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Animal Rights International

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Effective Strategies of Social Protest

Henry Spira

BACKGROUND

On October 31 and November 1, 1979, The Anti-Cruelty Society hosted a conference on laboratory animal usage. It was a unique gathering that included not only humanitarians from near and far, but prominent members of the biomedical community as well.

Day Two of the conference (November 1, 1979) opened with a presentation by Henry Spira. The following is a condensed and edited summary.

The topic is strategy. Let's start by thinking about the facts. There is an injustice here. There are 100 million animals that never have a good day in their lives in the laboratories. Every year, there are three and a half billion chickens that never have a chance to scratch the ground. What are we going to do about it? That's where strategy and tactics come in.

First we have to recognize that we are programmed into inconsistency. From the time we're kids, we're taught to be kind to the cats and dogs who are part of the household community. At the same time, we're eating other animals. And at the same time, it's accepted that certain animals are lab tools.

But the point is that the rabbit who is getting his eyes blinded in a Draize Test, the Rhesus monkey who is being blinded in order to see how long it then takes him to find his mother without the sense of sight, the calf that's crying for her mother -- each feels pain. And the pain is just as vivid to each of them as it is to a cat, or a dog, or to ourselves.

The second thing is that we have been programmed into not recognizing the levers of power.

We talk about how we want to change things, to educate people, maybe pass a bill. Play the game, give and take, and sooner or later, something will come out of it. Sooner or later, the people will be educated about this injustice. The problem is, that's just not the way it is.

Consider that there were animal welfare organizations established 100 years ago, when there were 1000 animals in the labs. Now there are 100 million animals in the labs

Consider the enormous amount of consciousness raising that has gone on. There have been articles in the New York Times Magazine and in Science magazine, for example. But for the animals themselves, nothing has really happened. And that's what we should be concerned about. We must effect change.

First we must consider priorities. Peter Singer really has done that, establishing priorities based on the numbers of animals involved and the intensity of the suffering. Based on that criteria, it *should* be obvious that there are two principal areas on which to concentrate: (1) the animal machines, those bred for people's dinners, and (2) animals in experimentation. Unfortunately, it's not all that obvious.

The incidents that draw the most attention are the visible, random acts of cruelty. In New York, for instance, there has been an enormous amount of activity relating to 80 horses used to draw carriages around Central Park. They are highly visible, and many people see them being driven down the street. Understand that it is not that those 80 horses are not important, or that an animal hurt in the production of a movie is not important, or any of the cruelty inflicted on animals is not important. But the fact is that the suffering of an animal is equal whether it's visible or behind locked doors. The crucial issue is that increasing numbers of animals are suffering intense pain, and it is institutionalized. It's legalized and it's kept out of sight. What we are trying to do is increase the parameter of that which is visible.

To do that we have to focus. Things don't get accomplished by random activity. And if we do not focus on lab animals and factory farming, and get serious about fighting those battles, we won't really be doing much to effect a change in the total amount of animal suffering.

Once we have established priorities, we have to think about how to make an impact. Many of us are motivated by putting ourselves in the position of the victim -- if we were the person, or that animal, how would we want to be treated. In planning strategy and tactics, we should try to conceive how the majority of people perceive the situation in question, how our adversary perceives it. Then decide how to turn things around.

We should also recognize that the fight for animal rights is related to the fight for human rights, in that we are concerned about the quality of all life. The reason that we expend our energies on animal rights is that, of all the groups that are being dominated, exploited and pushed around, the non-human animals are suffering the most intensely. It is their suffering that is expanding most rapidly and is the most socially sanctioned. And we can plan the battle for animal rights by looking at the history and dynamics of the human rights struggle.

One of the first things to learn is that the power structure sets up certain rules. They tell us the system is flexible, and give us instructions on how to work within the structure. Once you follow these rules, you're sure to lose. Because no power structure, ever, has set up rules in order to encourage others to fully share, or win, the power. What we have to do is use all the openings the system offers, exhaust them, and be willing to go beyond that. Only at that point is a power structure willing to take you seriously and consider your demands.

