

Leeza Barstein

Undermining Power: The Politics of Subversion and Resistance

Instructor: Alexander Herbert

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Suffering Redefined: The Animal Liberation Front's Subversion of Utilitarianism

The complex relationship between animals and humans has long been influenced by society's stance on consciousness, suffering, and hierarchy. Whether looking at Darwin's *Origin of Species*, the captivating relationship between Jane Goodall and chimpanzees, or even the modern-day trend towards veganism, it is clear that animals and humans have an intricate, often mutualist relationship; however, with the integration of modern technology into mainstream culture, the balance between acts that exploit animals and the advancement of human lives has become convoluted. The Animal Liberation Front, an animal activist organization, has directly confronted society's hierarchy of species and subverted the principles and systems that established this divide. Subversion is based on three intermingled principles: concretely recorded ideology that rejects common belief systems, direct action that manifests from this clearly stated philosophy, and change that is incited from these actions. Although direct action may take many forms, subversion requires that acts impose damage to the targeted people, property, or business. The ALF created a concrete ideology, rejecting the common utilitarian understanding of humanity's relationship to animals; it directly acted against the sources of animal suffering, and it used this action to prevent further exploitation of animals. Thus, it was an effectively subversive group.

By looking at rights through the contrasting perspectives of biomedical researcher Carl Cohen and philosopher Jeremy Bentham, it is evident that the ALF's ideology drastically subverted the scientific community's interpretation of utilitarianism and the mainstream understanding of rights within society. According to Cohen's view on utilitarianism, the ability to make moral claims is the only requirement for having rights, and animals, devoid of language, can neither present moral

claims nor defend them (886). Therefore, it cannot be inferred that for animals, “simply being alive [is] a ‘right’ to life” (866). On the contrary, rather than viewing rights as arbitrary rankings based on the complex abilities of individual species, Bentham claimed: “Rights are ... the fruits of the law, and of the law alone” (125). Thus, in order for a hedonistic society to exist, rights must not be inherent, assumed, or natural, but rather prescribed and allocated through a system of laws. In an interview conducted with the ALF to describe the reasoning behind their break-in to an animal research lab, one member explained that their actions were a response to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s failure to protect animals from lab testing. The member claimed that according to the Animal Welfare Act, “...you can do anything you want to an animal ... the experimenter doesn’t even have to use anesthesia” (McClain 2). Through this explanation, the ALF expands on Bentham’s notion that rights, or a lack thereof, are what deem a being powerless, and since laws did not provide protection for animals, it would be the ALF’s responsibility to incite change (Bentham 125). In other words, the ALF’s reasoning lay on the premise that animals were not devoid of rights because of inherently being less deserving of them, but because the American legal system failed to enforce legislation for the equal and ethical treatment of animals in laboratories. Since the ALF’s ideology challenged the common methods of assigning rights to beings, they achieved the first principle of subversion, which requires a concrete ideological rejection of society.

However, the ALF’s ideology did more than just subvert how non-human rights ought to be defined; it also rejected a common belief system that philosopher Peter Singer refers to as “speciesism.” According to Singer, the practice of speciesism not only deems humans as superior to other animals, but also calls for non-humans to suffer based on their utility to people. Most people in society are speciesists, and this stems from the failure to acknowledge that “the capacity for suffering” entitles animals to “equal consideration” (Singer 5). In an interview, an ALF member directly rejects this common thinking: “The philosophy that drives the ALF is the belief that animals do not belong to us. They don’t exist for our use” (McClain 2). This statement immediately dismisses

the notion that animals are commodities whose suffering should be disregarded for people's benefit. The ALF further refuses to take a speciesist standpoint in a pamphlet stating their goal "of liberating animals from places of abuse ... and placing them where they may live out their natural lives free from suffering" (Animal Liberation Front 3). Since suffering determines what acts are and are not ethically permissible towards a species, the ALF acknowledges that the only way to include animals in the definition of a utilitarian society is to acknowledge and consider their capacity to suffer (Singer 8). In fact, by dedicating their entire mission to removing animals from environments that strip them of their autonomy, they directly reject the common notion that based on the hierarchy of species, animals do not deserve equal consideration.

Having used writing and speech to establish an ideology that challenged conventional ideas of morality, the ALF fulfilled the next requirement of subversion, direct action, by acting against what they viewed as faulty power structures. Members used their settled ideology to act against what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer describe as the culture industry's grasp on pleasure. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the most powerful members in a capitalist society—big businesses and politicians—standardize the population's beliefs by only tolerating those who identify with behavior that strengthens the culture industry (147). In order to maintain this power, the industry relies on a system of exchange: as members of society personally and financially support the industry, the industry tolerates and gratifies consumers with material rewards. However, Adorno and Horkheimer also claim that "to be pleased means to say yes ... by desensitization ... by forgetting suffering even where it is shown" (144). Whenever consumers choose to ignore the suffering associated with the meat they consume or the animal-tested products they use, this blind eye "desensitizes" them to the atrocities behind their financial and moral decisions. To demonstrate this desensitization in their pamphlet, the ALF sarcastically includes a cartoon labeled "The Voice of the Honorable Opposition" (Animal Liberation Front 27). As the focal point of the piece, a decrepit man stands against a post, mocking the ALF for being

