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*Challenging anthropocentrism in politics and liberation activism means understanding animal agency and forms of resistance*

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## Animal Activism and Interspecies Change

*Challenging anthropocentrism in politics and liberation activism means understanding animal agency and forms of resistance*

NOVEMBER 29, 2016 BY EVA MEIJER

In the 1850's, the United States government introduced 75 camels into military service. Their job was to transport equipment and human soldiers. The camels resisted working, by refusing to obey orders and to cooperate, and biting and spitting upon the human soldiers, who learned to hate and fear them. The army stopped employing camels and returned to using horses and mules. They stated that using camels had been an experiment, while the camels were the ones who made it into an experiment, by being bad soldiers. Jason Hribal discusses these camels' resistance as an example of a situation in which nonhuman animal agency directly influenced a human political decision.<sup>1</sup> There are many other examples, some more successful than others. The role that nonhuman animals play in social change is however usually not acknowledged in theory or in animal activism.

Recent work in political philosophy that draws on insights about political participation of human marginalized groups, and work in animal studies, argues that nonhuman animals exercise political agency. Instead of regarding other animals as objects of study, it is argued that we should see them as subjects with their own perspectives on life, who stand in different relations to human political communities. Political nonhuman animal agency has been described and conceptualized in different ways: as resistance and

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Members of the U.S. Camel Corps in the southwestern desert in 1857.

Archive illustration. Credit: Getty Images.

protest,<sup>2</sup> cooperation with humans, voting with the feet, bargaining and negotiating,<sup>3</sup> and even deliberating.<sup>4</sup> Viewing nonhuman animals as political actors has consequences for animal advocates. Nonhuman animals fight oppression, and this the animal rights movement needs to acknowledge and support, in order to move beyond anthropocentrism. If one takes other animals seriously as subjects, it is paradoxical, as well as patronizing, if humans are still presented as the group that decides what is best for them, or if humans determine the precise form and content of ‘rights’ or ‘liberation’. This should be a mutual project. Taking nonhuman animal agency into account in activism can furthermore help us see the existing situation in a different light, and open up new ways of thinking about social and political change. It can also contribute to imagining and creating new interspecies communities.

### Nonhuman animal resistance

Twenty-year-old circus elephant Tyke killed her trainer during a show on August 20 1994, after years of abuse. Tyke ran into the streets of Hawaii, and attacked a clown and another member of the circus, before she was shot and killed by the police. Her death brought about hundreds of lawsuits against the city, state and Hawthorn Corporation, the owner of the circus. It also inspired humans to act on behalf of nonhuman animals, in the form of protests and boycotts. This forced the government to change legislation concerning circus animals, and made them confiscate sixteen other abused elephants from Hawthorn.<sup>1</sup> The stories of the camels and Tyke may seem to be isolated cases. However, while nonhuman animal acts of resistance are often, although not always, individual responses to human displays of power, they are not random or incidental.

Zoo animals escape from their enclosures, working animals refuse to do the work humans order them to do, non-domesticated nonhuman animals in circuses and aquaria attack the humans exploiting them.<sup>2</sup> Domesticated nonhuman animals also resist and protest. Work animals for example

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systematically resist orders, and as a social group, or class, were a force that influenced the course of history – both in what they helped build, and in what they resisted.<sup>3</sup> Their unreliability as workers instigated processes of modernization and industrialization. Nonhuman animal resistance is sometimes cultural. Orang-utans who are held captive in zoos cooperate to escape, and share their knowledge with others in their group, forcing zoos to separate and relocate them.<sup>4</sup> Elephants teach youngsters which houses to break into, and how to avoid humans.<sup>5</sup> Wild and domesticated nonhuman animals help members of their own group, as well as other animals, escape from enclosures (elephants have for example helped antelopes escape by opening the locks on their gate),<sup>6</sup> or teach them how to do it from a distance.<sup>7</sup>

Recent research on nonhuman animal cognitions and emotions, in neuroscience and ethology, shows that there is evolutionary continuity in humans and other animal species.<sup>8</sup> Eisenman<sup>9</sup> shows that the aggression that prompts nonhuman animals to resist is very similar to aggression in human groups that use violence to resist oppression, both on the physiological level and on the level of cognition. He discusses the examples of itinerant bands that stormed Newgate Prison during the Gordon Riots in 1780, the anti-Irish protesters of 1736 and the Wilkes and Liberty demonstrators of 1768–69 (2015, p.347). All these groups had reasons for their protest but were also driven by spontaneous feelings. Seeing the acts of resistance I discussed above as merely instinctual or automatic, while viewing comparable violence in human animals as purposeful, neglects the depth of nonhuman animal emotions, and their self-consciousness, and overstates it in humans (2015, p.346). Human animals and other animal species are driven both by physiological and emotional responses to abuse, and these responses influence cognitive processes. Different species have different ways of expressing themselves and expressing their anger, and different levels of self-consciousness.<sup>10</sup> Conceptualizing nonhuman animal resistance as a form of political resistance means we need to take species-specific behaviors and context into account. This requires empirical research into human and nonhuman animal behavior, and an analysis of the concept resistance.

