

CONFERENCE REVIEW

International Animal Rights Conference, Luxembourg, May 2011

Reviewed by Jessica Gröling¹

The first *International Animal Rights Conference* (IARC) took place in Luxembourg between May 19 and 22, 2011, bringing together around 180 activists, scholars and hybrids of the two for an exhilarating four days of presentations, workshops, discussions, campaign reports from around the world, stalls and art exhibitions, a film screening of *Bold Native*, plenty of delicious vegan food, and two special animal rights concerts. During his introductory speech, Heiko Weber, one of the conference organizers, divided the conference into eight themes: reformism vs abolitionism, vegan outreach vs direct action, animal liberation and human liberation, cultural aspects, ecological aspects, psychological aspects, philosophical aspects, and repression of animal rights activists.

The **reform vs abolition** debate was represented by a presentation by Catriona Blanke from Animals' Angels and a panel discussion with volunteers representing both sides of the debate. Blanke gave an introduction to her organization, which campaigns worldwide on the issue of live exports. The campaign consists of investigating and reporting on the suffering that animals endure, 'being there' to help alleviate their immediate suffering, developing training programs for police to enable them to respond appropriately to issues that arise during the transportation of live animals, giving advice to decision-makers at various levels of government, and raising public awareness and support for the campaign to enable legislative action. The group's current campaign is petitioning to reduce live export times to a maximum of eight hours, as a first step in the campaign to end live exports altogether. Concerns were raised in the audience that this was a welfarist campaign that risked being co-opted or giving the impression that limiting transport times to eight hours was enough despite the vast suffering it would still entail. If anything, the Animals' Angels campaign may fall into the

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category of what Gary Francione has labeled ‘new welfarism’, in other words conforming to the long-term goals of animal rights but using welfarist or reformist means in the hope of achieving those goals. This debate was continued in a panel discussion that afternoon, which seemed to conclude that there were no clear lines to be drawn between reformist and abolitionist strategies of achieving social change and that the two are not mutually exclusive.

The **vegan outreach vs direct action** theme included several contributions. A joint presentation by Felix Hnat, Jeff Mannes and Christian Vagedes, representing the Vegan Societies of Austria, Luxembourg and Germany, generated productive discussion of the role of vegan outreach campaigns in the fight for animal rights. Vagedes, who later gave a presentation about the abuse of chemicals in animal agriculture, spoke about his organization’s decision to focus not on the animal rights *struggle* but to promote the positive nature of veganism by encouraging people to “bring love to their refrigerator”. A comment was made that veganism is often reduced to a form of diet or lifestyle, distracting from the issue of animal rights and making it easier for the vegan message to be co-opted and corrupted by capitalist interests. It was argued that the product-focused nature of many vegan societies played into a middle-class consumerist fantasy that is not an adequate response to the ever-worsening issue of animal exploitation. Nevertheless, panelists remained convinced that there was a role for non-confrontational, positive campaigning to attract people to veganism and animal rights who might be turned off by more aggressive tactics.

This point was reiterated by both Felix Hnat and Melanie Joy in their workshops on vegan campaigning. Melanie Joy, psychologist, activist, and author of several books on the psychology of meat-eating and strategic action for animals, outlined some of the key obstacles to effective advocacy. Firstly, the meat-eating mentality, which she has labeled carnism, is structured to defend against our message. Secondly, most activists lack formal training in communication and advocacy strategies to circumnavigate carnist defenses. Finally, our own psychological state can have a negative impact on effective advocacy, leading to reactive rather than responsive campaigning. She provided a list of useful tips on how to communicate effectively, how to create a safe environment so that people are more receptive to our message, how to empower the listener to take action, and how to recognize our own needs. The role of advocates is to be compassionate witnesses, to find common ground, build on existing compassion, and speak from personal experience to expose defenses such as dissociation, denial, and myth without explicitly naming them. Things to

avoid are seeing carnists as the enemy rather than as victims of the carnistic mentality, overwhelming listeners with ‘the Truth’, which can lead to paralysis, demanding that people change immediately and expecting facts to sell the ideology. Knowledge or content, she says, can only lay the groundwork, but feeling inspires action.

