



DO FEMINISTS NEED TO LIBERATE ANIMALS  
TOO?  
by  
**Merle Hoffman**

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**Carol Adams sees feminism as a visionary philosophy that includes stewardship of the earth.**

Over the years, **On the Issues** has been committed to expanding the vision and definition of progressive politics. Acting on her concern for the exploitation and suffering of animals and her interest in exploring the role of compassion in progressive politics, publisher **Merle Hoffman** interviewed **Carol J. Adams** about the relationship between animal rights and feminism. In this interview, they discuss the reasons why people -- feminists, in particular -- should care about how we treat animals. Hoffman and Adams are both on the advisory board of **Feminists for Animal Rights**. Carol Adams is the author of **The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory** (which won the first Continuum Women's Studies Award in 1989) and **Neither Man nor Beast: Feminism and the Defense of Animals**. She has also co-edited, with Josephine Donovan, two books on feminism and animal rights that will be released later this year. In the 1970s, Adams started a hotline for battered women. She has since served on national commissions on domestic violence and has been involved in combating racism in housing practices.

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**MERLE HOFFMAN:** Carol, do you think animal rights activism has a natural home in progressive politics?

**CAROL ADAMS:** Not a natural home, but a logical one. When you look back at the nineteenth century, there were instances of unification among suffragists, workers, and antivivisectionists in protests against vivisection. But liberal politics is not generous about animal rights because liberal philosophy is premised on a separation of humans from animals. Progressive politics is about changing consciousness, changing the structures of oppression. Because there's a basic sense that animals don't have consciousness, structures of oppression are not seen as something animals can experience. I'm not sure animal rights per se -- the strictly philosophical concept of animal rights -- has a home in progressive politics. But animal advocacy does. Until we recognize how people who have no power -- whether it's women or people of color or the working class -- are positioned as being closer to animals, the human/animal barrier will retain its power and influence. Historically, women have been in the leadership of the animal rights movement, but feminists haven't. Why do you think feminists have not embraced the animal rights issue with the same political and philosophical fervor as they have antiracism and anticlassism? Several reasons. Over the years, many feminists have perceived that the equation of women with animals was a way to dehumanize women. Their response was to say, "We are a part of the human species too. We are rational, thinking beings just like men." Also, in terms of the kind of antiracist progressive feminism we all aspire to, there is a worry that we lessen human victims if we argue for animals. While we have the notion that the personal is political, what we eat or wear is seen as private. The response is, "I want my eating of animals to be a private decision."

**MH:** But eating is an extremely public action.

**CA:** Right, but there's a drive to keep it privatized. Though it's completely anomalous within feminist theory, many say, "this is a part of my life I don't want to scrutinize."

**MH:** Perhaps they don't want to be enlightened because that would necessitate a change in behavior. Feminists always rail against being treated like pieces of meat and yet they say this as they eat a hamburger or steak.

**CA:** We all have to come to an awareness on our own. But because of the cultural pressure of meat-eating, as well as the denial that meat actually comes from animals, there's a linguistic dance done around butchered flesh. We don't say a lamb's leg, we say leg of lamb. We take away the possessive relationship between a lamb and his or her leg. Animals are not mass terms. Water is a mass term. You can add or take away water, but you can't change what water is. We falsely perpetuate the idea that meat is a mass term, that it never adds up to a living animal.

**MH:** You've written that you became a vegetarian in 1974. I became one in 1986 after reading Hans Rausch's **Slaughter of the Innocents**. That was a very powerful epiphany for me. After that, I couldn't continue to eat meat because I knew what I was eating. Do you think all feminists should strive to become vegetarians?

**CA:** Yes, but consciousness-raising is a very painful thing. When anyone raises these issues, we hear a lot of defenses that are very similar to defenses of sexism from the early 1970s. If you were a "bra-burner" then, now people think, "You're one of those animal rights people making me worry about how I treat animals." But the basic insight of the feminist animal advocate is that animals are not ours to exploit, animals are beings that exist in community with us. Our goals are to not have them on our backs or on our plates.

**MH:** But you're dealing with a paradigm structure that's religious, philosophical, and political. Let's look at classical philosophy. In a sense, it's been the enemy of both animal rights consciousness and feminism. Particularly the philosophy of Descartes, the idea of a mind/body dualism. So how do you create a new philosophical framework?