“bunny-lovin’ nutcakes.” Drawn with a long, wrinkly face, straight eyebrows, and squinting eyes, the man appears to be numb and emotionless, depicting how the culture industry removes the shock value from the mistreatment of animals; however, at the same time, he is fenced in by the post he leans against which is entwined in barbed wire, demonstrating that the culture industry holds him captive not only as a consumer, but also as a thinker analyzing moral standards. With this critical cartoon meant to mock and shame consumers publicly, the ALF broke the cycle of “pleasure” Adorno and Horkheimer associate with passivity. Instead, they actively rejected the industry’s “toleration” and “gratification” of consumers and painted them in a negative light to instill feelings of humiliation, discomfort, and disgrace. By attacking consumers with the hopes of destroying their conception and experience of pleasure, the group acted against the mainstream trend of glorifying the supporters of industries testing on animals.

In addition to targeting consumers on a personal level, ALF members rejected the services of unethical organizations, refusing to participate in the economic funding of these businesses. Stated clearly in their pamphlet, the primary way members dismissed businesses was through “not eating animal flesh, and many of them [using] no animal products at all” (Animal Liberation Front, 4). By individually refraining from financially supporting the standardization of consumption, and consequently, suffering of animals, members refused to mindlessly consume. Adorno and Horkheimer refer to this mindlessness as “Capitalist production so confining [consumers], body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered them” (133). Not only do Adorno and Horkheimer deem consumers to be powerless within a capitalist society, but they also explain that through this loss of power, consumers have no choice but to financially support and benefit industries. ALF members, however, refused to be powerless victims; they refused to be “desensitized” or to “forget suffering”; in fact, they completely repudiated the culture industry’s control over citizens and used their role as consumers to support their cause. By acknowledging that businesses actually relied on consumers to buy their products, not the other way around, the

group threatened the monetary gains of the culture industry, even though on a small scale. Through breaking the cycle of passive internalization in society by damaging the incomes of industries, the ALF continued to be subversive, using direct damage to incite change.

The ALF further subverted the culture industry by using direct action to inflict more widespread economic damage on animal testing labs. Specifically, to weaken the economic standing of the pharmaceutical company Huntingdon Life Sciences, the ALF relied on going undercover to expose what they deemed as unethical practices towards animals: “lab technicians simulating sex with animals, punching beagle puppies and violating numerous animal welfare regulations” (Brown). After being exposed, not only did Huntingdon Life Sciences lose their listing on the London Stock Exchange, but the company, “teetered on the brink of bankruptcy” (“Animal Liberation Front Attacks Huntingdon Life Sciences Supplier”). The ALF justified economic sabotage based on the principle that “Where money is involved, people won’t give up until ... they see that their dirty business is not going to profit them” (Animal Liberation Front 18). Because researchers profited from the commoditization of animals, the only way to put an end to suffering would be to refrain from being a passive consumer and remove the monetary incentives behind animal testing.

Adorno and Horkheimer complicate the relationship between commoditization and consumption when they claim, “the stronger the positions of the culture industry ... the more summarily it can deal with consumers’ needs ... controlling them, disciplining them” (144). They acknowledge that economic prosperity not only gives businesses the ability to commoditize materials, but also to commoditize the consumers that support them. Instead of falling victim to the culture industry’s “control” and “discipline,” the ALF targeted the root cause of Huntingdon Life Sciences’ power—their money. Because the most powerful way to infringe on a business within a capitalist society is to prevent it from further making monetary gains, the ALF’s decision to expose the lab’s horrendous actions prevented the further suffering of animals. Seeing as the ALF’s direct

actions targeted and effectively weakened the power of animal-testing labs, they successfully completed the final requirement of subversion—to use ideology and direct action to incite change.

In addition to using economic sabotage, the ALF continued to incite change through direct actions by forcing animal testing labs to shift their priorities. In the case of the Silver Spring Monkey's, the ALF worked in conjunction with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), to steal 17 mistreated monkeys from the Institute for Behavioral Research (Saperstein). Primarily by exposing the labs that tested on animals, the ALF subverted Adorno and Horkheimer's notion that people are "completely expendable and utterly insignificant" (145). Rather than passively following the assumption that there is a hierarchy of species, the group spread footage from the lab to make other members of society conscious of the atrocities associated with the culture industry. By exposing the Institute's unethical practices, the ALF sent a message to laboratories that they could not continue animal testing without any repercussions. In other words, if they wanted to maintain a good reputation, these industries would need to change their priorities and practices. The ALF acknowledges the power and impacts of their subversion, explaining that "Damage to property does save animals ... laboratories have to spend more money on security ... money that would have been spent on experimentation" (McClain 3). In this case, with "damage to property" being the loss of their testing subjects, the monkeys, the lab lost time and money that would otherwise be invested in creating suffering. The ALF proved they are anything but "insignificant" in society and used their direct, subversive action to reduce the effectiveness and productivity of animal laboratories.