Chad Weidner, lecturer and researcher in ecocriticism at Roosevelt Academy, Utrecht University, gave a daring presentation on “animal rights activism and the problem of violence”. Weidner spoke about the ALF, Animal Rights Militia and Justice Department and their respective stances on violence, arguing that the use of violence has proven to be strategically counter-productive because it makes the entire movement a target for state repression and alienates moderates. His presentation attracted heavy criticism from members of the audience, many of whom questioned the evidence he had given for violent intent within the movement, leading next to a discussion about the definition of violence. Melanie Joy reiterated a difference between violence as an ethical issue and violence as a strategic issue, claiming that acts of violence, by virtue of their symbolic nature, are only strategically useful when there is already widespread support for a movement. British activist Brendan McNally also interrogated Weidner on his assessment of the use of violence in past human liberation struggles, arguing that inconsistent pacifism amounts to a speciesist double standard.

The pertinent question of how to define violence was also picked up in a presentation and Q&A session with Camille Hankins, a long-term activist and member of the North American Animal Liberation Press Office, who later also gave a very informative presentation about the use of direct action, and Steve Best, professor, author, and supporter of the ALF and direct action tactics. Best argued that pacifists within the movement exhibit Stockholm Syndrome, having adopted the definition of violence used by the corporate–state complex. At the same time, he argues that being pro-liberation is not the same as being pro-violence, in the same way that being pro-choice is not the same as being pro-abortion. The crucial thing for him is to define and assess violence within a context, rather than excluding it *a priori* from the list of tactical options. Both Hankins and Best provided evidence for the effectiveness of direct action, dispelling the myth that animal liberation is pointless because liberated animals are soon replaced. They agreed that social change comes about through persuasion and coercion and that coercive tactics are often the only option in the face of extreme violence from an oppressive force. Best challenged the idea that veganism is a form of activism, but argued

that there is no outright opposition between vegan outreach and direct action. Rather, we ought to opt for a plurality of tactics and need to be driven by a lucid realization of the vast challenges the movement faces, not least of which is the challenge to do *real* vegan outreach, by which he means speaking to communities that are currently not being reached and avoiding the promotion of white middle-class lifestylism. Best concluded by saying:

The big picture is not this: it's not violence versus non-violence, it's not pacifism versus militant direct action, it's not welfare versus rights, it's not the above-ground versus the underground, it's not liberation versus vegan outreach. It's the whole structural global system of capitalism and do we reform it or do we revolutionize it? The question we must not lose sight of is how do we create a global revolution against capitalism? [...] We live in a system that is nihilistic. [...] The world will be vegan but it won't be because of us.

The need for a holistic appreciation of the crises we face and the intersectionality of different forms of oppression and liberation was also raised in contributions under the **animal liberation and human liberation** heading. Historian and sociologist Renate Brucker traced the roots of the animal rights movement back to ancient times and gave an interesting insight into the more recent links between animal rights and the peace movement and women's movements, naming notable proponents of both animal and human rights. One of the highlights of the conference was a successful videolinked presentation by Carol Adams, ecofeminist theorist and author, who gave a talk about the sexual politics of meat. Adams explained the concept of the absent referent and how it prevents us from seeing ourselves as having any kind of relationship with animals. She talked about how the Western phenomenon of equating manliness with eating meat exerts enormous pressure on men to prove their virility by conforming to the culinary status quo. Women on the other hand are frequently depicted as meat, at the same time as food animals are often depicted as though sexual gratification could be gained from eating them. Women and animals suffer from interlocking oppressions, where the exploitation and objectification of one frequently compounds the oppression of the other. Ecofeminism appreciates that one cannot understand or address the oppression of women without understanding how it relates to the exploitation of animals and the environment, and vice versa. By objectifying women's bodies in the service of animal rights, Adams argues that groups such as PETA reinforce oppressive attitudes towards women by appealing to the human male subjectivity: the Derridean notion of carnophallogocentrism. Many liberal feminists equally reinforce the human–animal binary by explicitly distancing themselves from nature and arguing for their similarities with men.

