The Animal Rights Struggle

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To act as an enlightened philosopher

Neither sentimentality nor affectation

In England, the early defenders of the animal welfare cause tended to enjoy close relations with members of the judiciary and the clergy. Most of their French counterparts, on the other hand, were doctors and veterinarians, working in alliance with aristocratic landowners who had been reduced to managing their country estates, having been sidelined by the July monarchy (Pierre, 1998). Indeed among the ten founding members of the SPA – to whom, almost forty years later, the society’s membership would pay tribute – there were no fewer than six doctors, two veterinarians and an agronomist (BSPA, 1881). Representatives of these professions continued to wield a great deal of influence well into the last quarter of the 19th century, and the SPA would accordingly present itself in terms of its essential contribution to the progress of the applied sciences.

[The works of the SPA] can be put into two categories. The first involves the definition of your mission, explaining its significance, making it popular and attractive, generating righteous fervor; they constitute your literature and your philosophy. The rest of your work, which is within the domain of the applied sciences, addresses particular questions concerning the methods of application, in real life, of your declared principles. (BSPA, 1855, p. 104)

Thus, in the early days of the SPA the society made annual awards, promoting inventions and apparatuses which, by reducing all counterproductive suffering, facilitated the work of domesticated animals. In 1875, for example, the society honored the designers of a variety of devices, including a drinking bottle for helping horses swallow medicine, a collar to protect young chicks from being attacked by cats and other small predators, a spring-loaded trap to be used by clay pigeon shooters, and a new muzzle which was lighter and less likely to hurt the animal wearing it than previous designs (BSPA, 1875, p. 182). Henri Blatin, a doctor who was for many years a leading figure in the association, himself invented a number of devices which ensured that if a draft horse collapsed the tongue of its harness would become unbuckled, and the animal immediately freed of its heavy load. Veterinarians within the SPA were able to participate in broader initiatives which aimed to have the work of veterinarians recognized as an activity requiring scientific
expertise gained through studies, which led to a professional qualification (Hubscher, 1999). The promoters of veterinary science, which had hitherto been considered an auxiliary activity in the field of agronomy, undertook to distinguish the work of professional veterinarians from the less prestigious work of blacksmiths, as well as clearly disassociating veterinarians from the numerous healers, bonesetters, and medicine men operating in rural areas, who claimed to be able cure animals of their various ailments. Thus, one SPA member, when calling for the work of veterinary medicine to be recognized as a science, roundly condemned the “the widespread negligence and ignorance of those who treat sick animals [...], the empirics who, despite having no medical training, prescribe remedies prepared in an irrational manner, to the great detriment of the owners of animals and the public purse” (BSPA, 1855, p. 178). The monthly meetings of the SPA provided a forum for preparing arguments, to be presented to the French authorities, for reserving the medical treatment of animals to practitioners who had the requisite scientific training. Here “science” was understood in terms of its capacity to operate free of the irrational prejudices, beliefs and superstitions which had too often shaped mankind’s dealings with animals. Animal protectionists, drawing on their scientific worldview, were proud of their ability not to be influenced by impulsive emotional reactions which could undermine the progress of reason and humanity.

Allow me to acknowledge something, namely that hitherto you have admirably managed to avoid a trap which lies in wait for all the best causes, for nobody can accuse you of either sentimentality or affectation. You have enhanced the reputation of the animal protection cause by guiding it into the domains of science and industrial applications. (BSPA, 1855, p. 7)

While harsh treatment of animals offends the sense of justice present in all our hearts, we are equally outraged by the excessive sentimentality that makes men forget their dignity and lose sight of the true purpose of animals. Those afflicted by this ridiculous tenderness frequently neglect to behave justly to their fellow humans. It is not uncommon for a needy person to be turned away from the door of a home where a pugdog, suffering from severe indigestion, is unable to swallow the biscuit which his mistress has dunked in her coffee before offering it to him. We vigorously reject such sentiments and regard them as moral aberrations. Such sentimentality, which excludes true compassion, has been stigmatized by Nicolas Gilbert in his poem “Fragments du dix-huitième siècle”. (BSPA, 1855, p. 50)
It therefore becomes clear that, in this particular historical context, it would be anachronistic to give the same meaning to the expression “animal protection” as we do today. Initially, the main aim of protection societies was to work for the good of humanity, and not primarily for animal welfare. The earliest animal protection activists believed that the suggestion that the fate of animals was anything other than secondary to that of men would involve accepting the validity of representations quite alien to the views of enlightened philanthropists: “we have no intention of following the example of those bigots in Surat in India, who built a hospital for rats and insects” (BSPA, 1855, p. 50).

