

COMMENTARY

Abolition a Multi-Tactical Movement Strategy

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With so many people talking about abolition in relation to animal oppression and with this year's North American Conference for Critical Animal Studies theme on the topic, it is important to understand the term and its history. To abolish, do away with, nullify, eradicate, eliminate, demolish, destroy; all simply mean to stop or end, not reform or change. The concept of abolition is most notably used regarding human race-based slavery in Europe and the Americas. Abolition does not just refer to only the Underground Railroad which was an important and dangerous tactic of the U.S. anti-slavery movement that included breaking chains, knocking down doors, emptying cages, and hiding people (often including the use of songs, art, candles in windows, and other symbols to denote places of safety). Even though the Underground Railroad was successful and a fundamental part of the abolition movement, it was not the only tactic utilized. The abolition movement was much more. It was about changing and establishing laws at which William Wilberforce had been successful in accomplishing in England and that William Lloyd Garrison had been successful in accomplishing in the United States.

Those acts of changing legislation, which many animal liberationists today might call reformist and useless, were considered courageous and revolutionary by enslaved people as well as abolitionists at that time. Abolition, then, I argue is based not only outside but also inside the government. For instance, what if the US government abolished slaughterhouses and dairy farms? Would that be reformist? Abolition is not reformist. Many in the anti-slavery abolition movement did not risk as much as some. However, The Underground Railroad and legislators both risked their lives and many found themselves attacked and/or even killed at the hands of racists and white supremacists. Abolition was not just some masked person in the night breaking chains and sending hidden, enslaved people of color on their way to a sanctuary. It was much

more complicated and diverse. Those people that hid slaves were often jailed, beaten up, or lynched side-by-side with those they had been striving to free.

The Animal Liberation Front (ALF) is an underground group which takes illegal actions to free animals and destroy property (for economic sabotage and to protect animals). The ALF has been compared to the Underground Railroad and have also found themselves jailed and imprisoned. To date no one claiming to be an ALF activist has been killed, hung or tortured. The ALF are liberators but not necessarily abolitionists.

Abolitionists, in an historical context, have demanded mass systematic socio-political economic change. ALF members can be abolitionists as well as liberators, but there are many that could argue that members of the ALF are not abolitionists. While many are vegans, some may eat dairy products or wear leather. It sometimes appears that the general public opinion in the animal advocacy movement is that it does not matter if one is vegan as long as animals are liberated. The ALF, which may portend animal rights beliefs, is different than the animal rights movement as it is not dogmatic or hierarchical. Yes there are ground rules, but since there is no “organization,” there is no way to either mandate or enforce said ground rules.

The ALF is a decentralized group made up of a diversity of people with a diversity of missions. While seemingly grounded by many supporters in anarchist theory, the ALF also has supporters who love shopping and capitalism, or have a traditional family with children, and value conservative Christian beliefs. There are also those who support the ALF but fail to support other social justice causes and freedom for all. There are those who support property destruction but not arson, because they say it is hard to control a fire once set. Further, there have been significant debates about whether an ALF member should or should not be vegan. Obviously then, the ALF is comprised of people with diverse commitments and supporters.

As a Quaker, I have been taught by many fellow Quakers that abolition, specifically in the context of prisons today, is a long and difficult journey of hardships, losses, debates, multiple tactics, silence, reflection, transformation, healing, and of course a great deal of action. Prisons were created with the aid of Quakers in the U.S., sadly to

note, which is a modern-day form of slavery if you read the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution. There are few animal rights groups that work actively, not merely theoretically, on prison abolition. Other modern day abolition movements include those fighting against child-slave labor and human trafficking. Slavery, prisons, child-slave labor, human trafficking and nonhuman animal oppression are all based on economic profit motivated by capitalism, and rooted in the values of domination and control, by the elite.

There are five criteria that history gives us for abolition movements: 1) to educate the public about the need for abolition, 2) to support direct action to free those who are imprisoned, 3) to aid in passing legislation that promotes abolition and prohibits slavery/incarceration, 4) to challenge exploitative economic systems and 5) to aid in a broad creative social justice movement.

It is always beneficial when abolitionists for any cause are involved in an array of social justice movements, such as Quakers who have continually participated in movements as diverse as the Suffragette movement to anti-war stances. It cannot be forgotten that William Wiberforce cared a great deal for the protection of animals, and had a home filled with animals, while also striving for the abolition of people who were enslaved. Wiberforce learned through his struggles that it was through challenging trade tariffs that the abolition of slavery was possible. He also understood that abolition needed to be an act that must be implemented by government. It took him twenty-six years of legislative defeats before he saw the passage of the Slave Trade of 1807 that made way for the most important law, The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833.