The argument that different groups are oppressed by being associated with other subjugated groups was also explored by Jessica Gröling, PhD student at the University of Exeter, in her presentation about the commonalities and tensions between anarchists and animal advocates. She made the case for the intersectionality of struggles for human, earth and animal liberation, and suggested that an anarchist critique of capitalism and the state is essential for an appreciation of the causes of most forms of animal exploitation. Dividing her analysis of classical and contemporary anarchist theory into ontological and epistemological forms of anarchism, Gröling examined how thinkers from Kropotkin to Bookchin and contemporary anarchist activists respond or would respond to the animal question, concluding that some anarchist theory is limited by its humanist tendencies and is often dismissed for not offering concrete solutions to the problem of animal exploitation. Gröling concluded by exploring the common anarchist criticism of contemporary veganism as a flawed lifestyle, consumerist attempt to create social change and suggested ways in which ethical veganism could be transformed into a form of prefigurative politics.

In two rousing talks about animal liberation and moral progress and the revolutionary implications of animal standpoint theory, Steve Best expanded on the critique of anarchist and Marxist humanism, outlining how the Left has not adapted to the implications of recent findings in cognitive ethology that show that animals can no longer be reduced to brute beasts, and arguing that the struggle for total liberation is a struggle against hierarchy and dominator cultures, not just capitalism and the state. His animal standpoint theory builds on the leftist tradition of writing history 'from below'. In the same way that feminist analyses reveal the logic of patriarchy, and postcolonial theory or critical race theory can illuminate colonialism and the pathology of racism, animal standpoint theory interprets history from the perspective of human–non-human interactions and shows how human exploitation of other animals has had extensive social and ecological consequences. Only by drawing on multiple perspectives are we able to understand history and the origins of our present predicament. The first hierarchy that we developed, Best reminds us, was human over non-human. Today, progress is still defined according to the extent to which we have imposed our control on other species and replaced nature with culture. Best concluded that rather than discarding the concept of progress altogether, as postmodernists might suggest, we ought to reconstruct it along different lines. This concept of progress could not be based on a zero-sum game, as it currently is, and ought to consist of a broadening of the moral community and the universalization of rights.

The three presentations that formed the **cultural aspects** theme all focused on animal rights in the African context. Kai Horsthemke, associate professor of philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, spoke about the conflict between animal rights and cultural tradition. The pervasive view that African peoples see nature differently and speak to or about nature differently seems to suggest that there is no anthropocentrism within traditional African cultures. Horsthemke however argues that the traditional belief that animals embody the souls of ancestors and that humans have to protect animals in order to safeguard their own surroundings and not degrade their environment contains anthropocentric undertones. Indeed, in quasi-Kantian fashion, the concepts of *ubuntu* (“I am because we are”) and *ukama* suggest that we have only indirect duties to animals in the sense that we must protect them only to ultimately protect ourselves. Furthermore, the holistic idea that humans must aim for peaceful coexistence with animals, plants, and minerals amounts to a quasi-Christian dominionist view of human nature and doesn’t provide concrete suggestions for *how* we might peacefully coexist. Horsthemke questioned whether the bastion of tradition excuses practices such as the Zulu *Ukweshwama* bull-killing ritual, which as Sarah Rutherford Smith explained in her presentation, was brought before the courts but rejected on grounds of “freedom of worship and religion”. Rutherford Smith, lecturer in legal philosophy at the University of South Africa and South African representative of the International Fund for Africa, wondered whether perhaps promoting veganism as a form of culture rather than a form of protest would prove to be an advantage in such cases.

Anteneh Roba, president and co-founder of the International Fund for Africa, concluded this section by giving a talk about factory farming, which coupled with the growing trend in land-leasing, whereby wealthy nations lease land abroad to grow food solely for their own citizens, is causing increased volatility in the food supply. The problem of hunger in Africa is often misunderstood to be technological in nature, when the real causes are dysfunctional trade agreements, international commodity speculation, inadequate food distribution systems, and gross inequality. Factory farming contributes to already existing problems by causing land degradation, food sovereignty issues, loss of biodiversity, and threats to small farms. Dr. Roba argued that food which could feed humans should not be diverted to feeding livestock. He has been campaigning for the adoption of plant-based diets across Africa and has worked with vegetarian and vegan organizations in Ghana, Togo, and Ethiopia.

Lisa Kemmerer, associate professor in philosophy and religion at Montana State University Billings, provided the only contribution under the **ecological aspects** heading. Her talk focused on the significant harmful effects that consuming animal products has on every element of our environment, drawing particular attention to the contribution the livestock industry has made to our most significant environmental problems.

