Noble gentleness, vile cruelty

The first societies dedicated to animal protection were notable for the respectability and prestige of their supporters, the high membership fees putting off less wealthy potential members. In the 1830s the RSPCA could boast as members not only Queen Victoria but also her mother, the Duchess of Kent, as well as numerous eminent and rich individuals, including the fabulously wealthy Quaker banker Samuel Gurney (Turner, 1980, p. 44). The Parisian SPA, for its part, enjoyed the support of such prominent personages as Prince Jerome Napoleon and his sister Princess Matilda, Prince Adalbert of Bavaria, Grand Duke Nicholas of Russia and the bankers James and Arthur de Rothschild, as well as Alexis de Tocqueville (Fleury, 1995). This would indicate that any investigation of the sociogenesis of animal protection needs to analyze the evolution of the emotions and conduct accepted and valued by the upper echelons of society. In this connection the work of Elias once more provides a particularly pertinent and didactic theoretical framework.

The sensibility of distinguished men

The sociology of Norbert Elias calls for the taking of certain methodological precautions, which have been examined elsewhere (in Heinich, 1997, for example). Here I will confine myself to recalling a number of principles which are indispensible for the analysis of the motivations underpinning the animal welfare movement. The key insight of the German sociologist in this regard was to draw attention to the indissociable nature of two series of evolutions which, because of the misleading dichotomy drawn between sociology and psychology, had been considered separately. They were, on the one hand, the centralization of power and the monopolization of legitimate violence by state and judicial institutions, which had the task of resolving conflict following codified and predictable procedures, and, on the other, the evolution of manners or, more precisely, of thresholds which defined what kinds of behavior were or were not to be tolerated in society. By the expression “The Civilizing Process” Elias indicated a general widespread trend whereby certain behaviors, which were once acceptable, come to be regarded as improper, inappropriate, shocking, even disgusting. One particular historical trend saw violence and public and bloody physical confrontations increasingly become regarded as unacceptable. This led in
turn to the depreciation of the “desire to attack” (*Angriffslust*), the lowering of the threshold of tolerance toward aggressiveness, which accounts for the increasing prohibition of not only actual violence, but also the removal of the right to witness violent acts as a spectator. Generally speaking “Elias noted that the propensity of people to derive pleasure from participating in or directly observing acts of violence was in long term decline in Western Europe” (Elias and Dunning, 1994, p. 314). This evolution clearly manifested itself in the gradual disappearance of such practices as duels, vendettas and other examples of private justice, as well as the use of the stocks, torture and public executions.

The civilizing process is by no means limited to a growing revulsion at attacks on the physical integrity of the human body. It also extends to a growing tendency to take offence at the visibility of natural bodily functions. In this connection we can note that the norms offered to readers of books of etiquette in the Middle Ages differ significantly from the advice given in equivalent modern manuals regarding such questions as how to sit properly at the meal table, how to talk about one’s sexual needs, and how to wipe one’s nose, spit, urinate or defecate. Many acts which used to be performed in public without the slightest embarrassment called for more and more discretion. Given the analysis that follows it is necessary to point out, at the risk of putting off the reader, that this evolution in thresholds of tolerance explains the increasing repulsiveness ascribed to blood, as well as sweat, mucus, spittle and feces. We should note that this general trend also led to a growing propensity for death to be considered as a “dirty and unseemly” thing (Ariès, 1977, p. 277). Symbolic representations of death, the dying, and rotting dead bodies used to be an integral part of daily life. Many ritual practices contributed to making the end of life a familiar, if still harrowing, phenomenon. As the civilizing process proceeded, familiarity with death was replaced by the development of feelings of shame, embarrassment and repulsion, leading to the dead and the dying to be screened from view. In the modern world death is regarded as strange and monstrous, requiring it to be kept away from public life, thus depriving individuals of collective emotional conventions which may help them to come to terms with it (Elias, 1987).