The proof is in the human rights movement's history. In seeking rights for the physically handicapped, those involved petitioned government and went through all the proper procedures. But things only started to happen when they sat in at the offices of the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, or followed the President around, and got media coverage.

The same thing has been true of the women's movement and the struggle for Black rights. Success comes with a combination of a consistent ideology, mobilization, strategy, tactics, a serious plan and a program. You create an outline of what you're aiming at, then things begin to fit together. And there is room for a variety of actions. Some people place ads in the paper, others demonstrate, some write letters to the editor, others organize marches -- and all these energies flow together and are brought to bear on one target. It's like applying a blowtorch to a piece of steel. If you try to cover the whole piece, everything gets lukewarm. But if you target the heat in one spot, you can cut it in half.

Again, there are similarities in the human rights and the animal rights struggles. In both cases, the other side has all the power, the money, the apparatus, the tradition, the establishment. What we have is the might of right, the fact that we can mobilize people, the fact that we want to bring things out into the open

while our adversary wants to keep them secret. One thing we don't have in this battle is the capacity to mobilize the victims, so we have to mobilize ourselves to fight in their defense.

And because the most important thing we have going for us is our credibility, that is something we cannot afford to lose. So we must start with a position that's defensible.

To mobilize people, we must first give them confidence in their capacity to organize, to act and to win. After all, while there is a huge establishment that profits from the suffering of the animals, it is not a monolith. And we, too, have an enormous amount of resources.

We start by fighting a fight, winning it, and using that as a stepping stone to go on to the next. We don't take on everything at once. We move in on a target, stay with it until we've won, and establish credibility.

To illustrate what we're talking about, let's look at a specific struggle we've already won, the fight against the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Winning that one may have had a minimal effect in terms of numbers of animals, but it was a good symbolic victory.

The Museum was an ideal target in many ways, particularly because it was so grotesque. Basically, they were mutilating cats and then observing the effect of the mutilation on the cats' sexual performance. The logical question of course was, "Even if you do find out, what difference does it make?" People could not relate to this as a life and death issue. And the perception of the public is vital in any struggle, because the perception becomes a part of the political reality. The general perception of animal experimentation, for example, is that people are out in the frontiers of science trying to save lives and alleviate suffering. The cat experiments certainly didn't fit that perception. And, they were being performed with tax dollars. There was also the fact that many people didn't feel it was the business of a museum to be engaged in experimentation.

We attacked from a number of directions. We put out a fact sheet on what was going on at the museum and a sheet on what people could do which included a variety of activities, all targeting on the museum. We had demonstrations every week for a year and a half. People contacted their legislators to try to cut off the funding. People contacted donors to the museum to try to get them to apply pressure. We had proxy fights with corporations which had given money to the museum. People used the Freedom of Information Act as a pressure weapon, because the request for information goes all the way up and down the line, and everyone becomes aware of what's happening. Essentially we let the museum know we were digging in and planned to stay until the fight was over and we had won.

An important point is that we attempted to discuss the situation with the museum before we resorted to demonstrations. When they refused to discuss it, the demonstrations began. It established us as being reasonable, as attempting to create a reasonable relationship, as giving the museum a way out. But once we made a serious offer and it was turned down, we mobilized for action.

The attempt to conciliate was also important in the Draize campaign. At one point, we targeted Revlon in full page newspaper ads. In order to get the ads into the New York Times and Daily News, we had to pass their acceptability standards. The fact that we could show the newspapers documentation proving that we had tried for more than a year to have a dialog with Revlon, to no avail, made it clear that we were going to the newspapers because we had no other options open to us.

In both the case of the museum and of Revlon, we set a winning precedent that makes the next battle easier and give us greater credibility.