In a series of riveting presentations, Melanie Joy and Stijn Bruers provided an insight into the **psychology** of meat-eating. Joy challenged the audience to question why it is that appealing to logic and reasonable argument concerning the inconsistency of eating some animals and keeping others as pets rarely changes a meat-eater's perception of his or her behavior. She suggested that the cognitive moral disconnect is only the result of a deeper problem rooted in an invisible belief system, which she calls carnism. Carnism is an institutionalized oppressive ideology that enables speciesism and creates a wall of defenses, such as the three Ns of justification (natural, normal, necessary) to maintain perception. By viewing the problem we face as the result of a deeply entrenched belief system rather than as a matter of personal ethics, and by naming that belief system and bringing it into the open, Melanie Joy has suggested a way to overcome one of the obstacles to effective advocacy and begin to break down carnistic defenses. Joy's final conference contribution was a well-attended group discussion about how we relate to meat-eaters in our lives. This discussion provided a space to air frustrations and share personal experiences, while also reinforcing Joy's earlier points about the predictable nature of carnistic defenses. Finally, activist and writer Stijn Bruers presented a series of recent scientific findings in support of the claim that a large group of meat-eaters feel uncomfortable about their meat consumption but suppress and deny their feelings of guilt and continue to consume meat due to social pressure or lack of knowledge. He also briefly touched upon research that suggests that a large group of people eat meat for reasons related to social status rather than taste.

Bruers' other contribution was a presentation about the **philosophy** of animal rights, in which he presented what he believes to be the most consistent approach to animal ethics. Beginning with common moral intuitions about the (im)permissibility of sacrificing one person to save the lives of a few people, he generated three moral principles. These principles of equality represent elements of deontological, consequentialist, and feminist care ethics, and include basic rights, tolerated choice equality, and prioritarian justice, none of which, he claims, are in contradiction with emotional inequality. Next, he contended that the characteristics we use

to exclude non-human animals from our moral community are not morally relevant, nor are there any absolute distinctions between all humans and all non-human animals. The principle of consistency therefore demands that one of our original principles be modified. Bruers argued that we have the choice between permitting discrimination, throwing out the basic rights of humans, or forbidding the consumption of non-human animals, the former two of which he believed to be based on stronger moral intuitions. His presentation raised many interesting questions from the audience, some of whom challenged his original assumptions about common moral intuitions. Bruers now intends to investigate whether this discrepancy between average responses to moral dilemmas and responses from those present during his talk suggests an above-average proportion of deontologists within the animal rights movement, or may even be the result of differences in the brains of vegans, vegetarians, and meat-eaters.

Emil Franzinelli, student of philosophy at Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt and editor of the German animal rights magazine *Tierbefreiung* gave two provocative and slightly satirical presentations exploring rational anthropocentric reasons for being vegan and supporting animal rights, arguing that even those who hate animals ought to go vegan, if for no other reason than enlightened self-interest. He argued for an animal ethics that respects individuality and doesn't rely on moral intuition, common sense, religious myths, and traditions, or naturalism, although he acknowledged that an ethics not based on metaphysical assumptions and moral principles risks remaining anthropocentric, unless in quasi-Kantian fashion it can be demonstrated that the abuse and exploitation of animals may lead to violence against other humans.

The final theme, **repression**, was repeatedly touched upon throughout the conference. However, Felix Hnat also provided an update of the Austrian trial, and Camille Hankins and Brendan McNally gave a brief history of the repression of animal rights activists in the UK and the USA, drawing on the experience of hunt saboteurs and SHAC activists as they were faced with new laws concerning aggravated trespass and conspiracy. Hankins also gave a talk about the history of the SHAC campaign, its successes, and the trial of the SHAC 7 and emphasized the importance of prisoner support. Finally, Kai Horsthemke gave a presentation with the title "Animal liberation: terrorism or civil disobedience?", which brought together many of the discussions that had been started about the ethical and strategic use of violent and illegal means to bring about social change.

On top of the busy presentation schedule, conference participants enjoyed two evenings of delicious vegan food at Café ROCAS followed by performances by Gina Simmons & The Nobodies, SoKo and Tes. During the conference a solidarity arts raffle also raised over €1000 in support of Chris Moser, one of the victims of the Austrian trial against thirteen activists. The conference was an overwhelming success and received excellent feedback, due in no small part to the efforts and dedication of the organizers at Save Animals Asbl and the groups that sponsored the event.