

# Civil Rights Groups To PETA: “You Have Used Us Enough”

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In the wake of public outrage over an exhibit headlined *Are Animals the New Slaves?*, the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals are deliberating on whether to continue with their national Animal Liberation tour.

Following similar public anger over the group’s *Holocaust on Your Plate* campaign, the *New Slaves* show compares violent racism to the exploitation of animals. The twelve-panel display juxtaposes such images as two African Americans, noosed and hanging from trees, with photo of a cow being hung for slaughter. It also invokes indigenous people, child workers, and the struggle for women’s rights. A scene dealing with the latter subject shows a male crowd raising a sign declaring “We love women -- in the kitchen and the bed.”

Strong denunciations of the tour have come from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Southern Poverty Law Center, America’s Black Holocaust Museum -- whose founder is a survivor of the lynching scene used in the exhibit -- and the [alternative press](#). PETA employees seem taken aback, unable to comprehend why the exhibit was not surrounded with born receivers of the news. Let us consider, for a moment, why it wasn’t.

Could part of the reason be the group’s outright refusal to take positions against violence to humans? Here, readers might recall that PETA’s objections to suicide bombers who use donkeys were followed by director Ingrid Newkirk’s refusal to address the human rights issues involved in armed conflict: “It’s not my business to inject myself into human wars,” said Newkirk.

Could it be PETA’s notorious tendency to be, in Newkirk’s terminology, “complete press sluts”? [\[1\]](#) Or its acknowledgment that “[p]robably everything we do is a publicity stunt”? [\[2\]](#)

Could it be the group’s record of [using homeless people](#) to make a point about the undesirability of fur? Or its incessant pimping of people -- putting the T&A into PETA, as they’ve called it -- in boorish tours like the one featuring a

Penthouse model “tofu-wrestling” in a tub of bean curd?

Could it be, in the strangest of ironies, that PETA’s history of gross insensitivity to other human beings has generated invidious stereotypes about the category of animal advocates as a group itself?

The topic of animal use is an important subject, dire enough to be taken seriously on its own terms. [\[3\]](#) But by its unremitting lack of social understanding, PETA enables its perennial belittlement. For thinking people are unlikely to receive information about species bias from a source that shows little or no understanding of social hierarchy in any other context. If animal advocates use people instrumentally all the time, how is the rest of society supposed to consider them ethical guides?

### **Step Right Up**

“The next great liberation movement is animal liberation,” said PeTA’s special projects director, explaining the rationale behind the twelve-panel gallery of abominations. But when viewers see the clubbing of a seal beside a person being clubbed in a racist frenzy, they might remember PETA’s shock-video in which a man fatally clubs a screaming woman in the subway and rips her fur coat off, as the PETA captions asks “What if you were killed for your coat?” When a shackled human leg is shown next to the leg of a chained elephant, and the PETA staffers decry the whips and chains, viewers might recall the much-vaunted fashion show PETA sponsored in New York, featuring latex gear inspired by the urban S&M community and its mock slave auctions. The picture of a young man from the Kasai River Valley juxtaposed with a photo of a clothed Rhesus macaque may call to mind the Bronx Zoo’s early twentieth-century display of the man with a parrot and an orangutan; it might also bring to mind PETA’s circus protests that rely on appalling imagery of [naked, caged, chained, or beaten women](#), or its [use of dark-skinned men as “wild animals”](#).

Fair enough that Scot X. Esdaile, president of the Connecticut chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, [arrived at the New Slaves show in New Haven](#) and said simply, “Once again, black people are being pimped. You used us. You have used us enough. Take it down immediately.”

John C. White, the NAACP’s director of communications, stated, “PETA shows that it is willing to exploit racism to advance its cause. Is PETA saving that as

long as animals are butchered for meat, racists should continue lynching Black people?”

Another fair response, given that earlier this year, the group protested KFC, insisting that the chickens should not be electrocuted but rather, for humane reasons, gassed instead. What does PETA's call to KFC suppliers to buy gas chambers say to the Holocaust survivors and the African Americans whose cases PETA uses in comparison?

*In the Matter of Color*, A. Leon Higginbotham's classic study of colonial slavery legislation, suggests that focusing attention on extremes of maltreatment may, and did, elicit responses aimed at ameliorating certain conditions of slavery rather than abolishing slavery itself. Whereas looking at victims may move some to a charitable response, it's actual identification with the members of the wronged group that will prompt serious demands for just treatment.

But with whom does PETA identify? Animals comprise the specific oppressed class that PETA claims to represent. Yet this summer, after a high-profile sting, authorities lodged felony charges against PETA employees for killing numerous dogs, cats, puppies, and kittens, and subsequently dumping the animals' bodies into a waste bin in a North Carolina parking lot. Although unwilling to condone the dumping, PETA's director said that the charity's employees do indeed end the lives of animals -- routinely -- and referred to the practice as euthanasia.

It's a most peculiar theory of rights that accepts the killings of healthy beings as euthanasia. But in PETA's model, it fits. Peter Singer, the utilitarian philosopher whose book *Animal Liberation* inspired the title and a central quote in PETA's exhibit, is known for arguing the moral correctness of killing disabled human beings whose lives are, in Singer's view, not worth living. [Singer has also asserted that a dog owner who indulges in sexual acts with that dog can be engaged in “mutually satisfying activities.”](#) What group of human beings with a history of subjection to grotesque mistreatment wants to be anywhere near a comparison made in this kind of context?

"We are all animals," sniffed Newkirk's blog, "So get over it."

