

Why Socialists Should Care About Animal Liberation

DSA Animal Liberation Working Group

Towards Animal Liberation

The basis of socialism is to critique and dismantle oppressive hierarchies—to staunchly oppose all forms of subjugation and create a world that is liberatory for all. The question posed by animal liberationists is: Who is the “all” in “liberatory for all”? How far do we expand our scope of moral concern? For many socialists, the answer may seem self-evident: Liberatory for all means liberatory for all of humanity. But for animal liberationists, the answer is: all those who have sentience, who can experience suffering and the harm caused by their subjugation.

At stake in this question are the moral roots of the socialist project: What are we fighting for and why? Socialists stand with those we will never meet; those who will never know we exist; those with whom we have little in common. What is the basis of this solidarity? Is it that we share the experience of having the products of our labor stolen by capitalists? So, too, does the horse who pulls a carriage through Central Park, or the cow whose calf is stolen so that dairy corporations can extract and sell her milk. Is it that human workers fight for their freedom? So, too, does the circus elephant who turns on her trainer, or the zoo orangutan escaping his enclosure. Is it that we recognize all humans’ liberation is intertwined? It is also intertwined with other animals’: Think of the air pollution caused by industrial hog farms, or the fact that wild birds control insect populations and thus benefit human food production.

For others the basis of solidarity may be none of these things, simply the conviction that we all deserve equality, that those who are made to suffer unnecessary pain, exploitation, or oppression deserve to live fuller, freer lives. But this must be as true for the cancer-stricken lab rat or the mink caged on fur farms as it is for you and me. As philosopher and social reformer Jeremy Bentham once put it, “the question is not Can they reason?, nor Can they talk?, but, Can they suffer?”

Some on the Left worry that any focus on nonhuman animals can distract from the struggle for human liberation. The reality, however, is that different forms of oppression reinforce each other. Psychological research has shown that belief in species hierarchy is consistently associated with greater dehumanization of disadvantaged or marginalized human groups. This is reflected, for example, in the long-standing tradition of comparing marginalized groups to dogs or rats as a form of dehumanization, helping enable people and governments to commit atrocities with a clear conscience. We can tell who is committed to full liberation by looking at who’s willing to expand our moral scope, and who demands it stay limited to the smallest viable bubble.

This intersectional analysis is not new. There’s a strong tradition of animal rights activism within socialist and social justice history including figures such as Cesar Chavez, Angela Davis, Dolores Huerta, Jeremy Corbyn, Dick Gregory, Coretta Scott King, and many others. As the essayist Carl Boggs once wrote, “Aside from the military, no sector of American society matches the frightening consequences of the meat complex: ecological devastation, food deterioration, routinized violence, injury, disease, and death to both humans and animals, rampant corporate power.”

“The food we eat masks so much cruelty. The fact that we can sit down and eat a piece of chicken without thinking about the horrendous conditions under which chickens are industrially bred in this country is a sign of the dangers of capitalism, how capitalism has colonized our minds.”

Angela Davis

Ecosocialism

Animal liberation isn't just for the animals' sake. The process of raising and killing animals for our pleasure is deeply enmeshed in broader societal issues as well. Chief among these is environmental considerations. In fact, the meat industry is the top driver of Amazon deforestation, destroying one of the most crucial carbon sinks on the planet. On the whole, the industry makes up roughly 15 percent (by some estimates more) of global greenhouse gas emissions.

Therefore, addressing animal agriculture is critical to tackling climate change. The Green New Deal resolution, sponsored in the House by DSA member and congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, includes an ambiguous tenet about lowering "greenhouse gas emissions from the agricultural sector as much as is technologically feasible." Socialists must insist that this includes directly confronting meat and dairy corporations.

It's not just the climate: Fertilizer runoff from factory farms is associated with cancer, birth defects, and other health effects in humans—particularly the poor. Pollution from pig farms significantly impacts air quality in North Carolina (disproportionately affecting black communities), as well as in other states with large hog industries.

It's imperative to remember how tightly entwined ecocide is with racial, indigenous, and class issues. The climate and other environmental effects of the meat industry disproportionately harm those already exploited and marginalized.

It's not enough to think that a human-centered socialism will magically cure our environmental woes. Capitalism must be dismantled if we hope to maintain a habitable earth, but that's only the first step. Actually building equitable, environmentally friendly societies will require dramatic transformations in energy, food production, land use, and how we relate with the nonhuman world. Crucial to this project will be dismantling animal agriculture.

Global Food Security

The meat industry represents one of the most glaring examples of how food is unequally distributed under global capitalism. Meat—which is disproportionately consumed by wealthy countries—typically requires far more land, water, and energy to produce than plant food. In fact, on US feedlots it takes 7 pounds of grain (other estimates are higher) to produce one pound of beef. One study found that if the U.S. went vegan, on the other hand, we could feed the whole country plus an extra 390 million people.

The high-meat diets of the global affluent are especially indefensible when so much of the world faces extreme food insecurity. “In a world where 20 million die of malnutrition,” wrote vegan socialist David Swanson, “an animal agriculture industry propped up by capitalism has literal blood on its hands.”

