

# Towards an Animalist International

*by Alexia Renard*

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**Antispeciesism, which can be traced back to nineteenth-century activism, today comprises a range of discourse and strategies, which it is important not to oversimplify.**

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About: Jérôme Segal, *Animal Radical : Histoire et sociologie de l'antispécisme*, Montréal, Lux, 2020, 216 p., 16 €.

Over recent years, the French-language historiography of the animal cause has seen a wealth of detailed studies in both historical sociology and the sociology of activism.<sup>1</sup> Among these, Jérôme Segal's book *Animal Radical* offers a historical perspective on antispeciesism, a concept that was little known to the general public a few years ago but that is now called upon in political debates by its advocates and adversaries alike. Building out from a broad question about the origins of the animal cause and its most radical aspects, this book looks at the history of this school of thought whose proponents reject the idea that the human race is more worthy of moral consideration than other animal species. The concept of radicality lies at the heart of the book's analysis and is understood, variously, in terms of discourse, in terms of action, or, in its original meaning, as a means of approaching the root of a problem – in this instance, speciesism.

The book is divided into two parts. The first starts at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the first animal protection societies were founded, and explains how by the end of the century certain activists had shifted from protection to

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Christophe Traïni, *La Cause animale, essai de sociologie historique*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2011; Fabien Carrié and Christophe Traïni, *S'engager pour les animaux*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2019.

a more active defence of animal rights that then led to the birth of the antispeciesist movement from the 1970s onwards. The second part offers a sociological perspective on contemporary antispeciesism, shedding light on the various strategies of activist associations as well as the complex debates surrounding speciesism. Three national cases are used to illustrate the analysis: France, Quebec, and Israel.

## The History of the Radical Animal Cause

While the first legislation against cruelty to animals (specifically livestock) was introduced, in France in particular, by men from different ends of the political spectrum, the most radical champions of the animal cause were above all to be found in left-wing circles. While Marx and Engels rallied animal protectors in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), figures such as the geographer Élisée Reclus and the anarchist activist Louise Michel voiced arguments that ultimately differ little from those of today's militants. Reclus placed the murder of humans and animals on the same level and included animals in his 'affection of socialist solidarity' (p. 35). As for Louise Michel, in her *Mémoires* she was among the first to draw a parallel between the exploitation of humans and that of animals. For her, it was the 'torture inflicted upon animals' (p. 36) that led her to revolt, from a very young age, against the power of the strong and the powerful. The concept of antispeciesism may not yet have been invented, but we nevertheless find traces of similar ideas in the work of certain authors, particularly in their criticisms of breeding and hunting. Segal also shows that activism on behalf of animals, such as that exhibited by Marie Huot who founded the *Ligue populaire contre l'abus de la vivisection* in France in 1883, was considered pathological by various psychiatrists of the time. People who no longer ate meat and opposed the slaughter of animals were seen as suffering from what doctors labelled 'zoophilia,' an affliction ranked alongside 'sapphism' and 'pederasty' (p. 43) as a sign of mental degeneration.

It is not until the mid-twentieth century that the concept of 'antispeciesism' emerged, modelled on the word 'antiracism' by a group of students at Oxford. The philosopher Peter Singer, who was connected with this group, helped to popularize the term with his book *Animal Liberation* (1975). Singer adopted a utilitarian vocabulary inspired by Jeremy Bentham and defended the idea that most animals have interests, among which the most fundamental is avoiding suffering: this, he argued, should be the only moral criterion of import, beyond the question of species. Alongside the publication of Singer's book, which received much attention, groups such as the *Animal Liberation Front* were formed in the United Kingdom. These groups advocated not so much the protection as the liberation of animals, whether by opening their cages or more generally by freeing them from the yoke of humans. At the same time, in the

United States the former human rights activist Henry Spira had an impact with his campaign against testing cosmetics on animals. In France, antispeciesism became known somewhat later in the 1990s via a journal founded in Lyon, *Les Cahiers antispécistes*, which placed sentience (or sensitivity) at the heart of its thinking. While these antispeciesists were radical in their discourse, proposing to overthrow the speciesist order, they also defended a pragmatic view of activism later emulated by the L214 'Éthique et animaux' [Ethics and Animals] association founded in 2008.

## Sociology of Antispeciesism

The book *Animal Radical* is more than an intellectual history: it offers a political, sociological, and cultural perspective on antispeciesism. Thus, we discover that the anarchist defence of animals in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was part of a broader challenge to industrialisation: by founding vegan communities in France and Switzerland, some anarchists advocated returning to nature to liberate themselves from the 'so-called progress of civilisation' (p. 47). Segal also describes how, more than twenty years after the creation of the Vegan Society in the U.K., 1970s and 1980s English punk groups, such as *Conflict*, came to defend the animal cause and vegetarianism in their capacity as pacifists.

In the second half of his book Jérôme Segal – setting out to write a situated history of antispeciesism – analyses how activists, associations, and groups appropriate, transform, and develop antispeciesist ideas. His investigation is based on approximately thirty semi-structured interviews, several months' participant observation in an activist collective (269 Life), and his own personal knowledge of the animalist scene.