Similar to abolitionists, anarchists are opposed to all forms of domination and authoritarianism. However, anarchists have gone one step further and noted that property (in this historical context slaves, women and nonhuman animals) is “theft” and that society should not own anything but rather should share (economic anarchists identify this as mutual aid). This is a value that Native Americans believe in as well, including the parallel of resisting State structure.

The theory of a power-driven civilization is to divide humans from nature and to use, control, and dominate nature. It was only when people were driven from nature that that nature could become property – owned and exploited for profit. Therefore, if we want to free animals we must challenge the economic system and provide an alternative (such as anarchist economics), or else someone else will end up taking the dominated place of nonhuman animals as a so-called “natural resource.”

There are those who argue that abolition means nonviolence. And we must remember there were uprisings in the slavery abolition movement such as John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859. The question is, what are you striving to abolish? The exploitation of farm animals? If so, then a vegan diet and the laws that promote it are abolition-based. If one wants to liberate all animals from exploitation, from vivisection to entertainment, then veganism is necessary, but abolition must be a lot broader and more complex than veganism alone.

I agree that veganism is necessary for abolition, as Gary Francione writes, but my argument with his *Six Principles of the Abolitionist Approach to Animal Rights* is that he stresses that abolition is a nonviolent and non-legislative path. However, history shows us that abolition movements have included violence. That of course does not mean he must endorse it or even support it. I wish the animal rights movement was always nonviolent. As a pacifist, I hope everyone does. However, while violence is not necessarily an act that anyone wants to commit, it is part of history and it is something that some believe must be taken in order to survive. Francione’s note that animals should not be viewed as property is anarchist-based and I would not be surprised if he would support anarchism.

I would argue respectfully with Steve Best, a great scholar with whom I co-edited three books (and another on its way), that abolition is not merely based on direct action such as Underground Railroad tactics, which most of his scholarship is about, but is complex movement with legislators, educators, economists, lobbyists, and politicians. It seems that Francione and Best have a lot more in common than they have with many other scholars within other social justice movements. As both scholars and teachers at well-respected universities in the U.S. (one a lawyer and one

a philosopher) who conduct most of their activism through writing, Best and Francione seem to agree on the following points:

1. Intersectional alliance politics based movements are the way to succeed in the abolition of animal oppression
2. Veganism is a fundamental action
3. Activism is essential
4. Education is essential
5. Reform and welfare are insufficient to cause abolition
6. Nonviolent civil disobedience is an important tactic
7. Support of legal economic sabotage in the form of boycotts is useful
8. Animals should not be used period. They should not be exploited, killed, identified as property, used for entertainment, should not be dissected, vivisected, hunted, fished, beaten, worn or eaten.
9. Concepts of abolition and property are fundamental topics in the animal advocacy movement

What they seemingly do not agree on is:

1. *Violence Debate*: Best supports or sees the value in armed struggle and underground illegal direct action. Francione does not support violence and identifies armed struggle and property destruction as violence.
2. *Economic Debate*: Best critiques capitalism as a central focus a great deal, while Francione, critiques capitalism but does not make it a central point of debate. Best values property destruction as a possible tactic of economic sabotage, such as the destroying of computers in a vivisection laboratory. (Note, not all property destruction is economic sabotage, such as the breaking of the lock of a cage is not meant as a form of economic sabotage. Some property destruction is also meant to be symbolic.) I think for Best the debate on property destruction is not symbolism, but is rather based on economic sabotage. It is here that the two issues are interwoven.

So the questions for a healthy, safe and respectful debate (if ever one is established) between the two amazing scholars might be:

1. What is violence, and is it useful for social change?
2. Does the economy in fact play a direct part in oppression?

But, abolition, going back to the definition - to do away with - is a difficult task for a social movement to achieve and one that will take a diversity of strategies and tactics to accomplish. Abolition will not come any time soon. To completely do away with animal exploitation means to do away with exploitative economies, political authoritarianism and social domination. I think that this is the most important point for all animal rights activists to confront.

