

Steven Best

The Politics of Total Liberation

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I should say, initially, that there is much to admire in this book. It is refreshingly broad in scope, ambitious, controversial and, for some no doubt, inspirational. Moreover, it does contain some important insights. As with all metanarratives, however – and especially with one as wide-ranging as this one is – it does contain a range of contestable assumptions. Indeed, the book might be best seen as a series of hypotheses to be tested rather than, as the author intends, a manifesto explaining the world's ills and how to solve them.

Central to Best's thesis is a conventional abolitionist version of animal rights where human moral superiority is undermined by the cognitive similarities between humans and non-human animals. As a result, animals have a right to life and liberty, and their control by humans is akin to slavery. Best is, however, critical of the animal rights project as presently constituted. This is partly because its reliance on changing individual lifestyles fails to take into account the structural factors (and particularly global capitalism) largely responsible for the exploitation of animals. In addition, Best regards the animal rights movement (or at least a large part of it) as much too passive, and unwilling to engage in militant direct action. The animal rights campaign for veganism is, he argues, in one of many memorable passages: 'a quiescent, housebroken, apolitical form of consumption by and for docile citizens. Veganism is the new opiate of the people' (p. 47).

Above all, Best argues, the animal rights movement is much too insular, failing to see the links between the exploitation of animals and humans and the degradation of the natural environment. All have a similar cause. It is the forces of global capitalism that are to blame. These interrelated forms of oppression require alliances between social movements concerned with all forms of oppression, whether they relate to humans, animals or nature. The aim should be nothing less than the waging of a war of total liberation using any and all methods – violent and nonviolent – against the capitalist system with the aim of emancipating humans, animals and the earth. Best is adamant that whilst such a total liberation is necessary to end the anthropocentric and exploitative capitalist system, it will by no means necessarily succeed. Indeed, he is pessimistic about the human race's ability to save itself, arguing that its demise may be as inevitable as it is, in some ways, welcome.

There is a great deal that is valuable in *The Politics of Total Liberation*. Best's analysis of the various challenges to human moral superiority provides a useful introduction to the case against anthropocentrism. Best is surely also right to question the animal rights (and environmental) movement's reliance on campaigns to alter individual moral consciences, as opposed to the identification of a particular group or class in society who can be mobilised on behalf of non-humans. Best is also right to advocate the building of alliances between

different social movements concerned with animal and human oppression and environmental degradation. Best's critique is built upon his, largely correct, observation that the animal advocacy movement is enormously complacent. For despite the fact that it has had some success in altering the moral climate, this pales into insignificance when one considers the ever-rising number of animals being bred, raised and killed for food largely as a result of growing demand in developing (mostly non-liberal) parts of the world.

Having said this, it is possible to take issue with many of the claims made in *The Politics of Total Liberation*. Equating the confinement of animals with slavery, for instance, is problematic and yet Best does not engage with the animal ethics literature questioning its veracity. Relatedly, he also skims over the cognitive differences between the 'higher' and other non-human animals which, according to his own approach, might lead to a differential moral status.

More generally, many would challenge Best's pessimism about the state of the world and the character of *Homo sapiens*. One does not need to accept the Promethean perspective to challenge his claim that Western civilisation is characterised by 'a metastasizing system of domination, war, slavery, slaughter, omnicide, exterminism, and ecological devastation' (p. 149).

Likewise, Best also exaggerates the extent to which oppressions are linked. Take, for example, the key link he seeks to make between environmental degradation and the exploitation of animals. Yes, it is true that intensive animal husbandry can have a negative impact on the environment. However, it would be feasible to conceive of a world where domesticated animals are still kept for food and used in scientific procedures but in which the natural world is protected to a greater extent than it is now. Relatedly, Best ignores the well-known conflict between the disciplines of environmental and animal ethics where the former is holistic and not wedded to sentience whilst the latter is individualistic and based on cognitive capacities.

Perhaps the biggest assumption made by Best is the claim that the exploitation of nonhuman animals and nature as a whole is the product of the capitalist economic system. There might be something in this claim, as eco-socialists have argued, but Best needs to provide more evidence to support his claim that it is specifically capitalism, rather than industrialism more generally, that is responsible for animal exploitation and environmental degradation. Further, Best is not entirely clear what he sees as the replacement for capitalism. If he is offering a socialist solution he then has to deal with the apparent incompatibility between the productivism and anthropocentrism inherent in traditional socialist thought (and, arguably, practice) and the non-anthropocentric and limits to growth emphasis in much animal and environmental ethics. Indeed, much of the book consists of a critique of the left's failure to engage with animal rights and dark green environmental ethics.

Best, of course, is an academic and activist who revels in his radicalism and courts controversy whenever possible. I think there is a place for such prose in the academy.

However, this book's sweeping elegance is, perhaps inevitably, accompanied by some at best not fully tested, and at worst simplistic, assumptions.

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