

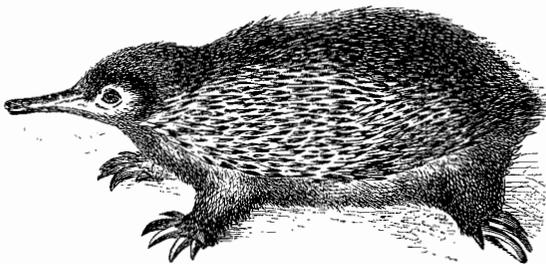
Animal Liberators

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**A review of Susan Sperling's
*Animal Liberators:
Research and Morality*
(Berkeley: University of California
Press, 1988)**



Dr. Sperling's letter in response to this review appeared in the Spring 1990 issue, a reversal of proper sequence.

Ever since I joined FRAME's staff in 1976 and became an active player in animal protection, I have searched for information and analysis on the movement. As all those involved in animal protection know, there are many interesting and eccentric (some might use more pejorative terms) individuals who participate in various types of animal activism. In addition, the animal protection movement spans the political spectrum with alliances between someone like Richard Morgan (who used Maoist sayings in his writings) and The Humane Society of the United States whose Chairman

of the Board was a Republican Eagle (a \$10,000 donor) and Vice-Chairman of the American Bible Society. Explaining why these people are drawn to the common cause of animal protection and why the movement has experienced such a renaissance over the past two decades is not easy.

Therefore, when I heard that a book on the animal protection movement by an anthropologist had just appeared, I immediately ordered a copy and eagerly awaited its arrival. I started reading as soon as it arrived but did not complete it until almost eighteen months later. While I was intrigued by the author's description of her own feelings about animal research and by some of her analyses (e.g. — on the boundaries between human and animal, on the relationship between feminism and animal protection, and on the importance of modern ethological data to the movement), I was disappointed by the relative superficiality of her research into the movement and her errors (mostly minor) in her description and characterization of the movement. Now that I have re-read the book (finishing it this time), I have had to revise my judgment. The analysis is much more perceptive than I originally thought but appears to be based less on evidence collected from the movement than the author's own reading and research interests. However, before coming to some conclusion, let us first review the contents and the argument.



REVIEW



The Contents of the Book

(i) Preface and Introduction

The book starts with a preface, in which the author explains that she has tried to avoid the usual polemical approach that characterizes much of the literature (she succeeds) and follows with nine chapters. The first chapter discusses a number of issues. These include:

- the distinction between animal rights and animal welfare (she uses the term "humane"),
- her own experience with animal research and then, later, with animal activists when they attacked her supervisor's research,
- the question of boundaries between human and animal (or culture/nature) and the blurring effect of modern animal behavior research, and
- the parallels between the Victorian and present day protests over animal research.

She argues that activists in both periods were upset about "perceived manipulation and corruption of nature by human technology, for which scientific use of animals is a key symbol." (p. 17) She argues that other similarities between the two periods include the viewing of animal research as a symbol of more pervasive evils, the linking of women and [concern for] animals, the concern with revitalizing a society that is seen as morally diseased and dangerous, and the focus on animals in both eras. Her hope is to provide a "wide-angle lens" view of the movement, leaving others to fill in the details.

(ii) The Victorian Antivivisection Movement

The second chapter describes the 19th century antivivisection movement in England and starts drawing parallels between this movement and the modern animal rights activism. For example, she notes that for both movements, the "act of vivisectioning an animal is symbolic of what is viewed by adherents as the central dilemma of society: the technological manipulation of living things by institutions antithetical to the natural order." (p. 26) In addition, both reflect societal anxieties about the 'modern' culture and view animals as rich symbols

of nature. She depicts the antivivisection movement, which is against painful research on animals, as fundamentally different from the traditional humane movement, which is against animal cruelty. In addition, the early humane movement had a distinct class bias as it focused on animal abuse by the working class while the antivivisection movement was targeted against an elite. She then argues (incorrectly) that the modern animal rights movement has followed the Victorian antivivisection movement and focused specifically on the use of animals in science. Her description of the two movements is broadly accurate but there were a number of claims which missed the mark.