More than any other campaign in the 19th century, the mobilization in favor of eating horse meat provides a demonstration of the intellectualized relationship with the animal protection cause which was, for an extended period, characteristic of the views of the most influential members of the SPA. For centuries horse meat had been considered a “shameful meat” (Leteux, 2005). The practice of eating horse meat, which was associated with pagan rituals, was banned by an order of Pope Gregory III in 732. More importantly, the horse came to be regarded as an aristocratic animal, associated with the nobility. As a result it enjoyed a special status, and the consumption of its meat became taboo. On occasion horse meat was eaten when food was scarce, in particular during sieges or arduous military campaigns; this contributed to it being regarded as a food eaten only as a last resort by individuals threatened by extreme hunger or starvation. Furthermore, because of its taboo status, horse meat has frequently been sold by traffickers, who have fraudulently passed it off as beef or venison (Pierre, 2003).

*Lettres sur les substances alimentaires et particulièrement sur la viande de cheval* (Letters on foodstuff, and on horse meat in particular) by Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire was published in 1856. As well as being a member and director of the SPA Saint-Hilaire was also a member of the French Academy of Sciences, director of the National Natural History Museum where he was also a professor, a member and honorary inspector of the Council for Public Instruction, professor of zoology at the Faculty of Sciences, and president of the Acclimatization Society of Paris. In this text, which expanded on some lecture notes, the distinguished naturalist presented a defense of the practice of eating horse meat. Quoting statistics which showed that a sizeable proportion of the French population, particularly the working classes, were undernourished, he argued that horse meat could provide an accessible and relatively inexpensive source of nourishment. He also points out that, contrary to popular prejudice, horse meat is actually quite
palatable and healthy and cites as evidence of this the “hippophagic meal”
organized by Professor Renault at the Alfort veterinary school during which
eleven guests dined on the meat of an old paralytic horse (Pierre, 2003). The
legalization of horse meat butchers’ shops was also considered to be
desirable from the point of view of public morality, insofar as it would also
put a stop to the illegal trade in horse meat. The open sale of horse meat by
licensed butchers would indeed put a stop to

the furtive dealing in “suspect meat,” in attics, in cellars, by passers-by,
by smugglers, by prostitutes, and by disreputable individuals without a
profession! These transactions take place out of reach of the long arm of
the law, by those who fear and flee the police! Instead of honest business
conducted openly, we have fraudulent deals struck in the shadows, in
“mass graves” hidden deep in the dwellings of the poor! (Saint-Hilaire,
quoted in Pierre, 2003)

The naturalist’s response to those who were angered at the thought of such
a familiar animal being cut up by a butcher was that conferring upon an old
horse economic and nutritional added value was the best way of ensuring
that it suffered a more gentle death than animals sent to rendering plants.
Saint-Hilaire’s position attracted a great deal of support, particularly from
within the scientific community.

Although, for reasons which will be analyzed below, a number of mem-
bers opposed the campaign for the legalization of horse meat, the celebrated
naturalist’s views were generally warmly received within the SPA. Émile
Decroix, a trustee and committee member of the SPA before becoming its
president between 1886 and 1888, soon became one of the leading advocates
of hippophagy. The former army veterinarian, who founded the French
Association against Tobacco Abuse and was also a member of the French
Society against Alcohol Abuse, campaigned for better public health by
organizing hippophagic banquets in order to demonstrate the health
benefits of eating horse meat. Between 1863 and 1895, he wrote and had
published a number of works praising the virtues of horse meat, including
a text entitled “The Prejudices against Eating Horse meat,” which he read to
a meeting of the Society for the Protection of Animals on 21 January 1864.
During this campaign another eminent member of the SPA, Dr. Henri Blatin,
took over the Presidency of the Committee for the Propagation of Horse
meat. The members of the committee went to great lengths to make their
message heard: brochures, lectures and banquets organized “in the public
interest,” as well as the weekly cutting up of a horse for distribution of the
meat to poor families. In June 1866, their efforts were rewarded when the Prefecture of Police passed an edict authorizing and regulating the sale of horse meat for human consumption.

“From the point of view of self-interest properly understood”

In Chapter 1 we noted, echoing Albert Hirschman, the extent to which upper-class sensibilities evolved in such as way that passions were discredited, and strictly economic interests became an ever more central concern. These changes were regarded as having the virtue of fostering inclinations which were both harmless and very predictable. Having adopted this way of thinking themselves, the ruling elites felt duty bound to propagate it among the lower classes, from which they recruited their wealth-generating industrial workforce. The importance of the ruling classes’ preoccupation with “protecting” their workforce needs to be stressed for the emergence of the first animal protection mobilizations to be properly understood. Indeed members of the British establishment began to mobilize to denounce and ban popular pastimes involving animals as long as twenty years before the creation of the world’s first animal protection society.