The work that Best is doing on the notions of total liberation and “radical abolition” is highly valuable. I also think the work Francione is conducting on promoting veganism and abolition is outstanding, but it disappoints activists, including myself, when he engages in destructive debates. To complicate issues even more, Roger Yates, an amazing activist and former ALF Press Officer and ALF political prisoner, very much supports the work of Francione. So it is obviously not an either-or, but a possible “both” as Yates has proven with his own scholarship and personal history when looking at issues, rather than the personalities (which I think much of the debate is now revolving around). It is very common within debates inside and outside of the academy that when disputing parties feel attacked, both sides begin to attack not the idea or concept being discussed (i.e., violence), but rather the person’s character. I do know why two scholars who generally agree on the same goal (animal liberation) destructively fight over how to get there (i.e., the process). I guess one could say that is what scholars do, but I do not think all scholars would agree, especially Paulo Freire.

We cannot aid in dividing this movement or allowing insults and rumors to grow. There is not one way, one tactic, one strategy, one mind, one viewpoint, or one person. It will take all of us, working together, learning from each other, respecting each other, understanding our socio-political and economic positions, our own and other’s languages and cultures. This is alliance politics, something that I have worked hard to

promote in the many conferences, books, articles, workshops, trainings, forums, demonstrations, radio shows, campaigns, organizations and other projects that I have co-organized in and outside of prisons, schools, universities, religious and community centers. In alliance politics, i.e., building friendships, one must understand that one will get into conflicts and learn about others, while especially learning about one's own self. If there is any scholar or activist in the animal rights movement who refuses to read Best or Francione's work because they do not agree with their views, personalities, or their politics, they are missing out on a great deal of valuable knowledge.

As the co-founder of the field of Critical Animal Studies, I believe that any class, article, book, forum or project that promotes animal rights/liberation/advocacy in and outside higher education (i.e., critical animal studies) that does not include Best or Francione in their conversation is leaving a great void in the dialogue. Critical Animal Studies must include many scholars – patrice jones, Richard Kahn, Lisa Kemmerer, Stephen Clark, Stephen Kaufman, Tom Regan, Peter Singer, Kim Stallwood, Mark Rowlands, Roger Yates, , Richard Twine, Richard White, Dan Lyons, Kenneth Shapiro, Julie Andrzejewski, Jodey Castricano, Karen Davis, Leesa Fawcett, Carol Gigliotti, Matthew Clarco, David Nibert, Constance Russell, Annie Potts, Philip Armstrong, Nicola Taylor, Will Tuttle, Michael Greger, Ingrid Newkirk, Joan Dunayer, John Sorenson, John Alessio, Jim Mason, Norm Phelps, Andrew Linzey, Richard Schwartz, Steven Rosen, Cary Wolf, Carl Boggs, Bill Martin, Steve Wise, Marog DeMello, Marti Kheel, Mirha-Soleil Ross, Lauren Corman, Piers Beirnes, Sherryl Vint, Amy Fitzgerald, Helena Pedersen. In addition, there are many others within the Institute for Critical Animal Studies who have published with Lantern Books, Society & Animals Journal, Columbia University's Animal Studies Books Series "Animals," Temple University Press's "Culture and Society," University of Minnesota Press's "Posthumanities," Journal for Critical Animal Studies, Journal of Applied Welfare Science, Human-Animal Studies Book Series, Critical Animal Studies Book Series, Animals & Society Institute, and other animal rights groups and activists around the world. And let's not forget historical figures who promoted animal protection such as John Locke, Jeremy Bentham, Margaret Cavendish, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Henry Salt, Mahatma Gandhi, Arthur Schopenhauer, Henry Spira, George Bernard Shaw, Cleveland Amory, Leo Tolstoy and St. Francis of Assisi.

Many of these people were not vegan, but they had and have something very important to say from which we can learn.

Critical animal studies is a viable educational field, and hopefully in the future will have departments offering a degree that could be awarded at many universities around the world that would encourage studies in theories and philosophies such as eco-feminism, animal culture, speciesism, posthumanism, animal law, ethical science, economics and exploitation, humane education, ecopedagogy, environmental ethics, critical animal sociology, green criminology, critical animal politics, disability and animals, critical animal epistemology and methodology, and race and animals, to name a few.

It is a broad field that strives to be all encompassing of human and nonhuman animals, rather than establishing a false binary such as human-animal studies or animal studies which fail to acknowledge humans under the concept of animals. Critical animal studies will need to take serious the notion of a new relationship between all living creatures and their ecological home, i.e., Earth.

In closing, I argue that we must understand the complexities of social change and that abolition includes not only liberation, passing laws, a vegan diet or challenging capitalism and global corporatization, but using all tactics and liberatory theories in engaging, active, respectful dialogues. For when one is oppressed, all are oppressed . Abolition is about being committed to a real strategic goal of abolition no matter the cause. It demands alliance politics that come from a place of respect that carries out listening projects and healing and transformative activities.