

Ethics

Marketing Morality: The Future of the Extremist Animal Rights Movement in America

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The animal rights movement, initially founded by a few ethicists writing about the animal interest in avoiding suffering, blossomed into what it is today in the past twenty years. Now, groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) are facing a dilemma common to all rising grass-roots organizations: how is it possible to achieve widespread public recognition when the very extremism that attracts attention also seems to alienate a broader support base? This paper attempts to illuminate this paradox through a sociological, ethical, and rhetorical examination. Malcolm Gladwell's "The Tipping Point," and Peter Singer's "Animal Liberation" are two of the sources that help to provide answers to the pervasive question of the marketing of ideas.

Today, the refrigerated section of Albertson's is stocked with Morning Star vegetarian sausage links, Tofurkey deli slices, and garden burgers of every sort. In an organic-obsessed culture, vegetarianism is no longer eccentric. Despite the unprecedented prevalence of non-meat-eaters, animal welfare supporters maintain an overzealous, foolish or even violent reputation. Organizations that promote the humane treatment of farm animals have valid and compelling causes. However, their methods are often injudicious. Fifteen years ago, 100 million cows, pigs, and sheep were slaughtered in the U.S., along with 5 billion chickens, and these figures are growing rapidly (Singer, *Animal Liberation* 95). The animals used to produce our meat and dairy products often endure unnecessary suffering as a result of an increasingly mechanized farming industry. Over the past thirty years, the animal rights movement has grown from a few thoughtful ethicists responding to livestock conditions into a large-scale campaign with a reputation for extremism. This evolution

has encouraged animal welfare supporters, despite the critical press received by many of the more radical demonstrations. However, now that the animal rights campaign has broader recognition, it has reached a critical point in its rhetorical development: it is time to lay down the blood-stained chicken costumes and inflammatory signs and begin to approach the public with a rational, palatable appeal for reform.

In discussing the issues surrounding radical demonstrations for the sake of animals, it is necessary not only to examine specific cases, but also to consider the broader implications that apply to all budding social movements. The animal welfare movement can be investigated from three different perspectives: philosophically, the rhetorically, and sociologically. The first of these relates to the messages of related organizations, the second to their chosen methods of presentation, and the third to the effects of these methods. In the examination these three aspects, lies an important lesson for all radical grass-roots organizations seeking to garner public support. In the case of animal wel-

fare, the organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) led the movement throughout its recent developments and is representative of the progress of animal welfare as a whole. Perhaps more can be learned from PETA's rhetorical failures than from its rhetorical successes, so it is appropriate to first investigate a recent PETA campaign that brought only shouts of scorn from the public.

In August of 2005, PETA demonstrators gathered in New Haven, Connecticut for their new campaign entitled "Are Animals the New Slaves?" This outdoor demonstration was part of a 10-week, 42-city tour that PETA had planned in order to improve animal welfare awareness (PETA's Aug. 2005 Demonstrations). Protesters crowded New Haven street corners waving graphic banners at passersby. The displays depicted human suffering juxtaposed with animal suffering – two black lynch victims hanging above a white crowd next to rows of butchered animals; a concentration camp inmate with a tattoo on his chest pictured alongside a monkey in an animal testing lab with a similar tattoo; children

laboring in filthy factories next to photos of cattle and sheep being tortured, sold, and killed (Christie 1). The demonstration was incredibly controversial. “You can’t compare me to a freaking cow,” shouted one man as he passed the protesters. Another observer remarked, “I think he’s right. To compare people to animals is an unfairness [sic] to people.” The president of the local chapter of the NAACP arrived on the scene and demanded that the banners be taken down (PETA’s Aug. 2005 Demonstrations). PETA and other animal welfare groups have used the comparison between humans and animals extensively in an attempt to convince the public that animal suffering is a worthwhile consideration. In 2004, PETA tried to air an ad during the Super bowl that was rejected for its violent content. The ad showed a lady in a fur coat being clubbed to death by a thief who then rips off her coat and runs away with it. The caption read: “What if you were killed for your coat?” (Animal Rights Television). This tactic of controversial comparison has repeatedly been met with scorn and contempt. People often see it as a trivialization of human suffering (Nibert 239). PETA justifies its protests with similar reasoning to that of author Barbara Noske, who comments, “Time and time again new versions of Darwinism have cropped up providing new genetic justifications for class oppression and sexual and racial discrimination, all of which have been labeled ‘natural.’ [. . .] In order to safeguard humans from another onslaught of biological determinism, social scientists tend to be quite defensive about the non-animalness [sic] of humans” (Nibert 241). Despite possible rationalizations for such offensive demonstrations, these protests are clearly designed to win support, yet only succeed in alienating a significant portion of the community. In the early years of a protest movement, these kinds of demonstrations can be beneficial to the growth of obscure organizations – extreme actions attract attention and media recognition. However, PETA is now the most well known organization of its kind, and these controversial displays are only detrimental to its reputation. These protests reveal PETA’s

