

Book Review: *Capers in the Churchyard: Animal Advocacy in the Age of Terror*, Hall, Lee (Nectar Bat Press 2006)

Sarat Colling¹

Lee Hall's *Capers in the Churchyard: Animal Advocacy in an Age of Terror*, is a manifesto written and published by Friends of Animals, an international group that claims to hold an abolitionist position in the animal rights movement's debates of "violence" versus nonviolence and welfare versus abolition. By critiquing the actions and philosophy of a number of activists, academics and organizations in the movement, *Capers in the Churchyard* aims to take an ethical stand for animal rights advocacy today.

The book investigates the emergence and patterns of domination and hierarchy throughout history and attempts to show that these characteristics are implicit in the welfare and "militant" factions (the latter which I argue in this paper, are rather extremists) of the animal rights movement. Hall feels that these two extremes are paradoxically similar with "militants" condoning the same "violence" found in the exploitation that welfarists facilitate, and like the welfarists, partaking in animal husbandry when they try to rescue animals, rather than not interfering.

The book's strongest feature is Hall's uncompromising position that animals have the right to not be interfered with; as she writes, all creatures have intrinsic value and should live free in their natural habitat. As she explains, the alternative of free-range farming is not an option because there would still be a dire environmental impact from the billions of animals that North Americans breed and consume for food, including the fact that wilderness and habitat would need to be pushed away to make room for the animals outside factory farms. And, this alternative would still rely on commoditizing the animals. Her position is that only a movement whose goal is the elimination of animal use will bring real change.

Hall focuses on a critique of "militant" advocacy and equates it with hierarchy, violence and utilitarianism. In activism "there should be no confusion between its end and means; it doesn't throw away its moral standards in the short term and claim that doing so will result in some later moral payoff" (19). She is adamant in her belief that "militant" activism turns people away from the cause.

One example that *Capers in the Churchyard* uses to illustrate this is when, after Bruce Friedrich of PETA told a conference audience that "blowing stuff up and smashing windows" is a "great way to bring about animal liberation," *The Austin Review* (a conservative journal) called for people to remove support from all animal advocacy groups if they had affiliations with radicals. Hall believes that a groundbreaking paradigm shift will come from nonviolent action: "When violence and destruction has, for century after century, been the tedious norm, non-violence is revolutionary" (122). Because food is central to society she explains that the nonviolent action needed must be focused on advocating a vegan diet. And since only 1% of the population is vegan "it's

¹ To contact Sarat Colling e-mail her at: sarat_colling@yahoo.com

premature to say that economic pressure has failed, it has just begun” (126). Thus, reaching Hall’s envisioned just society is based on the premise that our culture will, over time, make a voluntary transition to veganism.

I identified four main critiques of *Capers in the Churchyard*:

- (1) a lack of analysis on the effect of direct action
- (2) an overly simplified anti-violence stance
- (3) misrepresentation of activists who take direct actions
- (4) philosophical contradictions in Hall’s envisioned non-hierarchical society

A Lack of Analysis On The Effect of Direct Action

Hall argues that “militancy” will scare the public, whose support is essential, away from animal rights. As people generally learn about animal rights through the media, this position assumes that “militant” groups like the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and Stop Huntington Animal Cruelty (SHAC) create bad press.

The ALF formed as an underground group in the 1970’s taking direct actions to help animals. Usually, these actions involved liberating animals or obtaining important research documents from laboratories. A science writer named Deborah Blum stated that “those raids changed the way science is done” (Francione 24). One influential case was a break-in at the University of Pennsylvania in 1984 where the ALF removed approximately 45 hours from the Gennarelli lab of the researcher’s own videotapes capturing horrific experiments inflicted on brain-damaged baboons who were conscious and unanesthetized, and sometimes ridiculed by the researchers and their “guests.”

Much of the animal cruelty footage obtained by groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has been recorded by undercover ALF activists and delivered to the organization in anonymous mailings. This was the case in the University of Pennsylvania raid where copies of the tapes were distributed to a number of recipients. PETA created a video that was shown throughout North America and Europe.

The Pennsylvania lab shut down in 1985 and although it reopened in 1993, clearly the ALF had done something useful in releasing the tapes. They made millions more people aware of the horrors that existed behind the laboratories closed doors, and as Gary Francione wrote, the case “served to distinguish the emerging animal rights movement from its welfarist predecessor” (24).

In an “unspoken but pragmatic utilization of each others’ efforts to maximize their own impact” (Jonas 268), the ALF has a mutually beneficial relationship with Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC). SHAC is an international campaign that began in 1999 with the goal of shutting down Huntington Life Sciences (HLS): Europe’s largest contract animal-testing laboratory in which hundreds of animals are killed every day. Using controversial tactics of intimidations such as email and phone blockades and home demonstrations, SHAC warned that anyone associated with HLS was fair game.

