

Ethical reasons for animal liberation

Every year, humans kill 66 billion nonhuman land animals and more than a trillion aquatic individuals for the purpose of consumption. Countless other nonhuman animals are tortured in laboratories or exploited for human clothing, leisure, sports, or work. The immense suffering of animals contrasts with a general neglect of the issue in left and green movements, and theory. The aim of the session *“Degrowth and Animal Liberation”* is to cover this deficit and to make a strong plea for the integration of animal liberation into degrowth theory and practice. This first contribution examines the ethical foundations of the animal liberation perspective.

Today, virtually everyone agrees that the animals typically used in animal agriculture such as cows, pigs, chicken or sheep are not merely things or means of production. Instead, it is fairly generally accepted that these animals are sentient subjects, i.e. they are able to feel pain and to suffer, as well as to experience happiness. Correspondingly, it is equally uncontroversial that we are ethically required to take the interests of these animals into account – we cannot treat them just as we please or just in the way the capitalist economy can make the most profit with them. Nevertheless, it is far less clear to what such ethical consideration really amounts to. While many people think that the implementation of anticruelty or animal welfare legislation as it exists in most countries is enough to meet the ethical demands, animal rights theorists have argued that we need to abolish the use and instrumentalization of animals altogether. This claim can be defended by showing first that every use of animals for the purpose of food production violates important interests of theirs and second that no such use can be considered necessary for human flourishing.

When animals are bred within the meat, milk and egg industries, this happens with almost no regard for the wellbeing of the animals. “Laying hens” produce far more eggs than they need for their own reproduction, exhausting their bodies; broilers and pigs gain weight so quickly that their skeleton cannot keep pace; cows have unhealthily big udders etc. All farmed animals spend their whole life in captivity, typically in cramped and filthy conditions where they stand and live in their own excretions. It is almost impossible for them to engage in normal social relations with other animals or to perform their natural behaviors. This is not only true of animals in so-called factory farms, but also for most animals living on “organic” farms or in other kinds of alternative systems. Furthermore, in all forms of animal husbandry the animals are not allowed to spend time with their children or parents respectively, they are subjected to mutilations that serve the interests of their keepers, and they are killed in slaughterhouses after a fraction of their potential life-span. There can be no efficient production of meat, milk or eggs without placing the interests of humans over the interests of the animals involved, without harming animals, or without killing them.

The second point mentioned was that animal husbandry is not necessary for human flourishing. It is confirmed now by the American as well as the Canadian Dietary Association that a vegan diet is suitable for all stages of the life-cycle including during pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence.

Sometimes it is claimed that animal husbandry was a necessary part of a sustainable agriculture. Apart from the fact that at the moment animal husbandry is one central factor in environmental destruction and climate change, it is not true that we need any of it for a sustainable future. Stock-free farming systems already exist and can and should be further developed.

Given that we can live healthily and happily without using animals for food, and given that such use always violates the interests of morally considerable beings, it follows that it should be abolished. Similar arguments lead to the claim that we need to integrate the needs and interests of wild animals in our politics.

Unfortunately, there is little regard for nonhuman animals in the current movement for degrowth. While the conservation of nature and biodiversity figures as an important aim, the individual claims of animals are rarely considered. The other speakers in the session will highlight theoretical connections between degrowth theory and the animal liberation perspective. As regards practical politics, it is easy to see that the animal industries are highly destructive on several accounts. The degrowth movement should join forces with the animal liberation movement to strengthen protest and resistance against this ever-growing industrial sector.

A more controversial question is what kind of alternative is to be envisioned – a small-scale, organic agriculture that still uses nonhuman animals for the production of meat, milk, and eggs, or a stock-free organic agriculture that tries to do without the exploitation of animals altogether? Many people favor the first option primarily because they have wrong empirical convictions about the possibilities of sustainable farming without animals. Although it cannot be denied that there remain some insecurities and controversies about particular problems, it is important to see that a complete abolition of animal use can at least be imagined and aspired, so that apparent conflicts between the goals of the animal liberation and the environmentalist degrowth movement can and should be overcome.