

Repressing Righteous Rage: The Capitalist Criminalisation of Animal Advocacy

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Abstract

It is the unfortunate truth that, in many places, more legal protection is afforded to industrial property than to the many animal souls held captive therein, awaiting their fate at the hands of inseminators, slaughterers, or vivisectioners. Whilst capitalism has brought opulence to some and opportunity to many more, it has also commodified the nonhuman to no more than a number. When activists for animal rights seek to redress the balance of power on behalf of their nonhuman brothers and sisters, they are labelled terrorists, and their activism deviance, whilst the perpetrators of physical and psychological violence against those nonhumans receive legal (and sometimes financial) protection from the state. In a nation of animal lovers such as the United Kingdom (UK) or the United States of America (US) alike, advocates for our finned, feathered, and furred friends should be applauded, yet instead, campaigns against cruelty are criminalised. This paper applies several classical, critical theories of crime and deviance to this criminalisation of nonhuman animals' human allies. In most cases, the industries and institutions responsible for the use of animals in this way are also considered responsible for the perception of animal rights activism and liberation as acts of terror. But with the violence inflicted upon nonhumans within these settings, which side of the gate is the enemy on?

Keywords: activism; critical criminology; deviance; nonhuman animals; terrorism

*"First they ignore you.
Then they laugh at you.
Then they fight you.
Then you win."*

(Misattributed to Gandhi; source unknown)

1. INTRODUCTION

Society is in a constant state of evolution and, over time, one social injustice after another has come to the fore, created anger, been subjected to scrutiny, and eventually abolished. The subsequent want to implement positive change for those treated unjustly—by whatever means necessary—is now accepted in various campaigns for human freedoms. Despite the intransigent rhetoric of the powerful with vested interests in the status quo, the roles various (often violent) social movements have played in creating the change they wish to see is now acknowledged. Obvious examples include the direct action taken by radical feminists for the emancipation of women (*Gilcher-Holtey 2019*), the civil disobedience that was a large part of the American Civil Rights movement (Marek 1965), the abolition of South African apartheid which led ultimately to the election of the once-notorious African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela to the Presidency of South Africa (Macozoma 1994), and the various illegal acts of protecting Jews in Nazi-occupied territories during World War II (Henry 1986).

The nonhuman animal liberation movement seems unable, at least at this point in time, to be privileged with the same romantic notions of freedom fighting and social justice now afforded many of those mentioned above. They are routinely branded as terrorists or extremists, and it is this notion of an enemy status I seek to investigate here—particularly as attributed to abolition and liberation activists. I will do so primarily by way of explanations of such vilification in terms of the instrumental nature of animal rights criminalisation for the protection of vested economic interests. The characterisation shift from “gentle pacifist to violent criminal in one single bound” is suggested by Lovitz to have occurred when “protests against facilities that exploit, abuse, and/or threaten animals or natural resources, began to threaten the financial integrity of some major corporations” (2007:79). Money talks, and money silences.

This view is widely supported by a variety of critical criminological theories, including labelling theorists such as Howard Becker (1963), Stan Cohen’s 1972 “Folk Devils and Moral Panics”, and other views on social control such as William Chambliss’s ideas about political economy (1975). Ian Taylor, Paul Walton, and Jock Young also highlighted the crossover between the micro sociological labelling theory and the macro sociological conflict approach, theorising a “new” fully social theory of deviance that incorporates both perspectives (1973). All acknowledge the role of the state, its representatives, or funders as key informants in the stigmatisation of sub-cultural groups. Some lay the blame very clearly at the feet of big business.

2. DEVIANT LABELLING

The generally accepted understanding of deviance involves behaviour outside social convention, though not necessarily criminal. Such activities might range from obvious demonstrations of anti-social behaviour, binge-drinking, or unusual body piercings, to less obvious practices such as veganism, or minority religious belief. When certain deviant behaviours are brought to the attention of the wider population (often through mass or social media), practitioners are “othered” and become a common enemy. As Becker states: “deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label”, supporting the view that normative behaviour and by extension deviant behaviour are entirely social constructs: “social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance” (1963:6). Deviants become “outsiders”.