In focusing on what he calls the curialization of warriors, the German sociologist draws our attention to a crucial fact, namely that the original impulse behind the civilizing process originated from within the ruling elites of the European monarchies (Elias, 1975). This was because it was these very elites who were the first affected by the decreasing use of war as a means to resolve conflicts: the power of a small number of princely houses
were no longer regularly threatened from all sides, dueling was replaced by the king's justice, civil war by parliamentary debates, and vendettas were banned after the establishment of a system of tribunals and forces of law and order. Previously, in the age of chivalry, nobles were required to display the knightly qualities needed to survive and win the succession of battles which determined the fate of their houses. As societies became more peaceful, bravery in combat, martial zeal and even the cruel streak required to strike fear into one's opponents no longer appeared to be the qualities required to win the esteem of the people who mattered. As the ability to behave in an aggressive and spontaneous fashion came to be of limited value those moving in higher circles had more regard for individuals who were discreet, self-controlled, measured, thoughtful, and tactful in their dealings with others. Gentlemen were now refined individuals with a gracious and delicate bearing, capable of feeling and appreciating in others discreet and subtly expressed emotions. Expressions of anger and explosions of rage, which in Ancient Greece were expected of great men, were now associated with men of coarse and contemptible character. In order to make his mark in society a gentleman was required to demonstrate the ability to not only repress his most powerful feelings, but also to express, using the established codes, the emotional states which showed that he possessed the required degree of self-control.

Though from a different theoretical perspective, Albert Hirschman brilliantly demonstrated the extent to which the decline in the acceptability of the loud and explosive expression of passionate feelings facilitated the emergence of the economic thinking characteristic of capitalism. Discussions of the “Civilizing Process” and the development of the “Spirit of Capitalism” both mention as integral to these processes a growing aversion to affective reactions with potentially harmful consequences, as well as a common appreciation of inoffensive, constant and predictable conduct, especially when they seem to be universally shared. While Elias examined the evolution of conditions within the ruling elites, Hirschman was concerned with retracing the intellectual history at the origins of a “new distinction which sets up in opposition the interests of man and his passions, [and which now] contrasts the happy consequences of activities dictated by interest with the calamities which follow from giving free rein to passions” (Hirschman, 1980, pp. 33-34). This led to “lucrative activities such as commerce and banking – which had been disapproved of and held in contempt for centuries, because they were seen as the incarnation of greed, the love of money and avarice – coming to be regarded as honorable” (Hirschman, 1980, p. 13). For Max Weber, the fact that this complex set of
developments was as much about morality as economic practices was linked with the rationalization and secularization of Christianity evidenced by the development of Protestantism (Weber, 1999).

Over the following chapters the theoretical framework suggested by the work of Elias, Hirschman and Weber will be indispensable for our account of the succession of developments which have influenced the directions taken by the animal welfare cause, from its earliest beginnings to the present day. In contrast to metaphysical historicist approaches, we will examine the influence on the evolution of sensibility thresholds of the accumulated efforts of a succession of moral entrepreneurs with very different sociological profiles. In retracing the various key contributions and reorientations which have marked the history of the animal cause I hope to clarify an aspect of this history which Norbert Elias failed to address satisfactorily: his analysis, in focusing on the evolution of sensibilities within the upper classes neglected to discuss in detail the mechanisms which led to the diffusion, appropriation and modification of these sensibilities within increasingly wide sections of society.