**CA:** Feminist philosophy would say we've got a big problem with Western culture because it emphasizes rationality and has disowned the body philosophically. Since the body has not been valued, and since women and people of color and animals have been equated with the body, they have been seen as "less than." So the question is, how do we reverse that? Do we say that rationality is important and we are rational beings and then join the other side and disown the body too? Or do we say our bodies are a source of knowledge? Can we then say animals are only bodies, they are never rational, so we're only going to extend the insights of feminist philosophy about the body so far?

**MH:** How do you get people who "love" animals, who sometimes treat their pets a lot better than other human beings, to expand this monocular love to a more expansive vision?

**CA:** Generally, people are loving to specific animals with whom they have specific relationships. It's a very privatized notion of love, so we have to start by having them acknowledge that the relationship they cherish need not be limited just to the cat or dog they are fond of. We have to understand how it can be a model for other kinds of relationships, how love must work in partnership with justice.

**MH:** So love is a political act in this sense.

**CA:** That's right. Love involves an ethical stance, as my friend Marie Fortune says in her forthcoming book. Does love cause harm? Does love benefit from harm to others?

**MH:** But the reality we live in has been reinforced through the ages by traditional religion, where humans are seen as the "stewards" of the earth. So you don't only have a collective, assumptive reality -- you have one that has the bona fide Divine Word.

**CA:** Well, we always know that the minute God is brought into something it's because somebody is trying to express some power over something else. One of the problems with Christianity is that it has a kind of male/female, human/animal hierarchy. God and the heavens are above us, humans are above animals, man is above woman, and God is seen as a human male.

**MH:** So should animal rights activists be atheists?

**CA:** Maybe pantheists. There's a tendency in feminist theology to be more immanent. To see God as revealed through us rather than transcending us.

**MH:** In your book **Neither Man nor Beast**, you wrote that the antiracist defense of animals is not sentimental but is filled with sentiment. Could you explain that?

**CA:** For white people, there's a lot of guilt around the issue of racism. Identification with disempowered people is often described or experienced as sentimental. We see this notion at work when the "voiceless" are spoken for in the anti-abortion movement. I'm saying that an antiracist defense of animals begins with the recognition that we must act in solidarity with the oppressed. We cannot just speak "for" them. We're not saving or protecting or bestowing something on animals, but recognizing who has privilege and power over them and challenging that.

**MH:** Peter Singer and Tom Regan are the movement's main theorists. They have postulated a theory of animal "rights" and animal "liberation." Are there philosophical problems with these theories?

**CA:** I don't think we can speak about animal "liberation." Liberation movements are all movements that arise from within repressed groups. I also don't like to use the word "rights" when we're talking about animal advocacy. Rights language is a legacy of the Enlightenment -- the very Enlightenment that created a problematic philosophy of rational being.

**MH:** But it is also the language of abortion rights, women's rights, civil rights. And when you speak about rights, you have the counter-issue of responsibility, so then people say how can you talk of animal rights because that implies responsibility.

**CA:** Feminism completely changes the dialogue. I am not looking to take basic animal rights philosophy and fit women in. I am trying to take feminism, which I think inherently extends to animals, and start in a different place. I look and say many of the basic insights of feminism -- about how patriarchy works -- shed light on how we see animals. Patriarchy is a gender system that is implicit in human/animal relationships.

**MH:** Women have traditionally been intimidated by men's potential for anger, or actual anger. This anger has functioned as a limiting factor in women's political activism. What is your response to critics who say that, for women, becoming a vegetarian is a relatively low-risk way to protest?

**CA:** I don't think anything is a low-risk way to protest for women. I think that there are very few places in the world where women are safe. And any act of self-actualization can be very threatening to others in her life. Vegetarianism is not a simple decision. I have had many women over the past twenty years tell me, "I would be a vegetarian if it wasn't for my husband." By believing they must feed their husbands meat, they perpetuate the whole sexual politics of meat that says men need meat to be strong. They also fear that men's reaction to the absence of meat is greater than their ability to actualize their desire to be vegetarians.