Both cases were also examples of "single issues" in which we targeted on one specific institution or test that had a significance beyond that particular target. Another advantage of the single issue campaign is that you can have a coalition of groups that will support the issue based on a low common denominator that all can agree on. Once the issue is resolved, the coalition disbands and you start on something else, maybe forming an entirely new coalition.

One thing to remember is to go into the attack on an objective basis. Have your materials together, fact sheets, data, any and all pertinent information. And you have to be able to carry on a dialog: "This is a political issue. You have a right to your opinion. We have a right to ours. Let's discuss the issue." You can't go into an issue and attack your adversary as a sadist. There will then be no dialog and you will lose your credibility.

To give you an idea of how a campaign is actually conceptualized and launched, let's take the Draize Test campaign.

We had won the campaigns on the museum, Amnesty International and Metcalfe/Hatch. But so far they were all symbolic victories. So we looked at the lab animal question. The most rapidly expanding area of animal experimentation is safety testing, where you have regulations that in some cases haven't been changed in 40 years, the effect of which is intense suffering for millions of animals. We singled out one particularly grotesque, gross, vivid and indefensible test, the Draize Test. We began by discussing the issue with a number of people within the Animal Rights movement, and with people who had absolutely nothing to do with our movement. In that way, we gathered people's perceptions. Essentially we said, "This test has been going on for 40 years. Do you know what it feels like to get something in your eye? Nobody is putting any effort into developing other testing methods. And the goal itself is trivial and frivolous. Who really cares if you have one more oven cleaner on the market? Is another shampoo worth blinding rabbits?" Then, even though it did not become a policy of the national coalition, we began to target, picking Revlon. Not because it was any better or worse than any other company, but because they are perceived as being one of the leaders of the industry, so we could apply pressure and drive a wedge into the industry.

Now, the Draize campaign is going extremely well. Different groups are operating on different levels, providing different energies. There has been terrific cooperation from a number of directions. We really got going about a year ago at a meeting here at The Anti-Cruelty Society when Jane Gregory from the Chicago Sun-Times was here and did an article that got picked up in major papers around the country. That helped get the campaign off the ground. And there is a person in Washington who has had experience in drafting a bill – though on a completely non-related issue -- who has been very involved on an anonymous basis. The Draize campaign has really been made possible, not by any one particular person or organization, but by the huge number of people who have become concerned with this issue. That's where the power has come from.

Once we've spotlighted the injustice, we are dependent on the research community to effect change concerning animal experimentation. We're dependent on their imagination, their creativity and their expertise to develop other methods, alternatives.

Last night was proof it can happen. Right here in this room, the National Chairman of AAALAC suggested, in effect, that perhaps 50 to 99% of the animal experimentations now going on shouldn't be done. That's really incredible. A couple of years ago it would not have been possible. But people are coming to see us as issue related. We are not a bunch of sentimental, anti-intellectual kooks. A philosophical foundation has been securely built by people like Peter Singer and Tom Regan, that makes our efforts intellectually viable. And there are people like Bob and Jean Brown and Andy Rowan who

have been building bridges with the research community, which is crucial, because that is where the change ultimately has to come from: As we are sensitizing ourselves, we are sensitizing the media, the legislators. And above all we are telling the research community, "You must know the suffering of animals does count for something. And you can relieve it."

Henry Spira, who conducted a workshop on the second day of the conference, then called for a move from dialog to action:

"It's really impressive to see people from the science community and people that are concerned with animal rights getting together. But there comes a certain point where one has to move from words and sentiments and feelings into action. And I think people like Dr. Feinberg are eminently qualified, and have access to doing just that. I'd like to see people in the research community get together and put pressure on industry, government, and the animal welfare establishment to fund a major toxicology institution that would look for specific overall alternatives to the animal safety tests. Have a public committee evaluate what's going on in the labs, what the amount of pain is and what the possible trade-offs are. We cannot maintain the dialog forever."

After some additional general discussion, the conference adjourned for the evening.

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