The banning of repugnant spectacles

The first stirrings of the animal protection movement coincided with the birth of urbanization, industrialization and the capitalist economy. Once again, these changes occurred first in Great Britain, several decades before they reached other European countries. “In 1851, for the first time in British history, more people were living in towns and cities than in rural areas” (Charlot and Marx, 1978, p. 85). While in 1801 city-dwellers represented only 16.9% of the British population this figure rose to 50.1% in 1851 and then 72% in 1891. This increasing concentration of the population in urban areas was, as is well known, a result of the industrial revolution, which, as Friedrich Engels noted, began in England “with the invention of the steam engine and machines used in cotton production” (Engels, 1960, p. 21). The undoubted importance of these technological innovations should not, however, lead us to imagine a new urban environment where the cohabitation of humans and animals, characteristic of rural and agricultural life, swiftly became a thing of the past. In fact, far from being replaced by machines, animals were still very present in urban contexts, principally because economic and demographic change led to the large-scale trading in and transportation of cattle for the purposes of feeding the new urban populations. Slaughter animals continued to be raised in the countryside, but they still had to be
transported to and butchered in the cities, where their meat was consumed by the ever-growing urban populations. Moreover, draught animals greatly contributed to the development of the first waves of industrialization by transporting the raw materials and the finished products to and from the centers of industrial production. Certainly, with the growth of the railway network, animal-drawn transportation was progressively replaced by the train, but horses, mules, donkeys and oxen remained indispensible for the short distance haulage needs of numerous sectors of the economy. Thus, in the urban zones where trade and industry flourished there was a constant traffic of carriages and carts transporting goods for, among others, the mining, wool and brewing industries. Furthermore it should be added that, before the introduction of the internal combustion engine at the beginning of the 20th century, urban dwellers were reliant on hackney carriages and other horse-drawn vehicles for their own transportation needs. So, it was in this context that the exposure of the urban upper classes – with their distinctive sensibilities – to the shocking, noisy and malodorous spectacle of the exploitation of animals significantly contributed to the birth of the animal protection movement.

In fact, many of the protests by early animal welfare activists were manifestations of NIMBYism *avant la lettre*. Indeed, individuals were scandalized not by the suffering of animals per se, but by the fact that it occurred in public places, and that the sensibilities of delicate gentlemen could therefore be exposed to shocking and repugnant spectacles of ill-treatment. It was this assault upon their senses which caused delicate individuals to roundly condemn the sight, noise and smell caused by the manner in which their fellow, more coarse citizens behaved toward animals.

In this connection, the affective reactions to the way animals were butchered were highly revealing. In fact, for Norbert Elias, the clearest indications of the evolution of sensibilities could be found in such apparently insignificant phenomena as changing attitudes to food, and to meat in particular. “The way meat was presented at table changed considerably between the Middle Ages and the modern era. The nature of these changes is most instructive. The upper echelons of medieval society had whole animals or quarters of meat brought to the meal table. This was the usual way of serving fish, birds – sometimes unplucked – hares, sheep and calves. Large game, pigs and oxen would be roasted whole on a spit (Elias, 1973, p. 169). For the elites, who prided themselves on their martial and hunting prowess, there was nothing disgusting about cutting up a large piece of meat which closely resembled a live animal. On the contrary, as late as the 17th and even the 18th century, etiquette manuals stipulated that the ability to
carve up a whole animal was a skill required of a well-brought-up man. At
the beginning of the 19th century, though, when the moral protests which
concern us started to make themselves heard, the quartering of an animal
began to provoke very different affective reactions. “The orientation of
this change was very clear: the original norm, whereby the sight of a dead
animal being carved up at the meal table was regarded as agreeable, or at
least in no way unpleasant, was replaced by another norm which dictated
that the connection between a plate of meat and a dead animal should, as
far as possible, be forgotten” (Elias, 1973, p. 171).