failure to recognize an idea central to the development of any successful movement: activists must remember that their goal is to appeal to the very same group they criticize for inactivity. Creating a saleable campaign requires tact, and most importantly the ability to make ideas agreeable to the broader public through a sophisticated marketing strategy.

The animal welfare movement began to materialize in the mid-seventies and early eighties, almost immediately making use of radicalism to foster recognition of its cause. This movement, as distinguished from the collection of pet protection agencies such as the Humane Society, focuses on the humane treatment of the animals that we use for food, clothing, scientific testing, and entertainment (Garner 39). Prior to the development of the first animal welfare organizations, the meat industry had grown steadily throughout the twentieth century, and its relatively recent automation caused a new degree of livestock suffering. The authors and activists who came together to protest the distress of animals in the early stages of the movement had solid grounds for their argument: there was (and still is) a tremendous amount of unnecessary suffering inflicted upon the animals we use and consume (Garner 7).

As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, Upton Sinclair, in his revolutionary novel, *The Jungle*, exposed the downsides of the newly industrialized meat industry. He writes:

In the slaughter-houses of Europe, where there are laws, they fit over the head of the animal a leather cap having a nail in it; then, provided the knocker has only skill enough to hit the nail with a big mallet, he cannot fail to kill the animal. But they never stopped for things like that in the yards - the knocker would always lean over the pens and slap away at the creatures with a pointed hammer, and if they did not kill on the first blow, they had only to try again [. . .] Now and then you might see one banging away for a full minute, with the steer plunging and bellowing in agony and terror. (Sinclair 104)

Even now, a hundred years later, conditions have not improved much for

animals slaughtered in the United States. The pork industry permits perhaps the most appalling practices within the meat packing industry. To increase production speeds, three or more pigs are often put into a ‘knocking box’ meant for a single animal (Eisnitz 70). Because of this, one of the three is generally not killed immediately, and remains conscious while it is hoisted on to the hanging conveyor by one leg. The pigs’ throats are slit while on the conveyor, but the workers are often unable to cut in the right place, due to their efforts to avoid the animals’ thrashing legs (Eisnitz 70). Some of the pigs are even alive when they reach the ‘scalding tank,’ a large basin of boiling water designed to remove hair from the carcasses. A slaughterhouse worker at the packing business John Morrell and Company commented, “There’s a rotating arm that pushes them under, no chance for them to get out. I’m not sure if they burn to death before they drown, but it takes them a couple of minutes to stop thrashing. You think management cares about the pain of being drowned or boiled to death?” (Eisnitz 84).

Over the last hundred years, the large meat-packing businesses have increasingly sacrificed humane treatment for maximum production speeds and maximum profit – a natural result of the economic forces of supply and demand. Furthermore, meat consumption has never been higher in the U.S. The average American eats 195 pounds of red meat, poultry, or fish each year, as reported by the government, which is 57 pounds more than in the 1950s (Quaid). As the U.S. demands more meat, the companies will do all they can to supply it.