For example, she states that American humane societies, like the British, were always well funded. This is not the case. The RSPCA struggled in its early years as did many American humane societies, although the ASPCA was well supported and George Angell stood behind the MSPCA with his own money. Sperling claims that, while some early humane society leaders were against animal experimentation, vivisection was not a major issue in England until the middle of the 19th century and never became a major issue in the USA. In England, animal research was relatively rare until the middle of the 1800's and that may explain why it was not a major issue for the early humane society leaders. In America, there were a number of major fights over animal research that were taken very seriously by medical leaders such as William Welch of Johns Hopkins and Walter Cannon of Harvard. Both men devoted considerable energy to combat the antivivisection movement, and, from 1890 to 1916, antivivisection was perceived as a major threat by medical research interests in the USA. It should also be noted that Henry Bergh, the founder of the ASPCA, campaigned against vivisection although, after his death, the organization reverted to support for the medical profession and did not again join the ranks of the critics until 1972.

Sperling also notes the link in the 19th century movement with evangelical religions and feminism and points to the resurgence of evangelism, feminism and animal rights in modern times. I would agree with her linking of feminism but the connection with evangelism is much more subtle, if it exists at all. Studies of public attitudes to animals indicate that evangelical religious movements (and those who attend church regularly) are less sympathetic to animal issues than those with little or no religious affiliation. Finally, Sperling claims that

“science and medicine were more autonomous and less vulnerable to public opinion in Victorian England than in this country today.” No data is provided to support this claim, and I would suggest that this is a case where Sperling allows her own experiences and perceptions as a research scientist to intrude into her anthropological analysis. In both eras, the medical establishment has been faced with widespread public concern but has had strong ties with the power elite that have allowed it to engage in the sort of back-room power politics that the animal protection movement can only dream about.

(iii) Natural Incursions

The third chapter discusses some of the links between feminism and the reaction towards the domination by science and medicine of the body and nature. She details some of the opposition to the development of public vaccination programs that were seen as polluting the body and the protests over the Contagious Diseases Acts that sought to control venereal diseases by forced inspection of prostitutes. These protests were linked by the horror of the instrumental violation of human beings, and it was but a small step to viewing the vivisected animal as a metaphor for the prostitute or the vaccinated (“polluted”) individual. She comments on the anthropomorphization of animals by the Victorians and argues that such images were new to European society. [However, the use of animals as symbols of certain negative and positive human qualities had been widespread throughout Europe long before the keeping of pets injected a new element into the Victorian scene.] She also touches on the blurring of human/animal boundaries that occurred during the Victorian era and identifies Darwinian ideas as being double-edged.

(iv) The Modern Protest

In the fourth chapter, the reader is introduced to the modern animal rights movement. The opening paragraph announces that the animal rights movement is very different from the traditional animal welfare groups and that the “American humane movement has always been strongly pro-science and largely concerned with encouraging humane treatment of animals....” (p. 77). It is not clear if she means to imply that the animal rights movement is anti-science but that is the impression the

reader is left with. While there is an undercurrent of suspicion of science and some genuinely anti-science attitudes among a segment of the animal rights movement, I would be surprised if it constituted a major thread that distinguished animal activists from the rest of the population.

As regards the claim that humane societies have rarely addressed the issue of animal experimentation and then only reluctantly, she is just plain wrong. This error is all the more incomprehensible to me since she cites my book at this point. In that book I clearly describe the activities of the Animal Welfare Institute, the Humane Society of the United States, and other groups formed in the 1950’s and 1960’s, all of whom made animal research a major issue. Either she has decided to redefine these groups as animal rights organizations (which contradicts her earlier distinctions between animal welfare and animal rights philosophy) or she wrongly assumes that these activities were not important to the development of the modern animal protection movement. (However, see note on ASPCA above.) It is also true that the many small, grass-roots organizations that sprung up around the country often focused on the morality of animal research, but the modern animal rights movement has also been active in protesting hunting, trapping, fur wearing and, more recently, farm animal practices.

Sperling describes her research approach as consisting of interviews with a number of animal activists in the San Francisco Bay area and perusal of the ephemera, magazines and newsletters produced by the modern animal rights movement. She notes that it was very difficult to obtain figures on membership of the movement and other demographic data on animal rights activists. She did not find the Kellert 1976 survey reporting that 1.3% of the population were members of animal organizations — today the figure is around 6% — and she also missed the Animals’ Agenda survey of 1984 that provided some interesting data on its readers. However, her own observations seem on the mark when she characterizes the movement as typically white, college educated (80% of the Agenda readers had college degrees), middle class urban or suburban residents (of course 95% of America is now urban or suburban), with an average age in the early to mid-30’s, and female.