In 1800 and 1802 Parliamentary bills were introduced attempting to have bullbaiting suppressed. Bloodsports involving bulls were still widely practiced in rural communities in Britain and, as was the case in other European countries at the time (Saumade, 1994 and 1998), they provided an opportunity for displays of a sense of community. At the time of Great Britain’s early industrialization, such events were organized in urban areas where there was a high density of rural emigrants who had come to the city to find work. The fact that bullbaiting gave rise to a lot of drinking as well as creating a great commotion in the proximity of workshops and factories was a source of anxiety for the both custodians of public morality and industrialists. The pious Society for the Suppression of Vice, which was founded in 1802, considered bullbaiting to be an activity which corrupted men’s minds by stimulating their appetite for questionable sensual pleasures. This practice was shocking, therefore, not on account of the suffering it caused to bulls, but because it encouraged people to develop a taste for excessive drinking, noisy behavior, and disorderly conduct in public, and also provoked in spectators insatiable and unpredictable urges to be cruel (Turner, 1980, p. 22). So, in 1835, under pressure from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Parliament voted to ban bearbaiting. In 1849 another act was passed banning cockfighting.
In fact what made these outlawed activities all the more intolerable was that they undetermined the worker discipline necessary in increasingly regulated industries.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth century much of the pressure to eliminate cruel sports stemmed from a desire to discipline the new working class into higher standards of public order and more industrious habits. It has often been remarked upon (and was even noticed at the time) that it was the sports with a strong proletarian following which were outlawed – cock-throwing, bullbaiting and cock-fighting – whereas the gentlemen’s fox-hunting, fishing and shooting survived unscathed. (Thomas, 1985, p. 242)

The concern to create a disciplined workforce of unskilled laborers, necessary to ensure good economic returns, was also one of the motives behind the creation of the Metropolitan Drinking Fountain and Cattle Trough Association (MDFCTA). This association, based in London and founded in 1859, was made up of rich donors who decided to finance the construction and upkeep of fountains and drinking troughs throughout the city. This initiative won the admiration of the SPA membership, who paid tribute to “the charitable men, motivated by the desire to alleviate the suffering of not only their fellow men, but also of animals” (BSPA, 1876, p. 140). Nevertheless, the installation of numerous fountains and drinking troughs in English cities also aimed to divert carters and coachmen from the drinking establishments where they would often stop – too often for the liking of their employers – to drink beer. “Most carters [warned the French author of the Manual for Owners and Drivers of Draught Animals] have fallen into the habit of stopping off at every inn and tavern along their way. Those who frequent these hotbeds of drunkenness and dens of iniquity are soon dragged down into stupefaction and destitution” (Roche, 1880, p. 8). The workers in question were clearly perfectly aware that behind invitations to quench their thirst at these fountains and water troughs there was a disciplinary intent, and they also undoubtedly felt humiliated at being invited to drink alongside their cattle. Indeed, on occasion the fountains and water troughs were vandalized, leaving those who had funded them indignant, and outraged at such irresponsibility and ingratitude. In 1876 the SPA membership registered their dismay at the problems faced by their counterparts in New York City and Philadelphia who, having had the good sense to follow the lead of English animal protectionists and set up drinking fountains in their cities, “nevertheless saw many of the fountains
vandalized, sometimes so badly that they ceased to function properly” (BSPA, 1876, p. 359).

While the first French activists undertook to discourage the brutal treatment of animals by the lower classes, they were also motivated by a desire to maximize wealth creation. Indeed, an SPA bulletin reminded members of one of the vital objectives of their combat, namely “to instruct the ignorant, to appeal to their generosity and, above all, to make them realize that the adoption of such generous sentiments was in their own interests” (BSPA, 1881, p. 182). So, in this case, the promotion of the gentler treatment of animals was tantamount to exhorting the masses to demonstrate the strict economic rationality vital to the creation of the wealth of nations.

This gentleness brings other advantages, if considered from the point of view of self-interest properly understood. The animals which will help us in our work will be stronger and more docile, and they will live longer. Our animals will be healthier, and will provide us with food of a higher quality. Finally, thanks to more enlightened treatment, we will see improvements in all breeds of domesticated animal. (BSPA, 1855, p. 52)

By propagating and defending the principles outlined above our work will promote better public morals, and greater public prosperity. By taking better care of our herds we will have less reason to fear the outbreaks of epizootics which in the last fifty years alone have cost our country over two billion francs. With more domesticated animals the country becomes more prosperous and agriculture flourishes. (BSPA, 1904, p. 155)