Many of those involved in the livestock farming business consider the rise of the poultry industry one of the greatest agricultural success stories in U.S. history (Animal Liberation 98). Today, due to an increasing demand for chicken, more chickens are slaughtered per day than were killed in the entire year of 1930 (Eisnitz appendix). In 1997, first-hand reporter Gail Eisnitz commented:

With huge corporate packing plants putting thousands of smaller operations out

of business, slaughter line speeds have soared. A hog “sticker” may cut the throats of as many as 1,100 hogs an hour -- or nearly one hog every three seconds. With line speeds this fast, workers often resort to brutality to keep the production line running to keep from losing their jobs. (Eisnitz appendix)

As the country moves toward large-scale standardized businesses, fast food franchises flourish as well. This has a tremendous effect upon the meat industry as a whole and serious consequences for the animals involved (Schlosser 5). The effect of consumer demand on this industry is vital, for it drives the changes in the slaughtering process. This power for the public to affect change will be essential in considering the tactics of animal welfare agencies and protest activists.

As a relatively new movement, animal welfare has made remarkable progress. ‘Vegetarian by Choice,’ is no longer an eccentricity. Animal rights articles are repeatedly published in national magazines, and PETA’s name has become infamous. Despite its increasing recognition, however, animal welfare agencies and supporters have not done much to adapt their programs to the evolving public response. Many of the current ideas proselytized by animal welfare supporters have stemmed from ethicist Peter Singer’s canonical text, *Animal Liberation*, published for the first time in 1975. The book discusses the country’s moral and ethical responsibilities toward animals. Singer argues that the United States’ circle of moral consideration has expanded to admit first blacks, then women, then homosexuals. In each case, a group considered to be undeserving of civil rights was allowed into the realm of acceptance after great struggle. Singer contends that there will come a time when United States citizens will look upon this age of animal cruelty in the same way slavery is looked upon today (Singer, *Animal Liberation* 4). This argument is remarkably similar to the ones made in the recent PETA demonstration “Are Animals the New Slaves?” Perhaps it would be worthwhile to consider the consequences of this idea in the two separate contexts. The publication of Singer’s book launched

a succession of personal accounts by employees of slaughterhouses, and seemed to provide the substrate for the formation of several animal rights groups across the country. Used thirty years later in New Haven, on the other hand, this argument only provokes indignation and anger. There is an essential difference between these times, however. PETA employed this argument at a much later stage in the development of the movement — after it had won the recognition the initial argument sought to attract. To wage such campaigns successfully, organizations must be aware of context: what once worked to win over the first wave of supporters may not work to attract the next few. The presentation — in effect the marketing — of such arguments significantly affects the level of public receptiveness. Ironically, when Alex Pacheco, the founder of PETA, described his idea of modern activism in a recent interview, radicalism did not come up. Pacheco summarized the approach as “marketing compassion” (Nibert 244). The trick, he explained, is to create demand for products that compete with the mechanized industry — fake fur, vegetarian meat substitutes, and non-leather shoes (Nibert 244). This notion of marketing compassion requires a different strategy than did the New Haven demonstration.

The *Tipping Point*, published in 2000 by Malcolm Gladwell, examines the concept of contagion in social trends. This book explores the factors that cause a particular movement to ‘tip’ or become suddenly popular. One of the key elements of any marketing strategy or trend itself is what Gladwell calls “the stickiness factor.” This is the degree to which a message will remain in an individual’s mind and convert him from hostility to acceptance (Gladwell 166). This concept can also be seen as an argument’s level of rhetorical success. In his chapter on the “stickiness factor,” Gladwell discusses the rise of the popular children’s show *Sesame Street*.

In the late 1960s, psychologist Ed Palmer, as head of the Children’s Television Workshop, conducted a series of experiments involving preschoolers and their absorption of knowledge through

television. Researchers observed children as they watched an episode of *Sesame Street*. Next to the television they projected images — a rainbow, a building, a leaf in a rippling pond — called “distracters” because they were designed to lure the child’s wandering attention. The children were then instructed to watch the TV show. Every time they lost interest in the episode, their eyes would wander to the slide show, giving researchers the opportunity to record exactly which parts of the episode did not hold their attention. In this sense, the Distracter machine measured the “stickiness” of the show (Gladwell 103). This experiment was not as successful as the researchers had hoped. In one episode of *Sesame Street*, Oscar the Grouch and a Muppet help children sound out words. The word “cat” pops up on the screen and the characters go back and forth saying “cuh” and “at” until they form the word “cat” (Gladwell 107). The children glued their eyes to the TV set, but the experiment provided no way of knowing whether they were focused on the lesson at hand or if their attention was instead drawn to the grating voice of the furry green grouch (Gladwell 108). The concept of stickiness became immediately more complicated; what if the sticky image that holds the children’s attention to the show is exactly that which distracts them from the lesson?

