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Activity vs. Productivity: Strategies of Social Protest

Henry Spira

As animal rights activists, we need to be aware of and deal with the public's inconsistency towards animals. Indeed, the majority of the public is strongly opposed to animal suffering, yet, that same majority eats animals and supports the use of animals in research--if they believe that there are human benefits *and* no "unnecessary" cruelty involved. At the same time, the animal protection movement wastes much energy in random activities, and often fails to recognize opportunities for public support.

In the past decade, there have been highly visible, symbolic campaigns focusing on very few animals. Unfortunately, some of these campaigns have, at times, become ends in themselves rather than integral parts of long-range strategic planning. More unfortunately, huge numbers of people get involved in projects that focus on very few animals, resulting in enormous activity but minimal productivity. There's a need to find focal points personal enough for the public to relate to, yet with enough ripple effects to have an impact on the larger picture of animal suffering.

The understandable outrage focusing specifically on isolated instances--often expressions of all-or-nothing (angels and devils) morality--has not been strategically effective for the complexity of the social issues involved. This is particularly true in instances where the research can be positioned (by the opposition) as necessary for humans.

In order to avoid such futility, we have sought "winnable" issues whose apparent irrationality would be difficult to defend (i.e., forcing lye, ammonia, oven cleaner, etc., into the eyes of rabbits in the Draize eye irritancy test)--issues which would cause the general public to demand different behavior once they saw the irrationality of what was being done to animals and the possibility of alternatives. We have chosen targets so that each success produced widening public acceptance and scientific collaboration--part of a growing cascade of secure victories that could most rapidly lead to the largest amount of relief for the suffering animals. These efforts can be seen as part of an attempt to establish "zero-based" use of animals in every sphere through constant questioning: Is this data necessary? Can the data be obtained *without animals* or with *fewer animals* or with *less pain*?

In sum, transformation is gradual. If you want people and institutions to change, the pressure for such change must be strategically focused--without losing sight of the ultimate goal: to create a society where we live in harmony with one another--with human and nonhuman animals, and with all of nature.

What can the individual do now?

As consumers, write, phone, or visit companies whose products you use. Let them know of your concerns, and ask them to: 1) publicly commit themselves to eliminate the use of live animals in product development and testing; and 2) let you know how they'll achieve their goals and within what time frames.

The long-range need is to sensitize a new generation to the fact that animals can feel pain, and that, therefore, they have an obligation to see to it that animals are not harmed. Suggest to school principals, science teachers, PTAs, and community boards that inflicting pain upon defenseless, innocent creatures cannot be considered a worthwhile classroom activity. Promote alternatives such as vinyl models,

transparent overlays, and computer programs (check school biological supply catalogs for detailed information).

Four billion animals suffer from birth to death on factory farms every year. Demand the right to non-violent meals in public cafeterias from grade school through universities. Such campaigns can be mounted by taxpayers, parents, or students, and they provide an opportunity for focusing on the routine and institutionalized violence inflicted on farm animals.

What can animal protection organizations do?

They can provide grassroots activists with basic effective tools to promote change. For example, The American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, The Humane Society of the United States, and The Massachusetts Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals are preparing a campaign to abolish the crating of calves by the veal industry. When all the pieces are in place, grassroots activists will have tools with which to spotlight the most elementary right of every animal--the right to be able to move their bodies--a right now denied to the "veal" calf who cannot even turn around comfortably.

In promoting alternatives to animals in research and testing, major groups could fund appropriate and prestigious think tanks or universities to develop position papers highlighting opportunities for reducing and replacing lab animals in specific fields, including regulatory practices, behavioral and military experiments, the teaching of biology, product development, and safety testing. Such "white papers" are needed for strategic planning and to help writers, activists, and lobbyists increase the effectiveness of their campaigns.

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