The ever-present preoccupation with optimizing economic performance explains the close relationship which the SPA cultivated for over a century with many organizations involved in the exploitation of animals. In the first place, as we have already seen, the SPA had close ties with the veterinary profession, which was establishing itself at the time, and regarded veterinary science as vital to the field of zootechnics, because of its contributions to progress in the rearing of livestock and draught animals. Moreover, a number of SPA bulletins quoted in full deferential letters from horse-drawn transport companies, eager to express their sympathy for the society’s campaigns. In fact, for these companies, campaigning against the ill-treatment of these animals was linked to a wish to protect carriage horses from the negligence of those employees who were insufficiently committed to maximizing their employers’ profits. Finally, it is significant that a number of leading figures in the animal protection movement, including General
Grammont and the president of the SPA the Viscount of Valmer, were also titular members of the Société zoologique d’acclimatation. This association, which was founded in 1854 by the celebrated naturalist Saint-Hilaire, and soon changed its name to the Société impériale d’acclimatation, brought together scholars and other enlightened individuals with the purpose of, firstly, “introducing, acclimatizing and domesticating animal species, both useful and ornamental,” and, secondly, “perfecting and breeding newly introduced and domesticated animals” (BSIZA, 1854, p. 15). In other words this society shared the goals of both veterinary science – improving animal breeding methods – and the French colonial project, which sought to exploit to the full the resources of the territories covered by the French Empire. Society members offered to contribute their zoological expertise to the systematic investigation of the possibility of acclimatizing animal species native to France’s colonies, such as silkworms, yaks, angora goats, leeches, ostriches and dromedaries. Throughout the 19th century articles published in the SPA reflect a high level of interest in both scientific prestige and in the work of the Société Impériale Zoologique d’Acclimatation.

The earliest animal protectionists’ conviction that they were working for the common good was therefore strengthened by the knowledge that they were providing, and helping to spread, the expertise required to establish the kinds of relationships with animals which would take into account the varying impact different species had on the economy. This prioritization of economic concerns explains the importance that was attached to a system of categorization which set up so-called “useful animals” in opposition to “pests.” Efforts to rehabilitate a number of species which had come to be the victims of unfair prejudice, such as bats, hedgehogs and toads – who, as insectivores, were in fact the farmer’s invaluable allies – went hand in hand with calls to exterminate animals which “damaged land occupied by man” (BSPA, 1861, p. 118). When seen in this light, the violent treatment of animal species classified as pests is not inappropriate, insofar as it constitutes a response to the unacceptable economic damage they cause. This also explains why it was seen as “important to draw up an exhaustive list [of pests], in order to target such harmful beasts as the squirrel” (BSPA, 1908, p. 102).

In addition to this, SPA members frequently emphasized the need to teach children to properly distinguish between species which were useful, and therefore deserving of protection, and those which needed to be ruthlessly exterminated. In 1875 the SPA awarded its silver medal to the author of a “publication [which] makes an important contribution to animal protection doctrine” by producing tables to be used in natural history lessons: thanks
to these tables, which were hung up in over two thousand school classrooms and study rooms, “around three thousand children are now able to identify useful animals, and rethink some of their, sadly, widely held prejudices” (BSPA, 1875, p. 172). In 1882 the sixth edition of Les Martyrs du travail (le cheval, l’âne, le mulet, le boeuf): notions de médecine vétérinaire: conseils aux agriculteurs à propos des animaux utiles et nuisibles (Martyrs to work: Horses, donkeys, mules and oxen: An introduction to veterinary medicine: Animals that are useful and animals that are harmful to agriculture) by A. Édouard Roche, was published. Roche’s book received an award from the SPA, and the Chief Commission of the Ministry of Public Instruction placed a copy of it in every school library in France. The Commission also recommended that the book not only be widely read, but also offered at school prize-givings. It was also communicated that teachers should take special care that the book should not be put in the hands of a child until he or she had the necessary intellectual maturity to clearly distinguish useful animals from harmful animals. That is why an SPA spokesman recommended “removing the names of fierce animals [from the tables which distinguished the various species]. Nursery schoolchildren are too young to understand the role of these animals in God’s plan, and why, while they use to serve the purpose of decreasing the surplus population of certain species, in areas inhabited by man they are now regarded as useless pests” (BSPA, 1861, p. 118).

Once the age of reason has been reached, the discriminatory treatment reserved for animals, which classifies them as “useful” or as “pests,” appears sufficiently self-evident as to go unquestioned. In 1896 Émile Zola reported on the enthusiasm demonstrated at an SPA prize-giving ceremony for “the star of the show, a young 16-year-old shepherdess, Mlle Camille Camelin, from Trion in Yonne, who risked her life by standing up to a wolf, in order to protect her flock. She was given an ovation by those present, and I was most honored to be one who presented her with her medal” (BSPA, 1896, p. 218). It is clear that animal protectors were quicker to respond to the admirable and exemplary character of human beings than to express concern for the fate of nonhuman animals – such as wolves or sheep – who are evaluated, very unequally, according to their economic usefulness. In other words, they were still a long way from a world where a species like the wolf could become one of the emblematic figures of the animal protection movement.