Introduction

What motivates moral protest? Why do some individuals rally to the defense of others? How can we explain why some people are willing to offer their time and give money to improve the lot of creatures who are forgotten, and “without a voice”? The study of animal rights activism, like the study of humanitarian activism, is a good way of examining what underlies all militant movements which claim to be based on altruism, solidarity and other ethical principles. It should be noted from the outset that the animal protection movement is highly varied and complex. According to the records of the Conseil national de la vie associative, in France each year since 1998 an average of 532 associations, falling into the category of “friends of the animals,” have been registered. This is equivalent to twice the corresponding figure for the period 1975 to 1990. Although these statistics would seem to indicate that the animal rights movement has been expanding over recent years, a detailed analysis of militant organizations leads us to be wary of jumping to conclusions regarding the causes which lie behind this growth in activism. Indeed, any comprehensive survey of activists involves encounters with an amazing variety of individuals from all social backgrounds. There are the volunteers, often women, who work in animal refuges, where they take care of abandoned cats or dogs. Then there are the campaigners who concern themselves with the plight of endangered wild animals – such as whales, gorillas, rhinoceroses and polar bears – whose natural habitats may be thousands of miles away. There are also philosophy students who, on graduation, decide to champion animal rights or antispeciesism.1 There are also the vegans2 who, at Sunday markets, approach passers-by in order to draw their attention to the suffering inflicted on poultry by foie gras producers. In so-called alternative or autonomous punk circles, anarchists scream their disgust at the systematic exploitation of animals. So the range of militant activities engaged in by animal rights campaigners is enormous: feeding and taking care of animals; writing manifestos or works of moral philosophy; distributing tracts; producing documentaries – some intended to shock, others choosing to inform the viewer, using a more measured scientific tone, of the plight of certain wild species, as well as the fate of animals butchered for their meat, or used in laboratory experiments;

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1 See below for an examination of what is meant by antispeciesism.

2 Vegans eliminate all animal products from their diets, not only meat but also eggs, milk, cheese and honey.
organizing petitions; staging demonstrations outside bullrings, circuses, animal testing laboratories, as well as outside the premises of restaurant chains who source meat produced in factory farms; lobbying the authorities to make regulations to protect animals; organizing commando operations to liberate animals being used for testing purposes by the pharmaceutical industry, or, in the case of minks, being farmed for their fur.

Communicating a clear picture of the animal protection movement in all its complexity is further hindered by the fact that it is often associated with a number of stereotypes and sensational images. Indeed, this cause, which has a particularly long and complex history, seems destined to be reduced in the public mind to Brigitte Bardot’s media outbursts, and night raids on mink farms by animal liberationists. In this essay we will seek to replace this reductive image, using a number of tools which will enable the reader to negotiate the labyrinth of the animal rights movement. With this objective in mind, the issues being examined first need to be placed in their historical context. Like a geologist who seeks to uncover the mysteries of the ground beneath their feet, the sociologist of the animal rights movement has to trace the history of successive sedimentations, sedimentations which have modeled the forms which contemporary activists reuse and adapt. “Historical sociology is a field which promises to enlighten us, and that is because it obliges the researcher to constantly historicize their reasoning, and take account of the ‘dead hand of the past’” (Déloye, 2007, p. 23). Certainly, this approach is not unproblematic. The historical records available to the researcher can be scarce and patchy. While there is quite a lot of material in English covering the developments of campaigns to protect animals over the course of the 19th century, few French historians have chosen to work in this field. Given these gaps in the record, I decided to directly consult the archives in the French National Library, in particular the “Bulletin de la société protectrice des animaux,” published between 1855 and 1937, and the “Bulletin de la société française contre la vivisection” which appeared between 1884 and 1898. In conjunction with a survey of current activists – which will give rise to future publications – this archive work


4 In the rest of the book the Bulletin de la société protectrice des animaux will be abbreviated as “BSPA,” the Bulletin de la société française contre la vivisection as “BSFCV,” and the Bulletin de la société impériale zoologique d’acclimatation as “BSIZA.”
will give us a valuable picture of the evolution of the animal rights cause over an extended period of time. Furthermore, the analysis of the evolution of collective mobilizations for the protection of animals sheds light on a number of phenomena at the heart of some of the classic concerns of political science, namely: mechanisms for the control of violence; the work of sociologist Norbert Elias; the role of moral entrepreneurs and judicial norms in the evolution of moral values; the development of philanthropy; the level of legitimacy of collective mobilizations; rivalries between groups whose status may be rising or declining; the way religious belief informs the views of political activists; the gendered nature of certain forms of activism; and the emergence of the ideologies of political ecology.

In order to better analyze the successive developments in animal rights campaigning this work, wherever possible, relies on a Franco-British comparison. It is further limited not only by its length, but also by lack of data and the extent of the author’s historical expertise, which preclude an equally detailed treatment of the two cases. A more complete and nuanced account would extend further back in time, and include comparisons with other European and North American states, as well as with other countries elsewhere in the world, such as India and China. So the present survey can make no claims to being comprehensive. My objective when writing it was a more modest one: to convince the reader that the study of animal rights deserves much more attention than it has hitherto received.5

5 I would like to take the opportunity to thank Florence Faucher for kindly reading a first version of my manuscript. The responsibility for any errors and omissions in this work remain, of course, the author’s.