2.1 Folk Devils and Moral Panics

Cohen (2002) describes the process by which organisations and social structures, with media help (often believed to be directly influenced by those institutions), criminalise certain deviant behaviour through the discourse of division. Using an example of two British youth groups of the 1960s, the “Mods” and “Rockers”, Cohen explains how public fear was created from one relatively non-eventful skirmish between the two on a slow-news Bank Holiday. A “self-fulfilling prophecy” was created in those categorised as trouble, who thereafter became more troublesome, with subsequently lowered public expectations of them. Young people became “symbols of trouble” (Cohen 2002:vi), adopting their deviant status and ultimately leading to actual criminality. Rather than accept its role in the creation of this criminal behaviour, society successfully demanded action be taken and felt righteous justice was served on those young people with every arrest and prosecution prompted by the moral panic.

The ability of the powerful to influence both public opinion and individual behaviour is well-documented (see for example Becker 1963; Hall et al. 2013; and others). Not always is this acknowledged ability applied to the case of the various groups of humans who advocate for the rights and protection of nonhuman animals. They and their protestations simply become another perceived system of trouble in a society which subconsciously accepts a significant level of animal death as inevitable and necessary.

2.2 Labelling the Liberators

The labelling of these advocates is problematic, and categories range from “welfarists” and “reformists”, to “abolitionists” and “liberators”, with often very little separating one group from another, except perhaps in individual practise. Abolitionism, for example, is predominantly theoretical in nature (see Francione and Charlton 2015), with veganism and vegan education promoted as sufficient praxis to save lives in the future, whereas liberation tends to be more hands-on and direct in action (see ALF n.d.; HSA 2019) to save lives in the present. The uneducated in these often-subtle distinctions (the general public, for

example) may see no difference, though, between an anti-fur leaflet protester outside Edinburgh's Harvey Nichols on a Saturday afternoon and someone releasing American mink from a fur farm in the Highlands of Scotland (see Munro 2014). That is not to say that the same activist may not be involved or interested in both events, but saboteurs are more likely to be sabotaging a hunt on a weekend morning whilst possibly unconnected indirect action such as leafleting or demonstrating is undertaken in tandem by others.

It should be noted, however, that advocates often self-identify with these complex categories rather than accept a label allocated to them. Creating and attempting to maintain a Scottish alliance of animal rights activists in the early 2000s saw divisions created by media coverage and subsequent interpretation of various events, including and perhaps especially the Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) campaign (see Best and Kahn 2004). Coalition members who sat more distinctly on the welfare side of campaigning than the rights or abolitionist position grew increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of associating, or being associated with, the anti-vivisection movement. The media's labelling of those opposed to animal experimentation as extremists and anti-progress created fear, not just in the general population, but also in those on the softer side of campaign groups such as the Alliance. Individuals resisted involvement in certain single-issue campaigns to avoid the negative stigma that surrounded the animal rights movement at that time.

The fracturing of the movement could in some ways be viewed as a successful outcome for the animal-reliant industries, particularly when cohesion would have stood its opposition in better stead—presenting a united front against animal industry. That said, the varying disruptive successes of SHAC and other similar campaigns in obstructing business as usual for those industries cannot be overlooked or minimised in terms of their strategies, methods, and efficacy (Ellefsen and Busher 2020). Economic sabotage is an incredibly powerful tool in the activist armoury.

2.3. Capitalists' Criminalisation of Anti-Cruelty Crusaders

Chambliss (1975) and other orthodox Marxists propose that criminal law is state-imposed on behalf of capitalists—that the capitalist elite are creators of crime and protectors of economic interests. This would necessarily include the multiple industries reliant upon the use of nonhuman animals in one way or another for their survival—food agriculture such as farming and fishing, others for clothing, shoes, or accessories, captivity for entertainment such as aquaria and circuses, "pets" of all species and associated vets, and of course pharmaceuticals. It is the latter industry (including Huntingdon Life Sciences) that has borne the brunt of some of the most intensive animal activism in the history of the movement so far (Best and Kahn 2004) and prompted the world's first anti-vivisection organisation as far back as 1875, the UK's National Anti-Vivisection Society (NAVS n.d.).