Hall does not have anything good to say about SHAC. She accuses them of misleading the public by focusing on the “worst cases.” She writes: “...it is naïve to think of Huntington as a special case” (39) and that the SHAC campaign’s graphic material and wild tactics distract from meaningful discourse. And, “if the actions of the militants appear to work on some level, it’s neither the level of changing minds nor laws. Indeed, on both counts, they’ve triggered a fierce backlash” (Hall 121).

Unfortunately, “backlash” or retaliation from those who profit from exploiting others is an inevitable component of social revolution. In the case of SHAC, the strategy of focusing on one vivisection laboratory has proven itself to be effective. In September of 2005 the New York Stock Exchange delayed the company’s listing just an hour before it had been scheduled to take effect; the company’s losses as a result of the campaign were unprecedented. SHAC has mobilized activists on a global scale and inspired nonviolent actions.

In Chapter Ten, “Draconian Activism,” Hall goes so far as to compare the rescue actions of animal rights activists to Hitler’s vision of rescuing Germany. She writes: “the view that rescue justifies all forms of harm proved itself a bankrupt philosophy then, and so it is today” (125). This is a truly unfortunate comparison since the former (animal activists) act to defend sentient beings from unthinkable cruelty while the latter (Hitler) inflicted it. If anyone, activists should be compared to the brave resisters who fought against the German occupation and the Nazis.

Further, Hall seems to believe that rescuing animals is done as a personal impulse, having no impact on, and failing to challenge the system of animal exploitation (42). However, taking into account the amount of planning needed to successfully carry out rescues, and the resulting education from these, this is far from the truth.

Clearly the media resulting from direct action plays an important role in raising awareness about animal exploitation. In the case of Friedrich’s remark that “blowing stuff up and smashing windows” is a “great way to bring about animal liberation,” this provided the public with some powerful arguments. As Friedrich wrote:

I’ve been interviewed repeatedly regarding my July 2001 statements. In every instance, I was able to describe the awful abuse of animals involved in the farmed animal and vivisection industries...I was able to paint a vivid picture, pointing out that if these are human beings and laboratories, slaughterhouses, or factory farms, everyone would support burning down the implements of their torture. In fact, if these were dogs and cats, most of the general public would be supportive of such actions. These arguments resonate with people (Friedrich 258).

“If rescue from the cage, while benign, falls short of the true challenge to the system”

asks Hall, “then how much more likely is it that insults and threats and violence will fail entirely?”

The first premise is false; the ALF does challenge the system, not only in risking their freedom to help animals but also by educating the public. And the SHAC campaign has proven highly successful showing that tactics that publicize and shame people about the violent acts they commit on a daily basis is enough for investors to de-invest, and for HLS to land on the New York Stock Exchange pink sheets. But what about the use of “violence” in the movement?

Overly Simplified Anti-Violence Position

Hall not only states that “militancy” will scare the general public away from animal rights, but that it perpetuates a cycle of violence. In an overly simplified dichotomy of violence versus pacifism, she claims that violence can only beget violence and seems to assume that “militancy” is always violent. While I would agree that militancy, which stems from the word military, fosters violence (for the only institutions with militaries are governments), being extreme as Martin L. King Jr. was, is not. King stated, “So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists will we be? Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?”

In these extremely violent times toward nonhuman animals we do need to be extreme, but extreme with love and nonviolence. The ALF is just that extremist, opposed to violence against any living being. Instead of waiting while our fellow living beings are tortured in front of our faces, the ALF risk their freedom to stand in the way of torture and liberate those who are harmed. They use nonviolent direct action to stop the true violence of treating living beings as mere property. No one has ever been harmed by the ALF, and further, their guidelines are against it.

The book offers no clear attempt to define violence, which would have been useful. Violence is the harming of one’s life which makes it holistically, emotionally, and physically worse. If, upon hearing a human child in the next apartment being beaten to death, one breaks down the door and rescues the child, this is not violence. The question is whether animal rights activists could justify not running into the apartment to save a nonhuman animal as they would for a human child. It would be speciest to say that the “violence” of property destruction is justifiable to defend human life but not nonhuman animal life. From an anti-speciest viewpoint, as Hall claims to hold, if one would save the child then similarly one would rescue any animal in distress, and this should hold equal whether they are in an apartment, factory farm or vivisection laboratory. Therefore, the ALF’s rescue actions which involve property destruction, from a non-speciest standpoint are always justified.

Those who take the position that nonviolent property destruction is more than justifiable, such as philosopher Steve Best (who Hall critiques throughout the book for promoting militancy), extend the notion of liberation to freedom from being property, enslaved, and

imprisoned. Comparing the ALF to the Jewish Resistance and the Underground Railroad, Best writes:

On the grounds that animals have rights and these rights trump property rights, I argue that the ALF are not the terrorists that are demonized by animal exploitation industries, the state, and mass media, but rather counter-terrorists and the newest form of freedom fighters. Like the Nazi resistance movement, they destroy equipment used to torture and kill; like the Underground Railroad, they rescue slaves and transport them to freedom. Like any current human rights struggle, they seek peace and justice.