In England, this evolution is clearly reflected in the criteria applied
to the preparation and naming of meat. In the 16th and 17th centuries
the increasing use of horses as draught animals facilitated a rise in the
consumption of beef, to the point where roast beef came to be considered
as a symbol of the nation. Nevertheless, British people’s taste for rare meat
was subsequently largely replaced by a preference for boiled meat, whose
appearance was less evocative of a butchered animal (Thomas, 1985). It is,
moreover, significant that the English language often has two different
words for an animal and its meat – ox / beef; calf / veal; sheep / mutton; pig
/ pork – a semantic subterfuge which helps one forget that the meat is the
product of a process which includes the violent butchering of a live animal.
In France, a similar evolution was behind the setting up, in 1809, of the first
abattoirs. Before then butchers would slaughter animals near their market
stall, behind their shop, or even in a nearby street, leaving animal blood and
guts on the ground in full view of passers-by (Agulhon, 1988). As sensibilities
changed the sights and situations created by these practices increasingly
became regarded as intolerable. As well as the unpleasant sight of blood and
eviscerated carcasses there was also the risk of wounded animals escaping
and running down the street, knocking over everyone and everything in
their paths. In order to remove this butchery from the troubled gaze of
passers-by and people living in the neighborhood the authorities decided to
set up premises on the outskirts of Paris purpose-built for the slaughter of
animals. These places were called “abattoirs.” Once again, an activity which
had been long regarded as acceptable and normal came to generate a level
of disgust which required it to be hidden and confined to places out of the
public eye. The removal of these practices from the public view contributed
to intensifying the defamiliarization with and repugnance toward violence
and the butchery of animals.

Certain evidence clearly indicates that the evolution of sensibilities
regarding the deadly violence used in the production and preparation of
meat for human consumption was a significant motivating factor behind
the earliest animal welfare activism. Consider, for example, a speech made at a meeting of the Society for the Protection of Animals on 4 April 1852. According to one of the zoophiles present, the SPA needed to continue its struggle, in order to make further progress, as its achievements to date were insufficient and risked being overturned.

The creation of five abattoirs in Paris under the reign of Napoleon I certainly performed a great service to the population in terms of food safety and public health. Our eyes are now no longer treated, as they were at the beginning of the century, to the distressing sight of blood flowing along in the gutters of the city, in particular in the streets adjacent to the butcheries of Saint-Honoré and Saint-Germain, among others. We no longer have to suffer the pestilential, nauseating and putrid smells which rose up, with a particular intensity in the warmer summer months, from these narrow, winding scenes of slaughter, which, even after being rinsed down with abundant bucketfuls of water, still left an unhealthy smell in the air. It was also formerly the case that, on certain days of the week, the melting of tallow in scalding tubs gave off a stench of vile fumes, tormenting those unfortunate enough to live in the in or near the same building as a butcher. (Huré, 1855, pp. 48-49)

A British visitor, who had been sent by the RSPCA, echoed these sentiments and stressed the importance of the setting up of abattoirs, which did not yet exist on the other side of the English Channel:

Ours was certainly the Mother society, and yours the daughter, but, as often occurs, Sirs, with parents and children, the latter may turn out to be better than their predecessors, which indeed seems to happened here in the case of your society [...]. Without wishing to flatter your country, or accuse my own of negligence and indifference, I feel oblige to admit, since a good cause can only benefit from the truth being told, that France has overtaken England with regard to the level of humanity shown toward animals. For centuries, and up to the present day, we have allowed animals to be goaded through crowded streets to the central market, named Smithfield Market, which is terribly overcrowded. There they are beaten, covered in bruises and maimed for hours on end. In your country, on the

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9 We should point out that at that time the term “zoophile” did not carry any of the clinical and pejorative connotations it would subsequently acquire in France. On the contrary, zoophilia was initially considered to be one of the most advanced kinds of philanthropy.
contrary, such animals are never forced to walk through the streets and tortured by being squashed together in a central market; you have decent abattoirs on the outskirts of the city. (Huré, 1855, pp. 15-16)

Indeed over a number of years there had been a succession of protests and campaigns calling for the closure of London's Smithfield Market (Kean, 1998). Each week 35,000 sheep and cattle were driven through some of the more chic parts of the city, before reaching their destination: a butcher's stall in Smithfield Market, which was located in the heart of the city. The people who lived along the routes taken by these animals were horrified by the spectacle of cattle being shouted at and beaten by their drivers. Many of those who lived in the immediate vicinity of the market complained about the horrible, sinister, nightly din, produced by large numbers of distressed and sick animals herded together in cramped conditions. Her Majesty's subjects were indignant at seeing the French give the British a lesson in common sense, and called for all butchering activities to be moved to the outskirts of the city, exactly as had been done in Paris. In 1828 a petition presented in Parliament calling for the closure of Smithfield Market was signed by many tradesmen, bankers and local people, but also by some of the pioneers of the animal protection movement, including Richard Martin who, six years earlier, had been instrumental in the passage of the first ever piece of animal protection legislation.