This question is directly applicable to PETA and many other grass roots organizations. Protest demonstrations are designed to be noticed and remembered. In a sense, they are supposed to be ‘sticky.’ However, the main goal of all these groups is to promote recognition not of their shocking exhibitions, but of the underlying, foundational messages. In the same way that the *Sesame Street* lesson was perhaps drowned out by Oscar’s charisma, PETA’s ideas are obscured by the radicalism of its spray paint and costumes.

All protest groups, then, are confronted with this seemingly insurmountable paradox: to discover how they can make their ideas attractive to the public without distracting from the ideas themselves. In the early stages of any such or-

ganization, simple recognition is so essential that shocking demonstrations may be appropriate. However, now that PETA has achieved the infamy it initially sought its social context must change and its “stickiness” must evolve as well. At this point, shocking protests are unnecessary or even detrimental to the movement’s goals. Now, rational arguments should be compelling enough to bring the movement to its “tipping point.”

In the August PETA protest, the public did not absorb the ideas because they were not presented comprehensibly — most people simply cannot see the connection between animal suffering and human suffering. If the animal welfare movement is ever to reach its tipping point, or the point at which awareness is common and factory-farms are reformed and regulated, it must tailor its techniques to both appeal to and educate as broad an audience as possible. As Gladwell writes, “The lesson of stickiness is the same. There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible. All you have to do is find it” (132). The animal welfare activists of this country must reassess this packaging as the movement builds momentum and recognition.

Increasingly, animal welfare articles have been appearing in nationally recognized magazines. The authors of these publications have done a commendable job of presenting the subject in a more understandable and palatable light. In 2002, journalist Michael Pollan followed a calf from birth until death to get a sense of the life of an animal intended for slaughter. Pollan’s article about his experience appeared on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* in the same year. His article brings to light critical issues regarding the industry and he asks the public to examine its perspective on meat animals in general:

Half the dogs in America will receive Christmas presents this year, yet few of us pause to consider the miserable life of the pig-- an animal easily as intelligent as a dog—that becomes the Christmas ham [. . .] We tolerate this disconnect because the life of the pig has moved out of view. When was the last time you saw a pig?

(Pollan 60)

Pollan’s article accomplishes something important for the animal welfare movement: it presents an articulate argument for the improvement of slaughter conditions tactfully and through socially acceptable reasoning. In doing so, he inspired a new phase of civil awareness. The appearance of animal rights articles on the covers of such prevalent magazines suggests that the movement could be approaching its tipping point.

Pollan expands upon Singer’s arguments in his article, presenting them in a manner appropriate to this stage in the movement’s development. He explains that equality is not based on fact, but morality. Everyone is not, in fact created equal: some are prettier, smarter, and stronger than others. Therefore, equality is simply the belief that everyone’s interests should be valued equally, without regard for their differences. According to Pollan, “If possessing a higher level of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his or her own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit nonhumans for the same purpose?” (Pollan 60). This quotation presents the same idea that was behind the “Are Animals the New Slaves” protest, but it is more rhetorically successful for several reasons. Pollan skillfully uses the idea of “marketing compassion” to manipulate his readers into remaining open to his ideas. His rhetorical strategy is exceptional. First, he employs ethos to entice his readers to think of him as a teammate and not simply ‘some crazy animal welfare protester.’ He begins his article with a description of his dinner conversation with Peter Singer. Pollan includes a reference to his own initial mockery of the ‘hard-core’ activists and deliberately refers to the plate of steak he has ordered (Pollan 59). Gradually, Pollan describes his mental path: he was skeptical of the movement’s principles and goals, then he directly questioned Singer, who articulated his points well. Finally Pollan came not only to understand, but to support the cause with vigor. He peppers the article with his own skeptical questions, “Why treat animals more ethically than they treat one another? [.