Labor

The exploitation of animal labor echoes the exploitation of the working class by the ruling class. And animal agriculture is a leading purveyor of both. “The meat industry is also a disaster for labor,” reports Emily Atkin in a *New Republic* article called “Why Animal Rights Is the Next Frontier for the Left.” She goes on:

“Slaughterhouse workers—mainly immigrants and resettled refugees—often face lifelong injuries from their jobs, and likewise are denied the sort of disposable income necessary to treat them. ‘They describe punishing rates of production, leaving them with a lifetime of pain and physical problems,’ a 2016 NPR report read. ‘Workers making on average \$12.50 an hour, or about \$26,000 a year, say they can get fired if their injuries prevent them from working harder; companies report constant employee turnover.’ Those injuries aren’t just physical, but also psychological. ‘The worst thing, worse than the physical danger, is the emotional toll,’ an Iowa slaughterhouse worker told activist Gail Eisnitz. ‘Pigs down on the kill floor have come up and nuzzled me like a puppy. Two minutes later I had to kill them.’”

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“We need in a special way to work twice as hard to make all people understand that animals are fellow creatures. We must protect them and love them as we love ourselves.”

Cesar Chavez

Feminism

Feminists have long drawn connections between the oppression of women (and others who are not cis men) and the oppression of nonhuman animals and nature. For one, all of these perform regenerative and reproductive labor that is devalued under patriarchy and capitalism. Many feminists often point to the egg and dairy industries as examples of commodifying and exploiting animals' reproductive systems. Ecofeminists in particular have worked to analyze the relationships between structures of domination and articulate liberatory alternatives.

There is also the fact that meat itself is coded as masculine. Burger ads often objectify women, and depictions of animals to be eaten are often feminized and sexualized. And as Carol Adams writes in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, "According to the mythology of patriarchal culture, meat promotes strength; the attributes of masculinity are achieved through eating these masculine foods" and thus meat acts as a symbol of male dominance.

Men in the United States eat far more meat than women, and the overwhelming majority of animal advocates are women.

Racial Justice

While mainstream animal advocates can often make clumsy and offensive analogies between speciesism and racism, critical race theorists such as Aph Ko, Syl Ko, and Claire Jean Kim draw connections between different forms of oppression in much more sophisticated and emancipatory ways. Syl Ko, for instance, argues that the human/animal binary is fundamental to all forms of oppression. Black people and other racialized others are oppressed because, in the eyes of white colonial society, they are less than human—and “human” is defined Eurocentrically as the civilized rational able-bodied white man. Rather than assimilate into this notion of humanity, Ko calls for deconstructing the binary altogether.

Kim, in her book, *Dangerous Crossings*, documents examples of this binary in action: For instance, the anti-immigrant labor leader Samuel Gompers contrasted the meat-eating American man and the rice-eating Chinese man; or in colonial propaganda, Native Americans likened to wolves. “The synergistic taxonomies of race and species,” Kim suggests, “will need to be dismantled together or not at all.”

Disability Justice

Some earlier animal ethicists based their arguments for liberation on nonhuman animals' "intelligence." However, more recent works drawing on disability studies observe that centering cognitive capacity as the foundation of value is ableist, steeped in capitalist obsessions with productivity, and with dangerous repercussions for both humans and nonhumans. Both animal and disability liberationists have begun pushing back against the depiction of intelligence as a one-dimensional ladder, and increasingly argued that "sentience," or the capacity to perceive, experience, or feel, is the bedrock on which demands for justice for all human and nonhuman animals rest.

Disabled thinkers like Sunaura Taylor are among those working to flip this script. She observes that attacks on disabled human bodies often employ "bestial" comparisons to nonhuman animals, and suggests solidarity as a way out. In her book *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*, she writes, "What if, rather than dismissing or disassociating for the struggle of animals, we embraced what political theorist Claire Jean Kim calls an 'ethics of avowal,' a recognition that oppressions are linked, and that we can be 'open in meaningful and sustained way to the suffering and claims of other subordinated groups, even or perhaps especially in the course of political battle'?"

The Animal Liberation Working Group seeks to educate socialists on the widespread exploitation of nonhuman animals and bring an anti-capitalist analysis to animal advocacy. We believe that the commodification of nonhuman animals is intimately connected to capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, ableism, and other oppressive systems, and that liberation for all animals—including humans—means working toward democratic ecosocialism.

FOR FURTHER READING:

- *Aphro-ism: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism from Two Sisters* by Aph and Syl Ko
- *Protest Kitchen* and *The Sexual Politics of Meat* by Carol Adams
- *Veganism in an Oppressive World: A Vegans of Color Community Project*, edited by Julia Feliz Brueck
- *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* by Sunaura Taylor
- “On Vegetarianism” by Elisée Reclus

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Find your local farm sanctuary at vegan.com/sanctuaries
- Sign up to join us here: <https://bit.ly/2YxmwXl>
- Follow us on Twitter @AnimalRightsDSA and Instagram @dsaanimalliberation