



February 2023

Toward Movement Synergy Contribution to GTI Forum Solidarity with Animals

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It is refreshing to see other environmentalists and anti-capitalists taking seriously the question of solidarity with other animals, and Eileen Crist did a [great job](#) of starting this conversation.

I have been vegan for ten years and active in the animal liberation movement, written extensively on animal issues, and interviewed several prominent animal ethicists and activists on my [podcast](#). I agree wholeheartedly with Crist that there is no justification for human supremacy, and that human oppression of other animals wild and domestic represents an unfathomable moral atrocity.

What does this mean for a great transition? There is widespread agreement that humans (at least in most countries) will need to eat less meat and dairy, for environmental reasons if nothing else. And also that we should protect or preserve many wild species. But too often, concern for animal well-being is presented as a secondary justification for what we already have to do anyway, for humanity's own sake. I think genuine solidarity requires us to go further.

Crist presents a useful distinction between people's lifeworlds—in which many express genuine love and affection for other animals—and broader social systems, which enact tremendous violence. Clearly, it has not been enough to simply point out the contradiction between the two and expect people to align their personal habits more with their lifeworlds, or else vegetarianism would be much more widespread than it is.

I wonder, however, if more of that affection for animals could be channeled not only toward individual lifestyle change (though I think that is very important) but as part of a political movement to change systems. For instance, California voters have passed multiple ballot initiatives to prohibit egregiously tiny cages for farmed animals, by huge margins that show some

cross partisan appeal. (Of course, these initiatives have been challenged in courts.) In US polling, almost everyone says animals deserve at least some rights, and a slight majority even opposes animal testing.¹ Protecting endangered species polls better than climate action. People like animals, maybe not enough to eat less chicken, but perhaps enough to support politicians and policies that would make chicken rarer and more expensive. (Of course, I could be wrong, and any anti-meat measures would get a strong right-wing backlash, but ballot measures bear out some of my optimism.)

This means that fighting for animal liberation is not necessarily a distraction from other aspects of the great transition, but can be another rallying point to the cause. People who become vegetarians for environmental or health reasons are more likely to start eating meat again than the people become vegetarian primarily for animal-rights reasons: other-directed motivators can be stronger than more selfish ones. Analogously, a great transition movement that takes nonhuman animals seriously, rather than as an afterthought, might strengthen people's resolve to improve humanity's lot as well.² This, in a way, is what solidarity is all about.

But I would go further. Imagine a great transition that does only the bare minimum for animals: say, ending factory farms, reducing meat consumption, and increasing protected wildlife areas, but still leaves plenty of small-scale animal farms, vivisection, zoos, puppy mills, fur, leather, displacement of wildlife for industry and development, etc. This is not a great transition at all, or at least it is incomplete. After all, nonhuman beings represent the vast majority of sentient creatures on Earth. An anthropocentric great transition only substitutes one hierarchical, oppressive social system for another.

I encourage individuals to make whatever lifestyle changes they can to begin to embody this more just future in the present—eating vegan, eschewing zoos and Sea World, avoiding leather, etc. But again, the ultimate transformation will require rethinking animals' status in politics, policy, and law—in our systems. They must stop being considered property, and become something else. Possible starting points for what that looks like can be found in the work of philosophers like Will Kymlicka, Sue Donaldson, and most recently Martha C. Nussbaum in her new book *Justice for Animals*). Eva Meijer and others are exploring how we might build a “multispecies democracy.”³

I also think that just relations with other animals (as well as among humans) are ultimately impossible under capitalism. If profit is the primary economic driver, and there is money to be made from animals' bodies and/or homes, concerns about animal justice will be sidelined.

But might there be some ethical use of animals' bodies and/or homes in the postcapitalist society, even one with mutual respect between creatures (for instance a humane egg or wool industry)? I don't rule it out but am skeptical: I think that, without firm safeguards, it would be difficult to prevent backsliding to exploitation. But either way, I think that humane, respectful uses are likely incompatible with the buying and selling of meat.

Others have mentioned indigenous practices as a potential model for mutually respectful meat consumption. But I am not sure this model is a fair comparison to most of the world today, with a vastly increased population and year-round access to plant food that for most can reach nutritional needs. In the United States, outside of perhaps certain regions in Alaska or other remote areas, we would be eating meat not because we must but because we want to. Farming also removes the animal's choice in the matter. This strikes me as a different situation than that faced by indigenous groups who engage in subsistence hunting or fishing. At risk of coming across as too strident, for most Americans, claiming there is mutual respect in meat consumption is a flimsy excuse for unnecessary violence.

Endnotes

1. Taylor Orth, "Nearly Half of Americans Support Strengthening Laws around Animal Cruelty," YouGov America, May 31, 2022, <https://today.yougov.com/topics/society/articles-reports/2022/05/31/american-support-strengthening-laws-animal-cruelty>; Mark Strauss, "Americans Are Divided over the Use of Animals in Scientific Research," Pew Research Center, August 16, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/16/americans-are-divided-over-the-use-of-animals-in-scientific-research>.
2. Daton Martindale, "The Strategic Case for Animal Liberation," *The Trouble*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.the-trouble.com/content/2020/8/28/the-strategic-case-for-animal-liberation>.
3. Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022); Eva Meijer, *When Animals Speak: Toward an Interspecies Democracy* (New York: New York University Press, 2019). I interviewed Nussbaum on my podcast [here](#).

About the Author



Dayton Martindale is a journalist covering climate, ecology, and animals, and an editor-at-large for the rural news site *Barn Raiser*. He is the former associate editor of *In These Times* magazine, and has written for *Sierra*, *Boston Review*, *Truthout*, *The Trouble*, *Jacobin*, *The Next System Project*, *Earth Island Journal*, *The Ecologist*, and *Harbinger: A Journal of Social Ecology*, among others. He is also host of the environmental books podcast *Storytelling Animals*. He has a history of activism within left social movements, in particular those for climate justice and animal rights, and is a cofounder of the Democratic Socialists of America's Animal Liberation Working Group.

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Cite as Dayton Martindale, "Toward Movement Synergy," contribution to GTI Forum "Solidarity with Animals," *Great Transition Initiative* (February 2023), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/solidarity-animals-martindale>.

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