. . .] Don’t humans and animals differ in morally significant ways? [. . .] Without us [domesticated animals] wouldn’t exist at all” (Pollan 61). Immediately after posing these questions, Pollan provides answers. He expresses a clear example of Gladwell’s “stickiness factor” at work. Peter Singer, considered the father of the animal rights movement, was able to present his points with a considerable degree of rhetorical “stickiness.” Instead of using the traditional shocking displays, Singer used rationality to expose Pollan to his ideas. Pollan, then exposed the public to these ideas through his masterful article, without the distraction of a gory display. Due to Singer’s writing, and later that of Pollan, the notion that animals and humans share a common instinct in the interest of avoiding pain has grown increasingly prevalent (Pollan 60). This article is not only effective in the fact it is perfectly comprehensible, but it also markets its concepts by allowing the reader to feel that if he acts in accordance with the article’s proposals, he will become morally superior to those around him – those who are unenlightened by the contagion of the movement.

Michael Pollan was not the only one to articulate important arguments for the animal rights movement. In the summer of 2004, David Foster Wallace published an article in *Gourmet* magazine called “Consider the Lobster.” The fourteen-page article explores the notion of lobsters suffering as they are boiled to death (Wallace 50). This publication signified enormous progress for the animal welfare movement. It was a novel idea for a renowned culinary magazine to take an interest in the humane treatment of animals. In light of these public writings, it seems as though the animal welfare movement is now heading in the right direction. However, Only a fraction of intellectuals are able to articulate their ideas so effectively. The remaining activists join PETA or other such organizations and participate in more radical displays that have recently been shunned by the larger part of society.

In his essay, “The Dynamics of Protest Waves,” Dutch social analyst Ruud Koopmans discusses the common trajec-

tory of social movements. He introduces the Karstedt-Henke theory, published in 1980, which proposes a model for protests. This theory explains that movements tend to begin with confrontational actions leading to media attention, recognition, and the development of a larger public support base (Koopmans 642). Once the movement or organization (which can be seen as a micro-movement) gains popularity, it begins to faction into parties with divergent goals. A fraction of the initial supporters either become increasingly extreme or fail to successfully adapt their radical actions to a constantly changing social environment. This part of the group is ultimately estranged from mainstream society and its demonstrations devolve into small riots, no longer even associated with the issues at hand (Koopmans 642). The remainder – the more moderate members – gain conciliatory (and mostly palliative) institutional support, and the movement eventually fades away. As the

movement is institutionalized, the moderates lose the bartering power that stemmed from radicalism, and they are forced to accept whatever superficial concessions the government is willing to make (642). So, if Koopmans is correct, the animal welfare movement is destined to split: the moderates like Michael Pollan will be placated, while the radical welfare groups such as PETA will continue to shout until they are entirely disregarded. Unless animal welfare activists recognize the necessary changes that must be made in their strategies, the movement will expire.

Public awareness of slaughterhouse cruelty has increased over the past twenty years due to the tactful publications of animal rights authors, and initially to the crude demonstrations of organizations. However, the industry is still largely unregulated and unnecessarily inhumane. The radicalism of early protests was essential to the birth of the animal welfare movement. Now it is time for the activists

to direct their efforts toward a more deliberate marketing strategy — they must try to ‘sell’ their ideas to the public if they intend for their movement to reach its “tipping point.” To do this, the protesters must not split, as predicted by Koopmans, but remain unified and ‘infect’ as many members of society as possible with what Gladwell would call the contagion of compassion. Only then will the movement gain the momentum it needs to initiate true reform. In his book, *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser explains the power of public demand, “They will sell free-range, organic, grass-fed hamburgers if you demand it. They will sell whatever sells at a profit. The usefulness of the market, its effectiveness as a tool, cuts both ways” (Schlosser 269). This upheaval of demand is what will ultimately ‘tip’ this industry, and if activists can market their product effectively, consumers will line up to follow a new trend for the ethical treatment of animals.

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