Furthermore, in the case of the Silver Spring Monkeys, the ALF used direct action to infringe on the personal rights of researchers and their freedom to continue practicing. Because of the released documentation of the monkeys' retched living conditions, there was a, "landmark case, [a] court battle to decide the monkeys' fate" (Carlson). More specifically, Taub, the main researcher responsible for the mistreatment of the monkeys was "charged with 15 accounts of animal cruelty"

(Saperstein) Going back to the driving ideology behind the ALF's actions—that a being's rights are determined through legislation—by resorting to actions that resulted in legal punishment for researchers, the ALF reversed the roles, and threatened the rights of the researchers practicing on animals. In this case, however, researchers did not lose freedoms because of the belief that they were somehow inherently less deserving of them, but because their actions conflicted with the most important determinant of freedom—the law (Bentham 125). Because researchers lost freedom, and consequently the right to test on animals, the group directly targeted and deemed the Huntingdon Life Sciences powerless. Once again, the ALF's ideology led to direct action, which in turn, not only infringed on the powers of researchers, but also subverted the mainstream understanding of rights within society.

Not only did the ALF use direct action to subvert the culture industry, but it also subverted traditional power structures through its decision to act without a centralized hierarchy. With no formalized communications between its various sub-groups, the ALF acknowledged that, “any people ... who carry our actions ... have the right to regard themselves as part of the ALF” (*Animal Liberation Primer*). In addition to rejecting hierarchy in their pamphlet, they also published a striking image of a single fist raised, protruding through the bars of a jail cell. Not only does the fist in the image represent the ALF's emphasis on unity, solidarity, and support, but it also demonstrates its defiance of the rigid and oppressive traditional power structures represented by the jail bars. Returning to their core ideology that there should be no hierarchy of species based on inherent or intrinsic qualities, the ALF modelled the very structure of their group after this idea. Since Peter Singer's definition of speciesism rejects that individuals should be ranked or given more rights based on their ability to communicate or express themselves (Singer 8), the ALF refused to establish leaders or official titles within its various sub-groups. They further enforced this structure when they claimed all that matters is that people act, “by whom is not important” (Singer 9). By establishing that all members are equally valued, the ALF subverted mainstream society's tendency

not only to rank inter species, but intra-species as well. Not only did this structure subvert mainstream understandings of hierarchy, but it also made it harder for existing power structures, like law enforcement, to catch them. In the pamphlet, the ALF stressed the importance of “closely knit” and secretive sections in order for their actions to be difficult to trace (Singer 4). Without any established leaders to target, meetings to shut down, or hierarchies to disassemble, police had a significantly harder time tracking down members to jail and prevent from committing further acts of liberation. Thus, not only did this structure subvert common understandings of hierarchy, but it also allowed for the group to continue acting directly without interjection from the police.

Still, there is no denying that to many, the ALF ineffectively subverted mainstream society because of the extremity of their acts. In fact, researchers put off by the ALF’s many break-ins deemed their actions to be, “antithetical to the concept of social discourse” (Holden) and took the initiative to defend animal testing more adamantly in response. What these researchers failed to acknowledge, however, is that in order for subversion to be effective, extreme actions are not only helpful, but imperative. In fact, Antonio Gramsci elaborates on this idea and claims that subversion can only be achieved through negation and “negative, polemic attitude” (Gramsci 271). Essentially, in order for consciousness to arise within a society, there needs to be the presence of opposition, tension, and polarity amongst thought and action. The ALF expanded on the importance of juxtaposition through the art they use in their pamphlet. Labeled, “It’s not the cat who needs his head examined” (*Animal Liberation Primer 2*), the ALF included a black and white cartoon of researchers standing over a cat whose head is connected to wires. The first observation that strikes the viewer is the stark contrast of the cartoon’s shading—while the cat is mainly white, the researchers that stand over it are etched with wrinkles that are intensely shaded in. The juxtaposition of lightness and darkness, seemingly symbolizing good and evil, helps to convey the message that researchers are not morally justified in their decisions to test on animals. Just as polar opposites help convey an artistic message in the pamphlet, similarly, extreme and polar actions in

real life help individuals better understand the flaws within their society, Thus, although many criticized their extremism, it was essential that the ALF used bold actions to be able to formulate the ideology that fueled their subversion.

Through the rejection of common beliefs in their ideology, their direct actions, and their impact on the culture surrounding animal testing, the Animal Liberation Front was an effectively subversive group. Through challenging mainstream understandings of utilitarianism, suffering, and rights, the ALF argued for a society that not only considers the lives of animals, but also actively questions its hierarchal, moral, and ethical systems. In today's world, we are often presented with the dichotomy of increased technology pushing for testing on animals and on the contrary, various movements, whether environmental or pro-animal, pushing for the rise of veganism. Through the ALF's evaluation of animal rights and the complex establishments behind them, everyday citizens are forced to question and better understand their obligations and responsibilities towards the liberation and protection of non-humans.

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