Sperling then describes some elements of the growth of the movement and makes many minor errors. For example, she describes the Mobilization for Animals as

an example of the movement's growing organizational and political sophistication and ability to work together. The Mobilization for Animals was certainly a successful campaign for its main benefactors — the organizer Richard Morgan and the targeted primate centers, who ended up with larger funding appropriations to improve their facilities — but it was not the campaign I would have chosen as an example of growing sophistication. Sperling should have chosen the product testing campaign organized by Henry Spira that built a coalition of 400 animal groups, including many local shelters and humane societies, that resulted in industry devoting millions of dollars to the search for alternatives, and that has helped to initiate a paradigmatic shift in the way toxicology is developing in this country.

(v) Animal Rights Activists

The fifth chapter describes her interviews with nine local animal activists. She gives them all false names (without confessing to the fact), although it is not quite clear why she should have done so. Anybody with a passing knowledge of the Bay area animal protection movement would probably be able to recognize at least a third of her informants solely from the background descriptions Sperling provides. I personally recognized four of the individuals.

While I am no anthropologist, I have become familiar with anthropological method over the past five years, and Sperling's data collection is, at best, superficial. Sperling's interviews seem to do little more than provide her with isolated ideas and motives to include in her analysis. This analysis is then based largely on historical material on the Victorian movement and other literature sources rather than on any significant 'participant observation' of the animal rights movement. Interestingly, when she asked her nine informants why they thought the movement had developed, she reports that none had any helpful ideas to offer and instead were looking to her for some answers. The informants did agree, however, that modern animal behavior studies and the resulting data reports had influenced their interest in animal rights.

(vi) Humans, Animals, and Machines

The next chapter is devoted to a discussion of the relationship between humans, animals and nature and

how the perception of that relationship has changed with time. For example, the Victorians inherited a sharp demarcation between human and animal that became blurred by Victorian romanticism and the evolution debate. Today, the line between human and animal has also become blurred as we have been inundated with animal behavior information that has led to anthropomorphization of animal capabilities, while sociobiological studies have accentuated the animality of people.

The chapter also touches on the images of medically mutilated women. For example, in the 19th century sexual surgery was conducted on slaves and the indigent to learn more about the female reproductive tract. This "female passivity under the knife of invasive male physicians" (p. 144) elicited a very powerful resonance with animal vivisection. Sperling also draws parallels between the anti-abortion and animal rights movements. For example, like animal rights, the anti-abortion movement addresses the technologically mediated destruction of a living organism. The fetus is analogous to the vivisected animal, and both are raised to the same categorical status as humans. Both movements pose radical solutions to the problem of contested boundaries, and both are responding to similar societal anxieties. This anxiety is expressed through the vivisected animal (or the fetus) which takes on the metaphorical meaning of nature subjugated by technology — the vivisection of the planet. She also discusses some of the ecofeminist arguments that nature has been pitted against the machine in modern industrial and post-industrial societies.

(vii) Primate Iconography

The next chapter argues that modern primatology has had very important consequences for the way we view animals, especially the way we view the boundary between humans and animals. Sperling argues that the popularization of modern nonhuman primate studies has led to an anthropomorphization of these animals and an 'animalization' of humans. In addition, nonhuman primates are now used in evolutionary models of human behavior in place of 'primitive' human societies. Thus, in 1877, Morgan used 'primitive' societies to help explain the behavior of modern humans while, in 1975, Robin Fox used data from nonhuman primate societies. She is critical of the tendency by such persons as Jane Goodall to impute human thoughts and emotions to

their ape and monkey study subjects and seems to blame popular books on apes and monkeys for at least some of the blurring of the boundaries that has occurred.