In the US, as in the UK, a significant amount of legislation exists to prevent and punish cruelty, though this is focused primarily on "domesticated animals" and excludes the vast majority who are reared intensively for agricultural purposes. Marceau highlights the custom-in-practice exemptions to such protections:

- Animals raised for food may be exempted from general requirements for shelter, including minimal protection from the weather.
- Animals may be confined in cages or crates so small that the animal cannot even turn around.
- Animals may have their testicles and tails removed, or they may be branded, all without anaesthetic.
- Chickens have their beaks removed without anaesthetic.
- Chickens may be starved in order to induce a new egg laying cycle.
- Cows as young as a day old may be removed from their mothers and housed in veal crates that preclude exercise or play.
- Chickens are killed at rates that make minimally careful handling impossible, with many facilities striving for line speeds in excess of 140 birds per minute (meaning that each worker has to hang the birds by their feet upside down on a moving conveyor belt at a rate of about 30-45 birds per minute).
- Unwanted fowl may be drowned in foam, despite the final death taking up to fifteen minutes. (Marceau 2019:100)

Those raging against such processes by way of demonstration or other means somehow find themselves typed and vilified for daring to criticise what is viewed as a necessary evil by those seeking to maintain these exemptions. However, it is fair to assume that any of these exemptions, were they to be applied to nonhuman animals such as cats or dogs, would be considered *unnecessary* evil by many of the same people. One had only to witness the global condemnation of Englishwoman Mary Bale following CCTV footage of her putting a live cat in a wheelie bin (Barkham 2010) to see this contradiction in action. Her punishment was a fine of GBP 250, further outraging the public, who demanded a stronger penalty.

2.4 Labelling and Legislating

Unfortunately for activists daring to expose below-par intensive farming practices or highlighting sub-standard laboratory conditions, their wish to bring to the public's attention the plight of the nonhuman animals therein is frequently met with derision or denigration, rather than decisive action for improvement or change. As such, so-called "Ag-Gag" legislation and other laws designed to protect animal enterprises (including laboratories) have served only to further distance the public from the processes conducted on their behalf by these industries. Evidence-gathering becomes impossible and the veil of secrecy surrounding animal enterprise activities ever opaquer (see Fiber-Ostrow and Lovell 2016; and Wrock 2016 for further analysis). Business continues as usual without checks or balances.

3. NEW "RADICAL" CRIMINOLOGICAL REASONING

More than forty years ago, well before the enactment of such reactive rulemaking in agriculture, Taylor, Walton, and Young (1973) set out what was at the time a new, "fully

social theory” of deviance, still applicable here and now. Elements of their thesis included much already mentioned, though they acknowledged the interplay of social and cultural context as well as individual choice in their explanation for deviance. They argued there are always wider, social origins to an act being considered thus—crime is created in a cultural context and is therefore structural (and potentially fluid) in nature. If, for example, we as a society widely accept the use of nonhuman animals for food, clothing, entertainment, and product or medicine testing, then oppositional behaviour will necessarily be viewed as criminal—or at the very least, deviant. The deviant or criminal act itself marries the belief system of the actor to the choice to act based on that belief, despite awareness of accepted social norms and values.

Some decide to be the change they want to see in the world by being part of a wider moral and social movement as a form of prefigurative politics (Boggs 1977): for example, the consequentialist act of abstaining from eating nonhuman animals to live one’s ethical ideals may contribute over time to the reduction in animal use. For others, actions are more deontological, interventionist, and immediate, where a belief that animal use is morally abhorrent requires nothing less than direct, disruptive action, such as hunt sabotage. Both are viewed as socially deviant, some even by others within the animal rights movement, as previously described.

