welfarist legislation. I could not shut up about it (laughs).

Jon Hochschartner: Actually fighting it? How so?

Josh Harper: Oh yeah. I watched this group called the Oregon Bear and Cougar Coalition fighting against different types of hounding and baiting. Where basically drums of rotting meat would be placed out into an open area, bears would come to eat the meat, and then they would be shot while they were in the open.

Anyway, just so many resources went into that campaign. From all the people who they had to get out on the street collecting signatures, to the fundraising, to all the people working the office, working the phones, lobbying. In the end, ultimately the legislation passed. But the thing was, there was no money or will to enforce the law. And a few years later, the state legislators came along and said, "Oh, you know what? We think this was the actual will of the voters." And they just changed the language of the law.

So having watched millions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of hours of activists' efforts go into something that ultimately didn't help that many animals, I was incensed. And I felt like my opinion had to be known by everyone in the movement (laughs). So a lot of times when there was even initially discussion of new legislation, I was right there in people's faces,

going to conferences, and trying to convince them of the error of their ways. Of course, they proceeded without me. And all I did was cause a lot of conflict and rifts in the movement. There are people who are never going to see eye to eye with me. But that's fine, because we're not a cult. We don't have to just constantly just mimic back to each other the same ideas. That's dangerous. That would cause a lot of regression in the movement. Really as I've gotten older and begun to look at some of the more welfarist campaigns, I do believe that ultimately they can lead to a great reduction in the number of animals killed for human purposes. And they can lead a number of people to embrace the more rights-based philosophies.

When you think about the fair time doctrine that exists still in some states in the U.S., what will happen when you have the campaign against, for example, battery cages — I don't know if you've ever tried to get a commercial on television that shows brutality against animals. It's not going to happen.

Jon Hochschartner: Really, they won't take your money? Obviously that reveals my naiveté, but I always just assumed that for advertisers, money was money.

Josh Harper: Oh, no. The thing is that it's not just your money they have to worry about. They have to worry about their other advertisers. They have to worry about McDonalds. They have to worry about Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Jon Hochschartner: It's the bigger picture.

Josh Harper: Exactly. So the thing is that PETA, and the other groups, even Compassion Over Killing, for years tried to get commercials on television and didn't have a whole lot of luck. But now in a number of states where HSUS, for example, has tried to get legislation passed, you have television stations that cannot say no. And so all of a sudden you have millions of people exposed to this imagery they otherwise wouldn't have seen. So anyway, I think my arguments on these things are becoming a little bit more nuanced. I'm still not thrilled with that direction. Do I think there are better directions we could go? Yes. Do I think we're going to go that direction? Probably not. So to spend all my time and energy trying to block the efforts of other activists is a waste and ultimately I think harmful to the movement. So I'm knocking it off.

Jon Hochschartner: Writing these books, you have to take a historian's perspective. How do you hope people in the future will look back on you?

Josh Harper: (Laughs) You know, honestly, I hope that when people look back from the future they see me as a really minor character. And here's the reason that I say that. I think it's tremendously sad that the FBI was able at one point to consider SHAC the threat that they considered us. Because, ultimately while it's true that we were doing something pretty groundbreaking and historical, what we were doing wasn't enough. When I look back on the figures that I have admired so much in my life, the people who influenced me to become an activist and pursue the path that I have, I don't really live up. I don't really make muster. I'm not someone like (anarcho-communist) Alexander Berkman. There was a time that he was able to get 40,000 people out on the streets. And when I think about all that he did after the tremendous amount of time he spent in prison, I know that I'm not one of those figures. I think about Rod Coronado taking out the whaling fleet of a whole nation in a single night. I think about all these people like Jonathan Paul, who's a good friend of mine, who in the 1980s, was breaking into laboratory, after laboratory, after laboratory, freeing all of these animals. I know that I'm not one of them.

Jon Hochschartner: But I mean where is Rod Coronado now? Is he even vegan anymore?

Josh Harper: He's not.

Jon Hochschartner: I mean not to "diss" him, but you're still here. At this point you're almost like an elder statement of the movement.

Josh Harper: Oh, that's so sad.

Jon Hochschartner: I know. It really is, but it's true. And I think there's strength in the person who, maybe isn't a sprinter, but is there for the long haul. I don't know. I feel like you're selling yourself short.

Josh Harper: There's something to be said for perseverance. I'm going to continue to persevere. And I hope that the legacy that I leave behind will grow between now and the

time that I die. But I also hope that it's greatly eclipsed by the generation that's coming up now and the generation that'll come after them. I think my ultimate dream is that we'll see people with a much greater intelligence than my own (laughs), and a much greater strategic sense that takes things a lot further along the path for animal rights than I did. You know, don't get me wrong. Everyone hates the idea of being forgotten. But if I did end up playing a very minor role because other people overshadowed me, I'd be happy with that.