**MH:** What is it about the construction of manhood that seems to require the oppression of animals?

**CA:** Being a man is tied in to identities -- what "real men" do and don't do. "Real men" don't eat quiche, "real men" hunt. It's interesting how many homophobic insults are thrown by hunters towards antihunting activist males. It's not only an issue of privilege but an issue of symbolism. Manhood is constructed in our culture in part by access to meat-eating and control of other bodies, whether it's women or animals. "Man," which usually in our Euro-American culture is read as "white man," can exist as a concept and as a sexual identity only through negation. Not women -- not beast -- not colored -- that is, not "other." Also, male biologists have often defended male supremacy by appealing to the laws of nature. This such-and-such animal dominates his female because that's what nature intended. Men reinforce this by saying you bring out the animal in me, but they themselves resent being labeled animals.

**MH:** How would you say that the defense of animals intersects with theories of ecofeminism?

**CA:** Ecofeminism basically states that an environmental perspective without feminism is inadequate, and that a feminist theory that fails to analyze the way the environment has suffered because of patriarchal attitudes is also inadequate. Clearly, animals are on the nature side of the nature/culture dualism, but they often disappear in the environmental discourse. They're what I call the "absent referent." Many ecofeminists are comfortable with them remaining absent referents. They're concerned with species rather than individual animals. And so the defense of animals locates itself within an ecofeminist politics, and says we cannot look at the whole without looking at the individual. We cannot work for justice and challenge the oppression of nature without understanding that the most frequent way we interact with nature is by eating animals.

**MH:** Women have traditionally cared more about other victims than about themselves and about what happens to women collectively as a result of their simply being women. What do you say to feminist critics who charge that animal activism really serves to distract women from the women's movement itself?

**CA:** Well, I think that they are partially right. Women, who constitute at least 80 percent of the animal rights movement, may not deal with or recognize the issue of oppression in their own lives. Some women do recognize it or are the survivors of sexual violence. They realize that while there are feminists advocating positions on battering, rape, and other forms of institutional violence against women, there are not many feminists advocating on behalf of animals. So these women gravitate to the place where they feel they have the most to offer. But I do think the male hierarchy within the animal rights movement makes this a problem. We do not necessarily recognize it as a place for enhancing one's own consciousness as a woman in a patriarchal world.

**MH:** Do you find it more difficult to raise consciousness about feminism among animal rights activists or animal rights issues among feminists?

**CA:** One is not easier than the other.

**MH:** Which is a more natural progression?

**CA:** For feminists to recognize animals. That's my own progression. My goal is not to take animal rights, add women, and stir. I'm taking the basic concepts and ideas of second-wave feminism -- concepts about structures of oppression -- and saying that species is one of those structures. We cannot just stop at the human/animal barrier, because that barrier is part of the construction of patriarchy.

**MH:** When we were together at a recent Feminists for Animal Rights conference, you told me that you came to understand the antipornography position far more deeply by being involved in animal issues than in feminist politics. Can you explain that?

**CA:** Well, I always knew that I felt pornography was wrong. It was part of my feminism from the 1970s on. Later, I realized that this applies to animals too. Catharine MacKinnon talks about how epistemology constructs ontology. For instance, we look at a cow and say why else does that cow exist except to be our dinner? It's a forced identity that reveals more about us. Distancing ourselves from animals enforces the subject/object relationship and creates a false construction of animals as meat. Once I recognized that, I also recognized how pornography constructs a forced identity.

**MH:** You write that feminists "traffic in animals." I find this a provocative statement. Does it refer to trafficking in women and pornography?

**CA:** I think that we traffic in animals literally whenever we purchase products that derive from animals. I built on the concept that feminists have developed of trafficking in women because I wanted to politicize the use of animals' bodies as commodities that objectifies them and denies them any individuality.

**MH:** Pornography is a \$10-billion-a-year business. In the case of animal trafficking, it infuses every part of our lives.

**CA:** Both of them infuse every part of our lives. When the religious right keeps sex education out of schools, teenagers learn about sex from pornography. So they de facto endorse a sort of pornographic hierarchy of men and women even though they explicitly condemn pornography.

**MH:** I think they would debate that vigorously. Many on the Right excoriate the Left for creating a pornographic culture where women have sexual liberty and freedom through birth control and abortion. They see that as making women far more accessible to men's sexual needs. I believe you can make an argument that the Left has also objectified women and has created a pornographic culture. Let's talk about the Hill/Thomas hearings. When Anita Hill gave her testimony that Clarence Thomas had talked to her about pornography that showed women having sex with animals, what do you think was really going on there?