(viii) Conclusion and Postscript

In the Conclusion, Sperling suddenly raises a theme briefly touched upon in the Introduction — namely, the possibility that animal rights could be classified as a charismatic movement. Charismatic movements appeal to the disenfranchised and alienated, while a charismatic leader places followers in touch with power centers — often in opposition to some demonized element of the existing establishment power structure. There are numerous modern religious charismatic movements, but Sperling suggests that both anti-abortion and animal rights qualify as secular charismatic movements. For the animal rights movement, science or hyper-rational empiricism is viewed as the demon before which “many members of our society feel ... like small helpless creatures....” (p. 197). On the other side, however, Sperling argues that the scientific community identifies with the fundamental separation of humanity from nature and with the quest to develop knowledge about the world about us using the tool of reason. According to Sperling, the “researcher working with animal subjects, and [the] animal rights activist confront each other across an abyss, with these contested visions of the human place in nature echoing through the empty space below.” She concludes that if the two sides are ever to communicate, they will have to start by addressing the place of human and animal in Western cosmology.



Comments on the Book

I have very mixed feelings about the book. It contains a wealth of provocative ideas and analysis and is, I believe, on target in identifying the links between feminism and the rise in animal activism and the important role of modern ethology and animal behavior in challenging the absolute boundary between human and animal. I was also struck by her brief analysis of charismatic movements and think that her suggestion that some small part of the animal rights movement may fall into the category of a secular charismatic movement (albeit with many leaders) has some merit. Much more analysis would be needed to identify whether her claim is justified and, if so, to what extent the animal protection movement could be classified as ‘charismatic’.

The data on which her overall analysis is based is questionable. While the movement’s literature is clearly important, it must be interpreted with care. Most of the literature is either designed to elicit a response (such as a donation or a specific action) or is the public face of the movement — that is, presents an organization in the way it wishes to be perceived by the public. I came away with the impression that she had not exercised sufficient care when using the movement literature to support her arguments. Similarly, her interaction with actual activists appears limited and superficial, and it is not clear how representative her San Francisco Bay area contacts were of the larger movement throughout the United States.

Her prose is clear and sparkling with many good turns of phrase, but the organization of the argument is not as good. On re-reading the book for this review I found that I had been too hasty in my earlier criticism of the book because Sperling had, indeed, identified many of the issues that I believe to be important in the movement’s growth. However, there is much repetition, and I found that, for me at least, key points tended to become lost. For example, she mentions the charismatic movement link in one paragraph in the Introduction and then not again until the conclusion, although the whole work is suffused with hints about the idea of animal rights and 19th century antivivisectionism as charismatic movements. Perhaps it is unfair to criticize the author on this count — maybe I, the reader, should be to blame. But it is pertinent to suggest that the author would receive more credit for some of her analysis if she used

the prose equivalent of a two-by-four to call attention to the major points being made.

Finally, it must be said that the author never managed to overcome her own experience as an animal researcher, more specifically an animal researcher in a laboratory targeted by the activists. Her analysis of the movement is colored by her experiences, and there are far too many small errors. Most of them are not particularly serious — for example, she incorrectly identifies Caroline White as a British antivivisectionist when she was the founder of the Women's SPCA and the American Antivivisection Society in Philadelphia. However, her identification of the humane movement as pro-science and the animal rights movement as specifically focused on animal research are both caricatures of the actual situation. Since 1950, animal research has been a major campaign focus for many of the national animal welfare groups, while animal rights organizations have taken on many other issues. For example, Trans-Species Unlimited has championed the cause of trapped animals, rabbits farmed for meat, hunted pigeons, and fur animals as well as research animals.

This tendency to divide the animal protection movement into animal welfare and animal rights may satisfy our wish for categorical neatness, but it does not describe the messiness of the real world. For example, one would also have to draw a distinction between animal rights as a political statement and animal rights as a philosophical argument. In the first instance, it makes sense to refer to the importance of Peter Singer and call him the 'father' of the animal rights movement. Philosophically, however, such a title is ridiculous because Singer argues strenuously against the use of rights terminology. In addition, Singer's philosophical position certainly does not support an abolitionist position, and, in a quiet moment in the bar after the meeting, most scientists would probably find themselves in substantial agreement with Singer (and perhaps he with them).

One therefore needs to be far more careful in drawing hard and fast lines between the terms 'animal rights' and 'animal welfare' and then using them almost as opposites. Today's animal *protection* movement is suffused with the philosophical arguments that have been put forward in the past twenty years, while many so-called animal rights groups will campaign on 'animal welfare' issues. John Hoyt may argue that The Humane Society of the United States is not an animal rights

group, but there is nobody on the program staff who has not been influenced by animal rights arguments, and many would, if asked individually, probably classify themselves as part of the animal rights movement.

