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One Struggle, One Fight! Human Freedom, Animal Rights!

Grassroots Animal Rights Activism: Incorporating Animal
Liberation and General Liberation Ideologies.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

This thesis reports original research conducted among grassroots animal rights activists (GARAs) in Dunedin, New Zealand. The principle finding is that GARAs are unique in that they operate according to a dual-ideology of animal and general liberation. Much has been written about animal rights activism and the animal protection movement but few differentiate branches and groups beyond the basic philosophical distinctions of welfarists and rightsists. This study argues that differences in the organisational, lifestyle and tactical choices of specific groups represent more than simple differences in tastes, and proposes a Six-Axis model as an appropriate tool for investigating ideological positioning that may indicate reasons for difference. Drawing on information gathered through participant-observation and in-depth interviews, this study applies the Six-Axis model and explores the experiences GARAs have in grassroots groups and with animals.

KEYWORDS: Animal Rights, Grassroots Activism, Animal Protection Movement, Social Movement, Post-Citizenship Movement, Liberation Movement.

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PREFACE

Informally, the present study began when I made the life changing decision to become vegetarian six years ago. I was overseas at the time and I found myself in an unusual position. Choosing not to eat meat, I suddenly had to explain myself and my actions daily when food was presented. A dietary change that began as an attempt to better my health quickly developed into an interest in the nutritional and global advantages of a vegetarian diet as I sought information to back up a choice that originally seemed natural. I soon realised that by refusing to participate in certain rituals of food consumption I was challenging a structure of values far greater than I imagined. What were these values and why was my abstaining from meat eating so confrontational?

On returning to New Zealand I found that although vegetarianism was far more common and easily accommodated, it was no less oppositional to the dominant ideological position. Like so many New Zealanders, I am a first generation “townie” who comes from a long line of farmers for whom animal husbandry was a natural means to human ends, i.e. economic profit. This lifestyle was not only unquestioning of animal subjugation but was pervasively symbolic of a New Zealandness iconised by black woollen singlets and gumboots, barn fresh eggs and farm dogs. In our own popular culture, New Zealand became a nation built on the back (economically and culturally) of the hardworking man of the land: the Kiwi Farmer¹. From economics (e.g. export industry of beef and dairy) to recreation (e.g. hunting and fishing), and urban practices (e.g. pet ownership) to rural routines (e.g. Sunday roast dinner), animal use is well established in New Zealand culture and not only taken-for-granted but celebrated as an expression of national pride.

I was not the first in my family to jump on the vegetarian bandwagon. From a young age the sight of cooked meat on the bone had revolted my older sister and she soon

¹ For example see popular icons such as Billy T James and Footrot Flats

took to voicing her protest, beginning with refusing to eat roast lamb. Although I did not realise it at the time, the ensuing disputes that erupted at our dinner table, regarding eating etiquette (e.g. eating what you are given) and what is/is not categorically food (in our house, as with most in New Zealand culture, it was taken for granted the “meat” constituted food), gave me my first impression of the important role food plays in relationships, culture and identity forming, and provided active examples of individual protest. As Finkelstein points out (1998:201), “[s]tyles of eating are elaborate gestures that enunciate and perform a culture’s specificities”, so it would follow that refusing to participate in these “elaborate gestures” is a rejection of that part of the culture to which they are specific.

My own experience of vegetarianism was considerably less confrontational, as I was older and more independent when it began, but required no less re-evaluation of culture and identity. At this stage I maintained that my decision to abstain from meat eating was made out of consideration for my own health rather than animal interests, thus playing down my resistance to the Kiwi national farming culture. I did not actively look for other vegetarians who shared my worldview (although, in retrospect I note that my friends were mostly non-meat eating), nor did I seek to share that view with the world. I had found a compromise between my practices and beliefs and those of the larger society, and as other issues took the foreground, as they do in day-to-day living, vegetarianism soon became less of a conscious discourse between my nation’s culture and myself and more of a position of tolerated dissent.

It was from this position that the present study formally began. In February 2001 I heard an interview on student radio with a Wellington based animal rights activist, who was acting as spokesperson for the Animal Liberation Front (ALF). He was trying to express to the interviewer and audience that, ideally, one day we would have a society free of all animal exploitation in which animals and humans lived in harmony. I turned to Laura², a friend who is involved with the broader animal rights movement and was listening with me,

² To protect the anonymity of participants in this study, all names have been changed. See Appendix A for discussion of ethical issues.

and said “That is a bit unrealistic isn’t it?” Her reply was short and simple, “Isn’t that what people said about the abolition of slavery?”