Taylor, Walton, and Young (1973) are clear that laws are created within a capitalist framework to protect property and maintain social order. This is further supported by Chambliss’s (1975) view of capitalist control, not only of their respective industries but of normative ideology driven by economic interests. Maintenance occurs through mass media (another capitalist industry), deeming such deviance newsworthy, labelling it thus, and reinforcing social norms in doing so. In this case, the norm of viewing the utilisation of animals in food production or experiments as necessary (Taylor, Walton, and Young 1973; Erikson in Cohen 2002:10-11) sees opposition to these accepted practises as at best odd, and at worst, anti-human.

3.1 Capitalist Interests vs. Campaign Intersectionality

A more Gramscian proposition may be that whilst activists debate over effective campaign strategies and which animal is most worthy of their time and energies, they are ignorant of the capitalist elite growing their surplus value to obscene levels via cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1971). Whether environmentalists, animal rights activists, or any other social movement, they share a common enemy: the capitalist class. As such, many (such as Francione and Charlton 2017) believe they should be presenting a collective case for change rather than each focusing on the separate fragments of what is overall mass oppression and exploitation of both humans and nonhumans. In the same way that the Scottish Animal Rights Alliance disintegrated, so we see a distancing of one social movement from another, despite having similar aims and objectives—and a shared belief in making industry accountable for its actions, and improving the world for its inhabitants, present and future.

Perhaps the divide and conquer approach is a successful ruse by industry, via the media, to distract the masses and continue business as usual: the deaths of millions of animals every day in the United Kingdom alone, and billions annually worldwide (Animal Clock 2021). Despite the huge number of animals killed daily, these figures are not the sort to make news headlines—another example of the control of the system by those benefiting from its continuation.

“The importance of the media lies not in their role as transmitters of moral panics nor as campaigners but in the way they reproduce and sustain the dominant ideology.” (Cohen 2002: xxxvi)

4. TERRORISTS OR FREEDOM FIGHTERS?

Best and Nocella (2004a) investigate how activists opposed to these unimaginable numbers might be represented as “terrorists”, not just by media but also in law, by first considering how such a term may be defined. Various definitions exist from the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and others tasked with formally sanctioning crime, both in the US and the UK. These include “the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property ... in furtherance of political or social objectives” (FBI in Best and Nocella 2004b:69), despite the law already containing more than adequate mechanisms to protect people and/or property from criminal damage.

Is it possible, however, to commit violence on an object or property? Can one terrorise bricks and mortar? When Animal Liberation Front (ALF) activists free animals from what they consider to be morally unjustifiable conditions, some property damage to buildings or locks in order to gain access to often sick or injured animals is unavoidable. This seems reasonable and in line with ALF rules that specify the avoidance of harm to all living creatures (ALF n.d.). That a padlock is broken or a window smashed bears little relevance to the moral aberration being conducted behind those closed doors, though many disagree. That property destruction is what makes headlines, without mention of the reason behind the incidents, provides further support for the critical criminologist position.

5. HYPOCRITICAL HYPERBOLE

Controversy surrounds the debate(s) on the personhood of (some species of) nonhuman animals (see for example, Kymlicka and Donaldson 2011) but ultimately, proponents of animal use would at least afford them “thinghood” as objects of property, legally owned by industry, and kept within the physical property of farm or laboratory buildings. But if industrial property is protected from terror under law, and animals are the property of industry, then why are those animals not also protected from terror? The FBI’s own definition of terrorism mentioned earlier carries with it only one stipulation: that it is “unlawful”. This brings us back around to Marceau’s detail of agricultural exemptions, such as mutilation without anaesthetic (2019). In 2006, the recognition in UK law of the capacity of nonhuman animals to feel pain and suffering was heralded through the Animal Welfare

Act (2006). Despite this, more than two million sentient beings were slaughtered in the UK in August 2021 (and this figure only cows, pigs, and sheep) (DEFRA 2021a). The UK's Action Plan for Animal Welfare (DEFRA 2021b) includes an Animal Sentience Committee, tasked with ensuring animal welfare is accounted for in ministerial policy making. However, the same proposed Bill excludes animals killed to be eaten from the full legislative protection afforded to companion animals and others. One key pledge is to consider "what further welfare at slaughter improvements should be made" (DEFRA 2021b), clearly indicating the continuation (and potential reinforcement) of a normative dichotomy between the cared-for cat and the consumed cow. Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb, on 16 June 2021, stated: "the Government have finally published a Bill that, if one graded it, would get an F for fail" (2021).