**CA:** Several things were going on at the same time. First of all, it reminds us that women's sexual violation and exploitation are often linked with that of animals, because for pornographers to picture women with animals, the animals have to be coerced into those situations. It also creates what I call a "bestializing discourse" which always saw African-Americans as closer to beasts than animals. In the nineteenth century, black women were objectified by the white male gaze on black women's bodies. Patricia Hill Collins has argued in **Black Feminist Thought** that this led to the pornographing of white women. Ostensibly, black women could not be violated because they were seen as sexually voracious. Therefore, picturing black women with animals is a representation that excuses as well as invites the sexual exploitation of black women.

**MH:** Which is a point missed by all the media, and probably by many of the people who were watching.

**CA:** I'm not sure the feminist movement has looked closely at how often the presence of animals is a vehicle for announcing our own oppression. Battered women are often terrorized, traumatized, and kept hostage by their batterers by the mistreatment of their animals and children. Children who are sexually abused are kept hostage by threats to animals. There is a continual ratification of male control through acts of violence against animals.

**MH:** Let's talk about PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. PETA has been described in a recent piece in New York magazine as a sort of "Act-Up for Animals." They have outrageous media campaigns and "in your face" tactics, very much like WAC, and a bevy of celebrity spokespeople. Just a month ago, Ricki Lake was arrested for doing an antifur protest at Karl Lagerfeld's office, but was caught eating a bologna sandwich when she was sent to jail overnight. PETA also has an "I'd rather go naked than wear fur" campaign in which models pose nude with animals. Is this just another example of the prime directive of capitalism, where women's bodies are used to sell everything from toothpaste to cars? Or are women being coopted as pornographic signifiers for a radical cause? One "absent referent" posing for another? If, by posing nude, models can make a dent in the fur industry which causes so much suffering and death for animals, isn't it worth it?

**CA:** No, definitely not. The end does not justify the means. This is not theory, it's practice. That means how I live, how I interact with people, has importance in itself. I don't raise my kids by doing X and think they are going to become Y. I don't liberate animals over the bodies of women.

**MH:** If, tomorrow, fifteen thousand women standing up in Grand Central station posing naked could stop all animal oppression, wouldn't you support that?

**CA:** If I were going to have fifteen thousand dressed, clothed people who could stop anything, I would stop meat-eating because that is the most serious form of oppression of animals in the United States. To focus on fur is to play into a misogynist view about women. The antifur campaign gives lots of animal rights activists another way to harass women. I question why the fur campaign gets all the energy it does. Why? Because it is one of the few areas of animal oppression where women are seen as culprits, the takers of life. I think this feeds right into the antiabortion viewpoint, and also gives some credence to antiabortion in-your-face activities.

**MH:** You mean their strategies are like those of Operation Rescue?

**CA:** That's right, so that's my first objection. My second objection is that the "I'd rather go naked than wear fur" campaign really just accepts the cultural construction of women's bodies as commodities. And thirdly, I think that subliminally what this campaign says is you can still have objects in your life, they just can't be animals. You can still have women objects. It's a very big setback to conversations between feminists and animal rights activists because it is so clearly a form of participation in the dominant patriarchal construction of the male gaze on women's bodies.

**MH:** And it is easier just not to wear a fur coat to certain events anyway than to change your entire structure of eating.

**CA:** Right. Then I think the further insult was the celebration of PETA's alliance with **Playboy** by having a jointly sponsored event last summer, at which Patti Davis was featured. I'm glad she gave some of her money to PETA. But like Catharine MacKinnon, I'm not sure reparations money is the way we go about changing the status of women. I abhor the alliance of any animal advocacy with pornography.

**MH:** It's interesting because this was a debate in the prochoice community a few years back. The Playboy Foundation was giving money to prochoice causes. I was personally involved with a couple of national prochoice organizations when the question of whether or not to accept funds came up. I was very opposed to it for the same reasons.

**CA:** I think that what it shows is the kind of "add women and stir" attitude that's going to survive as long as the animal rights movement is controlled by men or has a patriarchal

theory governing it. I've talked to a lot of antipornography workers around the country, and they're one group of feminists who I can predict have read **The Sexual Politics of Meat**. Many liberal feminists have decided that this is a form of feminist theory they don't have to deal with, probably because they don't want to change their diet. But the antipornography activists always understood what's going on with the objectification of animals.