Her statement (for it was posed more as a statement than a question) brought sharply to my attention a framework I had previously taken for granted. Yes, I was a practicing vegetarian³, and yes, I had previously questioned the morality of eating animals; but I had never before been made so aware of a structure of ideas ingrained in our culture that placed humans within and animals outside of a moral boundary that informed how I, and other people, live and think about the world. The analogy with human slavery suddenly presented a parallel through which I could conceive of an enormous lapse in ethics that allows animal exploitation and which exposed to me my own anthropocentrism. I decided to explore further the worldview and actions of animal rights activists through the approaches offered by anthropology and began research for an initially smaller project that has now been extended into the present thesis.

Keen and unpractised, I was very conscious of the ethical issues regarding informed consent and consequently rushed in to telling everyone who would listen about the project before I really knew what I was doing myself. Fortunately the many mistakes I made early on with my eager approach have proven repairable. Although a few people felt uncomfortable at first at the prospect of being researched, nearly all became less reluctant as I showed through my involvement in protests that my interest was not entirely self-serving. I tried to respect the rights of individuals who remained uneasy and either avoided events where they would be present or simply did not question these individuals directly. The study would not have been possible if I did not have a genuine interest in animal rights.

One of my major ethical concerns has been how I, as an anthropologist, can research the beliefs and actions of animal rights activists without taking the focus away from the animals whose suffering they are trying to expose. However, the focus of this thesis is the activists not the animals. The ethical dilemma this has posed in my own research is far from being resolved yet I have attempted to address the problem by

³ I then considered eating gelatine, eggs and dairy products to be in line with vegetarianism.

----- PREFACE -----

beginning each section with extracts that will, I hope, urge the reader to consider the many cultural constructions of animals in contemporary western societies. These are taken from scientific, philosophical, and agricultural sources as well as popular culture and animal rights texts. Some demonstrate the cruel nature of animal use; others exhibit anthropocentric attitudes; and still more undo capitalist mystification techniques. The purpose of this thesis is not to preach animal rights philosophy. By including these extracts I wish only to invite the reader to look through the eyes of the 'native' and explore the human-animal relationship from an animal rights activists' point of view.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS & ACRONYMS

AAA	Auckland Animal Action
ALF	Animal Liberation Front - under this name small groups of people commit acts (usually illegally) in the name of animal freedom, e.g. animal liberations and property destruction such as breaking butcher shop windows. There is no formal membership and anybody can call himself or herself ALF at any time as long as action/s fit a short list of guidelines.
Animal Liberation Ideology	An ideology related to animals that incorporates an animal rights philosophy, abolition objective and no-compromise approach.
Animal Protection Movement	All groups that take action to try to better the treatment of animals. It includes welfarists and rightsists.
Animal Rights	Philosophy in which animals are seen to be sentient beings of inherent worth that should not be used for human benefit.
Animal Welfare	Philosophy in which animals are seen to be sentient beings that can be used for human benefit so long as they are not subjected to unnecessary pain and suffering.
AWA	Animal Watch Aotearoa
Civil Disobedience	Moral protest actions that break laws but are conducted in a non-violent way, e.g. sit-ins, lock-downs, disruptive public demonstrations.

----- GLOSSARY OF TERMS & ACRONYMS -----

Conscious Living	A style of living that requires every choice to be made according to an individuals' ethical framework. In GARAs it is most evident in a vegan diet and specific product choices.
Demo	Demonstration, public protest.
GARA	Grassroots Animal Rights Activist – Individuals who follow an animal rights philosophy, actively campaign for radical changes to current systems of animal use, and do so through grassroots groups.
General Liberation Ideology	An ideology related to issues of general human oppression that is marked by worldviews which are anti-domination, anti-oppression, anti-hierarchy and are in favour of egalitarianism, equality, and individual autonomy.
HARD	Hamilton Animal Rights Defence
Home-Demo	Protest or demonstration held outside the place of residence of an individual who is involved in an animal-use industry, e.g. scientist who practices vivisection, intensive farmer.
Open-Rescue	An animal rescue involves liberating/stealing animals from farms, laboratories, or any other place where they are kept for human use. In an open-rescue activists carryout the operation in broad daylight and admit to having done it.
Postering	Placing posters with animal rights messages or advertising animal rights protests in public/private spaces.
SAFE	Save Animals From Exploitation
SPCA	Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

----- GLOSSARY OF TERMS & ACRONYMS -----

Stickering	Placing stickers with animal rights messages in public/private spaces to draw attention to animal issues.
Rightsist	An individual or group that follows an animal rights philosophy.
RNZSPCA	Royal New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
VARA	Vegan Animal Rights Activist
Vegan	A non-dairy vegetarian diet that excludes all food and by-products that comes from animals. Veganism is also a lifestyle in which followers do not buy animal-based products (e.g. wool clothing, cosmetics tested on animals etc) or support any animal use industries (e.g. circuses and zoos).
WAA	Wellington Animal Action
Welfarist	An individual or group that subscribes to an animal welfare philosophy.