6. HOODED VILLAINS OR MASKED HEROES?

There are multiple, often multinational industries at play in the war on terror waged against animal activists in the last few decades. These include so-called "meat" and "dairy", fur, "leather", household products, pharmaceuticals, and the media itself: arguing against disruption or obstruction of any business reliant on sentient beings for profit. In 2006 (many believe in response to the SHAC campaign), the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA) overwrote the Animal Enterprise Protection Act (AEPA) in the US to make illegal damage or interference in "the operations of an animal enterprise" (US GPO 2006). What these nonhuman animals really need is alternative institutional intrusion: a Thirteenth Amendment against their enslavement.

There remains a fundamental juxtaposition in most of these industries' insinuations, that despite the social acceptance of their businesses as necessary, it is not the case that humans need them at all. It is well documented now that a plant-based diet is as nutritionally balanced as mainstream ones based on the consumption of nonhuman animals, and in many ways protects the practitioner of the former from the early onset of a whole host of diseases such as diabetes and heart disease (see, for example, The British Dietetic Association 2017). Humans need not use household products tested on animals in laboratories, particularly when many of the substances contained in such products are so harmful to humans that they necessitate a toxic warning symbol (Health and Safety Executive, n.d.). Most poisonous cleaning products around the home could be replaced with more natural substances (Friends of the Earth, 2017), that are not only kinder to the house's inhabitants, but also the environment. Despite numerous calls for alternative therapies and medicines to be scrutinised for efficacy (and their practitioners labelled "dangerous" in the meantime), the fundamental problem of vivisection's lack of evidence itself as an appropriate tool for the development of human medicines is seldom mentioned, but hugely significant nonetheless (Fano 1997; see also Jayne and Hermann 2019).

Chambliss (1975) explained how capitalism created a perceived need for products, and although his focus was on how the working classes were then prisoners to exploitative employment to purchase these goods, it is not too far a step to apply this to the institutional view of animal use. If holding down two or three minimum wage jobs to survive is necessary,

there is no time (or energy) to consider alternatives to habitual practice—eating “meat”, bleaching the bathroom, using animal-tested products, or popping pills for one ailment or another. One’s focus is also individualistic in nature; it is understandably difficult to have empathy for others when life is a daily struggle. Nonhuman animals might feature some way down a priority list, if at all.

Those who dare to raise their head above the parapet of “normal” to highlight problems and start a moral conversation, are deemed a threat to the fabric of society as currently accepted. They are demonised, and ultimately criminalised. One need only look to the gaping chasm between each of the official responses to *Black Lives Matter* and pro-Trump *Stop the Steal* protests outside the US Capitol in Washington in 2020. Whilst various groups have leapfrogged each other to the top of domestic terrorist agendas, it remains the insistence of many national authorities to reinforce the view that (certain) activism is dangerous and requires what is very often disproportionate punishment, particularly those fighting for the rights of the powerless without taking lives themselves in the process (Brown, 2019).

Interestingly, although there is no singular definition of terrorism (FBI or otherwise), the Encyclopaedia Britannica in 2007 proposed terrorist acts to be those that “harm unarmed civilians who, except by way of their unfortunate location in the world, otherwise have little to do with the politics that inspire the acts” (Lovitz 2007:79). The topic page is very different now and its definition much more akin to that of the FBI (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2021). Might even Britannica have succumbed to the media-driven moral panics regarding advocacy activism?

So-called “terrorists” might say the real criminals are the capitalist companies making money from the unnecessary misery of millions of nonhuman beings each second, minute, hour of every day, across the world. These animals, and not their keepers, breeders, experimenters, or killers, are the genuinely innocent victims referred to in the FBI’s definition of Domestic Terrorism. Campaigners for the liberation of these individual innocents may view themselves and their actions as ones that, when the time comes, will be morally judged as having been on the right side of history.

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