If Hall is opposed to property destruction proclaiming it as violence, one must assume that Hall is opposed to the tactics that have been key in advancing so many social justice movements. This nonviolent direct action cannot be argued as violent, but ethical and just.

Further, Hall writes that society has always been violent and it is nonviolence that is revolutionary. Yet, whether it be the massive peace protests of the 60's during the Vietnam War, Gandhi's quest for independence in India, or the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., liberation movements have always had strong peaceful factions that are widely accepted. "Violence" in self defense, on the other hand, has been much less accepted by the mainstream. Going beyond the ALF's nonviolent property destruction to armed struggle, which to date only a few have and do advocate, Malcolm X explains beautifully about the difference between violence and armed struggle: "It doesn't mean that I advocate violence, but at the same time, I am not against using violence in self-defense. I don't call it violence when it's self-defense, I call it intelligence."

Misrepresentation Of Activists Who Take Direct Actions

Hall claims that those drawn to "militant" activism are looking for "community or catharsis" (28) and generalizes that the followers of Best are "mostly young and untutored in political history (92)" using the plight of animals to forge identities. In Chapter Six: "The Activist as Superhero" she observes that young activists find a cultural niche in a militant scene. In referring to them as listening to "metal" (Hall 64) in order to escape the banalities of home life, it must be assumed she means punk rock, hardcore, emo, and other types of music that makes people jump around and is loud as well.

Today vegetarianism and veganism are staples in modern punk and hardcore in a number of circles; many focus on the importance of food production, often promoting boycotts through DIY fanzines. For punks, "nowhere is the philosophy of preserving and improving the environment more evident than in discourse on food and diet" (O'Hara 131/132). As the Scottish band Oi Polloi said: "Punk is about freedom for people and animals too. Punk is against discrimination in the forms of sexism and racism and also speciesism. 'Man' has no right to abuse and inflict pain and misery on other living

creatures who have as much right to freedom as we (134).”

Sure, there will be a few who use animal rights as an excuse for anti-social behaviour, but these are far outweighed by the responsible and loving extremists. No activist really wants to use tactics that risk their being indicted under laws such as the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA) passed in 2006 that targets underground and aboveground animal rights advocates. In a book about animal rights in the “Age of Terror” it was surprising to see no mention of this act. Unfortunately, when the ALF interferes with profits of corporations—corporations that in fact are also harming the Earth and humans- they, like many peacemakers of the past, are deemed terrorists.

Hall asks “[who] could rely on them [the extremists] to act with the respect and integrity necessary to lead the expansion of humanities moral community” (29)? While I do not think leading the expansion of humanity’s moral community should rest solely on one faction’s shoulders, there is no reason to believe that any other faction would be more effective than the extremists.

Philosophical Contradictions In Hall’s Envisioned Non-hierarchical Society

Hall claims to hold an anti-hierarchical and anti-domination position and here there is inconsistency in the vegan utopia. Because unless Hall could remove the police and lawmakers, it can be assumed that the society she envisions includes enforcement of peace by state authority which is yet another form of domination.

Many extreme animal rights activists are anarchists who, while holding various visions of an ideal society, all hold that the State, which is rooted in vertical hierarchical structures of authority, must be abolished. As an example of how society could look, Hall writes that “within the co-operative movement many residences and businesses employ non-hierarchical models, and even successfully apply them to complex financial decisions.” However, on a large scale the monetary and business model still allows for the exploitation that has been implicit since the state’s conception.

In conclusion, *Capers in the Churchyard* attempts to take a moral stance against “violence” in the animal rights movement, claiming that domination and hierarchy are implicit in the welfare and “militant” factions. But those whom the book argues are “violent” are, rather, loving extremists.

Property destruction in order to liberate animals from torture and from being killed is justifiable, desirable and necessary. Contrary to creating violence, it prevents it. The nonviolence stance that Hall presents is overly simplistic and does not address the distinction between extremists liberating animals and the systematically permitted violence of the state. Further, unless Hall follows anarchist principles and does not support authority to enforce peace, her anti-hierarchical position is flawed. Pacifism without anarchism is contradictory.

Capers in the Churchyard advocates veganism as the path to transform society, yet offers

no proof that a vegan utopia will come solely by boycotting animal products. The remaining 99% of the population will not voluntarily transition to a vegan diet if only asked nicely. Nor will the multi-billion dollar corporations torturing and killing nonhumans for profit simply walk away from their business. And while I agree with Hall's sentiment that more focus on veganism is essential—she provides a sound critique of free-range farming and some welfarism can do more harm than good—no respectable abolitionist will oppose all welfare reforms. If opportunities for incremental steps arise, as long as they do not compromise the statutes of nonhuman animals as rights holders, they must be implemented.

Finally, the book offers an unfair portrayal of the intelligent and dedicated activists who risk their freedom to help others. Social justice history has shown extreme nonviolent direct action leads to liberation. For those interested in critiques for and against the ALF, and the history and current state of extremists in the movement, I recommend the anthology *Terrorists or Freedom Fighters? Reflection on the Liberation of Animals* which looks at extreme animal rights activism from a diversity of perspectives.

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