The author first focuses on the range of views and strategies that inform the movement. He retraces the origins of the different analogies between the exploitation of animals and, on the one hand, the Holocaust but also, on the other, slavery or the treatment of women. Segal thus identifies the existence of a 'direct, technical, and ideological line of descent' (p. 118) from slaughterhouses to the Nazi extermination camps, the conception of which was probably influenced by Fordism, itself inspired by the modernisation of slaughtering techniques at the beginning of the twentieth century. On a conceptual level, many authors such as Theodor Adorno, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Primo Levi, and Marguerite Yourcenar have drawn parallels between genocide and the treatment of livestock. Analysing these comparisons allows Segal then to address the convergence of feminist, antiracist, anticapitalist, ecologist, and LGBTQ struggles within a movement of which two thirds are women. However, the antispeciesist movement seems divided between the desire to present a common front

against all oppression and the desire to place at its heart the specificity of the animal cause, often relegated to the background of activist struggles.

The author then goes on to analyse the strategic debates running through the movement. At the centre of these debates lies a dual tension between, on the one hand, reformism and radicalism and, on the other, veganism and antispeciesism. Certain activist groupings such as *Boucherie Abolition* in France consider the action taken by L214 – such as video recordings inside abattoirs – too timid and criticise this ‘reformist’ approach (p. 167). *Boucherie Abolition*, like *269 Libération animale* in Switzerland, advocates more radical methods, for example freeing animals or blocking abattoirs. As for veganism, certain activists consider it to be a form of depoliticised consumerism in contrast with an antispeciesist movement that is more explicit in designating speciesism as the political enemy and non-human animals as its victims.

## Discussion

*Animal Radical* provides a subtle, well-documented, and accessible picture of the antispeciesist cause. The historical narrative and sociological investigation allow for a fluid reading experience that carries the reader with it. By always rooting concepts in their socio-political context, the book uses the past to shed light on contemporary debates and underscores how antispeciesism can be traced back to the first radical champions of the animal cause even though the 1970s saw a turning point in the movement, with animal ethics becoming as much a subject of interest for intellectuals as for the activists who took up its concepts.

The choice of national cases can be questioned though. While we understand, implicitly, that Israel, Quebec, and France have been chosen because the antispeciesist movement is more visible there than elsewhere, it might nevertheless have been interesting to look to other places too. In certain countries, the movements have a collective identity that is closer to veganism than to antispeciesism, and activists tend more generally to describe themselves as animal rights activists – for example in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, although the term ‘antispeciesist’ originated in the United Kingdom, Anglophone activists seem less quick to use it today, including in Quebec where 7.5% of the population is made up of native English speakers. Does referring to a ‘globalised’ and ‘internationalist’ movement (p. 9, p. 153) not, therefore, run the risk of grouping together under the banner of ‘antispeciesism’ a movement that is in fact very diversified? There would ideally have been more about the respective specificities of the French and Quebec political contexts. What has been the local impact on the

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<sup>2</sup>On this topic, see Elizabeth Cherry’s book *Culture and Activism: Animal Rights in France and the United States*, London, Routledge, 2016.

antispeciesist movement of different activist cultures – one forged in a sovereign nation-state permeated by Republicanism and the other in a French-speaking province that is linguistically isolated within the Canadian federation?

Another criticism relates to the book's sociological aspect. There is no specific analysis of the gender, age, or socio-occupational category of the people encountered: the question of the type of social strata mobilised thus remains unanswered. For example, in their socio-geneses of the movement, Traïni (2011), Ingram (2013), and Carrié (2015)<sup>3</sup> have shown (respectively for France, the United Kingdom, Quebec, and Ontario) how political and cultural contexts influenced the social categories that became involved in the animal cause, from the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century. In Ontario, for example, the animal rights movement was originally driven by women and social reformists, whereas in Quebec it was the English-speaking bourgeoisie that was at the forefront of the cause. And what of today? What are the contemporary social determinants of this activism that is enjoying increasing levels of popularity and legitimacy? For that matter, what paths do these forms of activism take? Segal begins a fascinating analysis of this question when he mentions how, in Israel, a number of disillusioned peace activists made the transition to antispeciesism, and it would have been good to read more about the trajectories of the other activists cited in the book. However, these remarks are more a call for further research than any real criticism of the book itself, which does not set out to provide a detailed sociology of the movement.

To conclude, the strength of *Animal Radical* lies in its author's activism and in his ethnographic knowledge of the movement. As the historian Antoine Prost has reminded us, the history of the working classes in the twentieth century was often written with full scholarly integrity by historians sympathetic to the workers' movement, a number of whom were members of the communist party. As an activist and a historian, Jérôme Segal is part of this tradition of engaged intellectuals capable of constructing a rigorous and distanced historical overview of causes that are often caricatured or misunderstood. *Animal Radical* offers an insight into a movement preoccupied with issues that concern us all. Against the backdrop of an environmental and health crisis, an ethical crisis is also looming as more than 70 billion animals are slaughtered every year in the world in conditions that few people still endorse.

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<sup>3</sup> Christophe Traïni, *La Cause animale, essai de sociologie historique*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2011; Darcy Ingram, 'Beastly measures: Animal welfare, civil society, and state policy in Victorian Canada,' *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2013, p. 221-52; Fabien Carrié, *Parler et agir au nom des 'bêtes': production, diffusion et réception de la nébuleuse idéologique 'animaliste' (France et Grande-Bretagne, 1760-2010)*, PhD thesis, 2015.

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