Of course, the fact that Paris had abattoirs before London did not constitute a real challenge to the British SPA's reputation as pioneers of the animal protection cause. Indeed, at a meeting of the French SPA on 4 April 1852 it is clear that no one took the kind words of their English guest at face value:

I desire more than I hope that this premature praise will one day be deserved [commented the Chairman of the meeting]. For now, however, I see no one worthy to be the recipient of such praise. Animals, calves in particular, continue to be driven, if no longer through our streets, then still along the boulevards which encircle the city, tied, bound and tortured, in carts which are frequently too small to accommodate the number of beasts which are crammed into them. (Huré, 1855, p. 16)

In fact these arguments were not new: the topic had often been used in questions for the entrance examination of the Institut de France, founded en 1795, which, in 1802, asked candidates for the morality essay prize to answer the following question: “To what extent is the barbaric treatment of animals a matter of public morality? and should laws relative to such behavior be passed?”
Who has never, while trying to enjoy a quiet day alone [complained one of the exam candidates], been unexpectedly and unavoidably confronted with the sight of a butcher – covered in blood, armed with a knobbly stick, and accompanied by ferocious dogs foaming at the mouth – indiscriminately beating animals who, stunned by the noise, let out horrible bellowing sounds. (Quoted in Pelosse, 1981, p. 13)

The unseemly behavior of tradesman and butchers had long provoked indignation and continued to do so over an extended period. The gradual confinement of violence to within abattoirs had the effect of lowering thresholds of sensibility, so leading people to come to be shocked by practices which they had previously found quite acceptable. In 1875, a member of the SPA complained that in his country insufficient advances had been made in this area: “future generations will be puzzled by the fact that in this century, marked by so much social progress, we have remained, as regards our relations with animals, in state of barbarism. I invite you to visit and observe the situation in our markets, great and small!” (BSPA, 1875, p. 114). We should note that it was an aversion to the public visibility of blood and the bruised bodies of animals which caused the first animal welfare activists to call for the banning of practices which had been long considered to be perfectly normal. Further clear evidence of this can be found in the campaigns launched against the use of dogs as draught animals. Criticisms of this practice were not essentially a show of sympathy for this domestic animal. In fact, those who condemned this particular use of dogs were first and foremost critical of the repugnant spectacles which resulted from this practice. Dogs were forced to drag loads which were far too heavy for animals of their size and strength. Individuals who could not afford to buy a horse, a mule or an ox would overload the carts which the dogs were pulling, causing the exhausted animals to become deformed. Thus, at a meeting of the RSPCA in June 1854, the Marquess of Westminster, after arguing that this use of dogs was inappropriate from a technical point of view, denounced the repugnant fact that “the soles of the animals’ paws, which carry a lot of weight, come into contact with pebbles and stones, causing such bleeding that the vehicle [they are pulling] leaves a trail of blood behind it” (BSPA, 1855).10