Having both criticized and complemented Sperling's opus, my overall recommendation is that this is a book that should be read by all serious students of the movement and should also be in the libraries of all animal organizations (no doubt this is the sentence the publicity department at the University of California Press will extract!). People will not necessarily agree with her arguments, but the movement has to learn to be more self-critical and self-reflective so that it can learn from its mistakes and profit from its successes. In addition, a knowledge of the underlying motives that drive people to join the movement should improve any organization's membership drive.

Postscript

Having commented on Sperling's book, I would like to use the occasion to elaborate a little on the animal movement and suggest some additional questions that need answering. Sperling presents some interesting arguments and analyses in support of her thesis that feminism and the development of an interest in animals as intelligent and rational (while accentuating humanity's animal roots) are important causes of both 19th century and modern animal protection movements. I agree with her and came independently to the same conclusions albeit on much less impressive analysis. However, much more could be done on this issue. In addition, Sperling focuses mainly on the 1980's and the animal rights movement. We need a similar analysis of the animal welfare movement since the mid-1950's.

The fund-raising issue is very important and needs much more study. For example, some groups have relied almost exclusively on direct mail, while others have relied more on legacy income. The two are not necessarily incompatible, but charitable watchdog agencies will downgrade a nonprofit's status if too much of its income goes into and is derived from direct mail. While few donors appear to pay much attention to these watchdog agencies, attorneys who draw up wills do. Thus, there tends to be an inverse relationship between direct mail fund-raising and legacy income. In addition, it would be interesting to study how fund-raising material matches the stated policies and programs

of each organization. As we all know, some organizations hide fund-raising costs under the rubric of "education," and an analysis of such "education" would be of considerable interest.

The sociology and demographics of the movement need much more study. I mentioned above that membership in the movement has expanded from 1.3% of the population in 1976 to 6% of the population today. Much of that growth appears to have occurred since 1980, and it appears as though movement supporters are better educated and more affluent than the average person in the street. If Sperling is correct in arguing that the people who are joining the movement feel alienated and disenfranchised, then why are we seeing so many of our supposedly upwardly mobile population joining? Do they really feel alienated and/or disenfranchised, or are there other reasons prompting them to join? It should also be noted that about 20% of the adult population claims to have contributed funds to an animal organization. This seems very high, although it may be accurate if one considers both conservation and animal protection groups as "animal organizations."

I think it would be useful to do more analysis of both the leadership, the public image, and the membership of the different organizations. For example, PETA is a self-proclaimed animal rights group while the HSUS now promotes itself as an animal protection group, but are the people who contribute funds to PETA really that different from those who contribute funds to the HSUS? I would wager that the average PETA supporter is very similar to the average HSUS supporter. Also, why do they contribute, and how do they pick a particular group? Are there differences between the big donors (say \$250 or more per year) and the rest of us who scramble to find the membership fee. Some groups are interesting phenomena in their own right. The North Shore Animal League has millions of people on its mailing lists and regularly raises \$3-4 for every \$1 it spends on fund-raising. These days, the organization has an income in the \$20 million plus category, and yet it is little more than a local ('no-kill') shelter on Long Island.

Ultimately, the fact that I find most surprising about the last two decades is not the growth of the animal movement, but the lack of academic attention to the animal movement as a phenomenon worth studying. Sperling's book is the first scholarly treatise on the topic, although there have been other more

polemical attempts. There are some signs that this is changing. A colleague has just begun an ethnographic study of shelters, while sociologists at New York University are engaged on a three year study of the movement. I have heard reports of several others who are in the process of writing books, so we should have several works appearing in the next few years. It will be interesting to see if they advance our understanding of the movement or if they merely repeat the standard myths. In the meantime, we can continue to speculate about the movement's growth and underlying causes safe in the knowledge that there are very few people around with any good evidence to refute us.

Editors' note: Dr. Sperling's book is, however, not "the first scholarly treatise on the topic..." For an earlier study of the animal rights movement, which appeared in *Between the Species* in 1987 and 1988, see David Macauley, "Political Animals: A Study of the Emerging Animal Rights Movement In the United States," *Between the Species* (3) 2, 1987, pp. 66-74; (3) 3, 1987, pp. 119-127; (3) 4, 1987, pp. 177-189; and (4) 1, 1988, pp. 55-68.