### **People as Props**

The racism connected with human slavery still exists in this society, as does human slavery itself. A 2004 report by Free the Slaves & Human Rights Center

estimates that 10,000 or more people are enslaved in the United States, with about half being exploited expressly for sex. PETA's perennial use of pornography suggests that its leadership has no interest in confronting the traffic in human bodies; and moreover, as Geov Parrish stated in the essay [Treating Women Like Meat](#), they have also helped to glorify war. PETA's decisions could hardly be more conducive to the interconnected use of human bodies.

To the extent that the trafficked humans were portrayed in the exhibit solely to attract and transfix passers-by, these images served as props. And therefore, when African Americans take exception to the portrayal -- just as feminists have objected to PETA's sensationalistic use of female images -- they object with good reason. One wonders when all of the people who join the movement because they get off on pictures of domination and submission will get out of the way and stop obstructing serious discussion.

But PETA supporters won't hear of it. No, they say, those who oppose the display on such terms are simply showing our own "speciesism." In a world where we are all brought up with the idea that humanity is unique in some way, spitting at critics with accusations of species bias is hardly creative advocacy, and it gives the impression that the campaigners lack a concept of the dynamics of social hierarchy.

Prejudice is frequently furthered by comparing the targeted group to another group that's considered even more different or dismissed. Because racial and gender-based oppression uses name-calling in threats to annihilate the very core of one's identity, the making of such comparisons has an especially upsetting effect. Modern feminists and civil rights advocates pay particular attention to discrimination accompanied by such comparisons, which are typically marshaled not with the intent to treat their objects as non-human, but rather to treat them as sub-human. For people perceived as outsiders in our society, the risks still do include harassment, physical assault, even death.

While African Americans have been systematically degraded by being compared with nonhuman beings, are we to think that angry responses to the pairing of man and monkey were unanticipated? The monkey in the photo was objectified, demeaned, and used. But the point of animal rights advocacy is not to call for equality in the sense of equivalence. And although PETA misses this key distinction, the history of oppression practically guarantees that people faced with a series of stark comparisons will infer that the displays are yet again about annihilating their identity, the rights of personhood they struggled to

attain. That's precisely why angry viewers asked whether the exhibit compared African Americans to cows. Interrogating the framework of domination itself is the important task, but it's an undertaking which does not lend itself to the sensational quality of traveling exhibitions. It's insensitive, it's counterproductive, and it's arguably inhumane to attempt to address domination by putting people in situations where the feeling of oppression is violently replicated.

### **A Conservative Compassion**

The tour and the response to it indicates a world of difference between a horde of campaigners who have fashioned themselves into a charitable conglomerate, on one hand, and the struggle of a social movement on the other. Regarding the workings of the former, consider Matthew Scully, whose 2002 book *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, received PETA's Book of the Year award. Scully, a speechwriter for George W. Bush, won PETA's praise for denouncing the cruelty of high-volume meat production and for setting out the "basic moral boundaries we need in livestock farming." Yet Scully positively flaunts the view that some are fit to be masters: "Someone has to assume dominion, and looking around the earth we seem to be the best candidates," states the author. Elsewhere in the same book, Scully states: "It is our fellow creatures' lot in the universe, the place assigned to them in creation, to be completely at our mercy, the fiercest wolf or tiger defenseless against the most cowardly man."

According to Matthew Scully, dominion is the natural and noble way of civilizing the fierce, the way to elicit "qualities hidden within its own nature" that raises an animal from a savage state. Applying such a paternalistic attitude to humans, humans who can speak out and hold their advocates accountable, would, today, seem utterly preposterous. Singling out people for belonging to a racial class in visions of *noblesse oblige* such as this would be racist. And perhaps this is why people are putting the burden of proof upon PETA to demonstrate that their exhibit is unracist.

### **Reasons for Abolition**

PETA's exhibit makes emblematic displays out of images of slaves, indigenous people and other exploited individuals, reproducing the abject victimization of subjects who aren't around to authorize such reproduction. The campaign exudes the sense of objectification seen in the very spectacles its panels

reproduce. Civil rights activists are rightly appalled, as are feminists who have been subjected to PETA's disgraceful tactics for far too long.

There are important moral reasons to abolish the whole legal framework that commodifies conscious life. But we are never going to have that debate as long as people who claim to represent animal rights theory refuse to show the same "ethical treatment" to human animals as they claim should be extending to the non-human ones. They might be surprised at how far they could get, and how fast they could get there, if they would discover the art of listening.

And if only they would, they might figure out what other social justice movements know: Human enslavement and degradation isn't old. We have yet to find a way to get things done on an egalitarian basis within humanity. To the extent that animal rights can further the possibility of doing so, it can and will be welcomed as a social asset. At least we know that we are doing our best to make it so if we don't overwhelm ourselves with our own self-certitude.

The point of activism is not to offend people, but to work diligently on establishing a viewpoint and a basis for serious change. From a moral standpoint, the use of deliberate shock tactics betrays animal rights principles. From a practical standpoint, it rivets public attention on the menace posed by activists, rather than that posed by human domination over nature and the use of animals to achieve it. And it's the latter threat, not the former, that animal rights theory is really about.

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## REFERENCES

[1] Michael Specter, "Real Life: Mother Nature," *Observer Magazine* (22 Jun. 2003).

[2] Carolyn Pesce, "Holding the 'Radical Line': Animal Group Shocks Even Its Supporters," *USA Today* (3 Sep. 1991).

[3] The insistence on comparisons, however, is pervasive in animal advocacy, and reflected in British media commentaries as well. A [recent essay in the \*Guardian of London\*](#) claims that the closing of a family farm known for breeding animals for labs was forced by “terrorism” -- including the exhumation of a buried body and a pedophilia smear campaign -- and that Nelson Mandela would understand.