10 In England the RSPCA managed to obtain the prohibition of the use of dogs as draught animals in 1839. The French SPA were behind a similar ban in the region of Nord et Pas de Calais in 1860 (Fleury, 1997), but the practice continued in many French departments, as evidenced by a number of prefectoral orders, made in 1895, prohibiting dogs to be used for this purpose since “the states of exhaustion which these animals are forced to suffer make them more vulnerable to rabies, particularly when they are on heat” (BSPA, 1895, p. 81).
Nevertheless, throughout the 19th century, it was the treatment meted out of horses which generated the most indignation among animal welfare activists. Because of their imposing stature and extensive use for the transportation of both passengers and freight, horses were an ever-present feature of the urban landscape, even in the narrowest of streets. Furthermore, going as far back as to ancient times, the association of horses with the aristocracy made them a symbol of nobleness. Many nobles thus regarded the manner in which horses were exploited solely for the maximization of economic returns as an undeserved fall from grace of an animal previously associated with the social preeminence of their own class. The capitalist economy initially developed in an anarchic fashion, and large numbers of horses found themselves in the hands of a “sort of lumpenproletariat who were coarse and without any education or qualifications, and who relied solely on the whip and insistent clamorous shouting” (Agulhon, 1988, p. 250). Beasts of burden were usually under the control of workers who were themselves exploited and put under pressure by bosses eager to make quick profits. In such a context, it was rare for coachmen and carters to show any concern for the fate of these animals, which they tended to regard as no more than simple tools placed at their disposal. These attitudes led to frequent scenes where carters ill-treated their horses which, after being starved, injured and overworked to the point of total exhaustion, finally collapsed and lay dying for hours before anyone took the trouble to remove them from the thoroughfare. Those who witnessed such scenes were as angered by the drivers’ foul language as by their physical abuse of the horses. The survival in the French language of the expression “to swear like a carter” is evidence of the impression left by the coarseness of the language they used. What was even worse was that their excessive use of the whip caused a horrible and exasperating atmosphere to prevail in cities and towns. Thus, in 1839, Frances Maria Thompson, one of the patronesses of the Animal Friends’ Society, complained that: “acts of cruelty committed in our streets have become so frequent that every time one leaves one’s home one is confronted with scenes which shock and hurt our feelings” (Kean, 1998, p. 60). In France, Dr. Dumont de Monteux was motivated to organize the protests which led to the foundation of the SPA as a direct result of the moral shock he had suffered on witnessing a carter subjecting a horse to abuse.11 Scandalized, this upstanding citizen wrote to the Paris

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11 Regarding the care which needs to be taken in the use of the term moral shock, which is sometimes used by specialists in collective action to explain the recruitment to certain causes, I would direct the reader to an earlier article (Traini, 2010).
Prefect of Police a letter which was subsequently published in *La Réaction agricole*. The successful mobilization of public opinion was such that on 5 October 1843 the Prefect of Police signed an order making it a criminal offence to strike a horse with the handle of a whip (Fleury, 1995, p. 20). Just over two years later the same Dr. De Monteux drafted the statutes of the SPA, which was set up largely in order to continue to campaign against the maltreatment of horses. The suppression of repugnant scenes involving the abuse of horses remained a constant preoccupation of the society and its members right up to the beginning of the 20th century, when horse-drawn vehicles came to be largely replaced by motorized transport. Thus in 1876 “the SPA Committee for Horses recommended that a prize of 500 francs be awarded to the inventor of the best machine for the transportation of wounded horses” (BSPA, 1876, p. 122). Nearly thirty years later, in 1904, the protection society had at its disposal “two vehicles for the transportation of wounded horses [...] placed at the disposal of the public, day and night, and free of charge” (BSPA, 1904, p. 179). The same year the board of the SPA decided to finance the creation of two new relay stations for horse-drawn vehicles to add to the five that were already in existence. Over a period of just over a year these stations, located at the foot of the steepest streets in Paris, facilitated 18,554 ascents of urban inclines by offering assistance to teams of horses pulling heavy loads.

It should be stressed that the measures recommended by the first animal protection campaigners were aimed less at decreasing animal suffering than at prohibiting those scenes of exploitation likely to shock the sensibilities of passers-by and local residents. In the light of this it is unsurprising that the Martin Act and the Grammont Law only punished ill-treatment of domestic animals carried out *in public*. This would suggest that the campaigning of animal protection activists may be seen as being a continuation of the same trend as the setting up of abattoirs, insofar as it led to the banning from public spaces of scenes of animal exploitation which involved violence, bodily injury and slaughter. In prohibiting the public display of long-familiar practices, in the name of protecting their own delicate sensibilities, members of the animal protection movement contributed to the lowering of the tolerance threshold toward violence among increasingly broad sections of society.