**MH:** It's very interesting how the themes of the prochoice movement are coopted. The profur campaign focused on women having a choice, even an "informed" choice. It's subtly saying you can do what you want with other creatures' bodies.

**CA:** Having access to other bodies is exactly what we're challenging in terms of male privilege over women, and that kind of privilege is suddenly constructed as "choice" -- whether it's dietary choice or fashion choice.

**MH:** What specific tactics or strategies do you think the animal rights movement shares with Operation Rescue? Can we look forward to a vivisectionist being gunned down in the back like an abortion doctor?

**CA:** No, I don't think so. We have to look at the extreme right wing's religious language. They invoke God and suddenly see themselves as having a divine right to kill to save life. The kind of Paul Hill "justifiable homicide" defense. I'm concerned with any animal rights activity that gives credence to the activities of Operation Rescue. For instance, I've always opposed picketing at vivisectionists' homes. Last year our home was picketed by Operation Rescue and I thought, what's the effect on the kids in the home? What kids of vivisectionists are ever going to be able to come to animal rights without drawing on the traumatic experience of being picketed? We need a generational commitment to not inflict pain on children. Secondly, I object to any tactic that invokes the "voice for the voiceless" argument and the kind of dangerous sentimentality that says "I've got to protect you." Rather than talk about privilege, we've got to examine the language about privilege--because ultimately there is a lot that the abortion rights and reproductive freedom movement have in common with animal advocacy.

**MH:** Why don't you expand on that.

**CA:** I think both animal advocacy and being proabortion are about being against forced motherhood. I'm against forced motherhood for women and cows and rabbits and pigs, etc. I've looked very closely at some of the language that's used to justify both meat-eating and the antiabortion stance, and one of the things I found was how they both argued from the state of nonbeing. Isn't it better for the cow to have been brought into life and then killed humanely than never to have existed? Lots of people say the same thing about abortion: "What if I had been aborted?" But the fact is, if you'd been aborted, you wouldn't be standing there arguing "What if I had been." Feminists need to recognize that what we're doing in terms of oppressing animals is morally and politically heinous. That it is deeply anthropocentric. The antiabortion movement is really just pro-fetal life for only the human species.

**MH:** In my position, I've always heard the question, "If you believe so much in animal rights and you don't eat meat or wear fur, how can you oversee the killing of thousands of babies?"

**CA:** I think women can be morally responsible to know when a child should be born and when a child should not be. I trust women. I don't think the antiabortion movement trusts women. For the antiabortionist, the absent referent is the woman. It's clear when you look at the pictures of fetuses -- they're floating in the air as if they are coming down from the clouds.

**MH:** Well, yes, but the argument can be made that we construct the fetus to be "blood and tissue" when we don't want the pregnancy, and talk of it as a "baby" when we do.

**CA:** I think this shows the social nature of growing into a community, into a relationship. Certainly when I was pregnant and did not want to be, I had a different relationship to what was happening to my body than I did when I was pregnant and wanted to be. But that just shows that all of life is a process -- and that we have a right to take part in deciding what potential life will come into life. There is no reason to think that carrying every human fetus to term is natural.

**MH:** One of the questions we haven't touched on is the use of animals in medical research. It has been said that if chimps hadn't been used in AIDS research, we wouldn't be anywhere near finding a cure. Is the answer no cages, or better cages?

**CA:** I don't think we should experiment on animals. But I want to enter the debate by saying let's look at what feminist philosophy has already said about male science. Male science is not objective. No science can be objective. If animals are close enough to us to be legitimate sources for knowledge, they're too close for us to experiment on them. And if they're not close enough, why are we doing it?

**MH:** Some people seem to feel that they have limited resources for compassion.

**CA:** Well, I'm not sure they think that there are limited resources, though we always hear of compassion fatigue. The fact is that there is no feminist justification for the slaughter of animals. We are benefitting from the object status of other creatures in our world. Once we recognize that, it doesn't take any more energy to grab a veggieburger on your way to a prochoice rally. To buy nonleather shoes rather than leather shoes. Once one makes this an inherent part of one's life there is nothing that stops one from continuing to be the kind of feminist/activist and antiracist activist that she's always been. In fact, because vegetarianism is actually healthier for you, a feminist vegetarian hopefully adds years to her life and can accomplish more with her activism.

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