A focus on resistance challenges the view that nonhuman animals cannot be political actors because they cannot speak in human language. This is not to say that nonhuman animal resistance is completely similar to human resistance. Rather, the concept ‘resistance’ is used to describe a variety of practices that resemble each other in some ways and differ in other ways; they share a family resemblance but do not have one characteristic that defines all of them. Dinesh Wadiwel argues resistance is a good lens to think about animal advocacy and nonhuman animal agency, because it allows us to understand and foster nonhuman animal creativity and makes us see them in a new light. It avoids an emphasis on animal suffering, which is especially important for species who are by some thought not to suffer, such as fish and



insects.<sup>11</sup> According to him, resistance is a form of political agency that does not need to be grounded in an innate capability or worth. Drawing on the work of Foucault, Wadiwel<sup>12</sup> sees power as a network of forces, and argues that resistive elements engage as agents in power relations. Examining these power relations through acts of resistance can help us see whether these relations are just. Through resisting, nonhuman animals show us their standpoints, which help us see their perspective, and therefore these acts can help us think about new relations. Furthermore, nonhuman animal acts of resistance influence societies and political structures that are usually seen as solely human.

### **Taking animal agency into account in activism**

The animal advocacy movement is currently mostly framed as humans speaking for other animals, or as humans rescuing or liberating other animals. While from a pragmatic point of view it might sometimes be justified to stay within an anthropocentric framework, speaking for other animals in this way runs the risk of leaving the binary between human and nonhuman animals intact, and of reinforcing anthropocentrism. Human activist groups can assist other groups of humans in different ways – by joining them in protests, drawing attention to questions that concern them, assisting them with money or other resources, sharing knowledge, and so on. We also find these acts in relation to nonhuman animals. Humans put on street protests, raise money, create websites, teach courses in animal studies, build shelters, rescue nonhuman animals who are the victims of other humans, and act in many other ways. Below I will discuss some examples of activist practices and shed light on how they can better incorporate nonhuman animal agency.

First, there are acts that involve contact with actual nonhuman animals, for example when activists rescue or liberate nonhuman animals from laboratories, farms and other spaces where they are held captive. Some of these acts really have the form of humans saving other animals – think for example of saving beagles from laboratories and finding new homes for them – while others assist nonhuman animals. Activists go to animal transports, farms and slaughterhouses, and open the gates so animals can escape. Greenpeace activists stay in boats close to whales to prevent hunters from killing them. The Lobster Liberation Front demolishes fishing boats and releases lobsters back into the ocean. Activists also go to areas where nonhuman animals are killed en masse, for example with the gassing of geese around Schiphol airport in the Netherlands from 2011 onwards, and the English badger cull of 2013 and 2014, aiming to prevent the killing of animals and to assist animals who escape or who are injured at the spot. Currently, these acts are often framed as humans who speak up for other animals, or who save or rescue them, which glosses over animal agency in the process and keeps intact a framework in which humans decide what is best. Viewing

them as political groups not only challenges this but also opens up new theoretical and practical channels to challenge oppression.

Second, there are forms of activism in which humans translate or shed light on nonhuman animal agency, in interaction with other humans. Jane Goodall did this in the 1960's when she started addressing the chimpanzees she studied as 'her' or 'him', instead of 'it'. Her colleagues saw this as anthropomorphism; it changed the way many humans thought about chimpanzees. More recent example are the documentaries *Blackfish* (2013), which highlights orca whale Tilikum's agency by using footage in which he uses violence against humans,<sup>13</sup> framing it as resistance,<sup>14</sup> and *Tyke Elephant Outlaw* (2015), about circus elephant Tyke's acts of resistance. Humans often present captive nonhuman animals as lovable and content, even happy; these documentaries show that they do not like to perform tricks or to live in captivity, that they can become depressed when they are held in solitary confinement, and that they can and do intentionally resist their oppression. Recognition of their agency works two ways: the films can be seen as acts of solidarity with them and others in the same situation, and their acts make something clear that human advocates cannot, which strengthens the case the humans want to make. In framing this, it is again important to not speak for the nonhuman animals, but to let them speak for themselves.



Iconic still image from footage of Tyke on a rampage before he was killed. Photo from the documentary *Tyke: The Elephant Outlaw*

In addition to these more explicitly political protests, taking nonhuman animal agency and subjectivity into account on a day-to-day basis, and honoring nonhuman animal subjectivity also is a form of resistance. It challenges anthropocentrism and can show new directions for interaction. Leslie Irvine<sup>15</sup> argues that play between humans and cats, or dogs, is a site for political resistance because in play, humans and other animals, challenge the current construction of the human-nonhuman animal divide. Play acknowledges nonhuman animals' subjectivity and communication skills and thereby challenges "human disregard for non-human life" (2001, p.1). Drawing

on the work of Foucault, she argues that micro-practices, common everyday practices, are spaces in which power hierarchies and conflicts are shown, and in which common views about human-nonhuman animal hierarchies can be challenged. Different aspects of play, such as resisting the notion of otherness and trends to dominate other species, can address current power hierarchies. Humans who engage with other animals in this way can build new relations with other animals, and can discuss these with other humans.

Finally, those who write about and educate others about nonhuman animals can, and should, also challenge anthropocentrism not just by addressing questions regarding the lives of nonhuman animals, but also by taking their voices seriously and avoiding speaking for them when possible. Hribal<sup>16</sup> signals a pressing problem in the growing field of animal studies, namely that the animals' perspectives, and their agency, are often not taken into account in theorizing.<sup>17</sup> This perpetuates the existing hierarchy and continues to silence nonhuman animals. While it is sometimes not easy to know how we can best include other animals' voices, we need to listen to them and learn from them, and not exclude them beforehand.

### **From animals as actors of change to interspecies communities**

Viewing other animals as political actors and taking their agency into account in activism can help us see them in a different light, and it can help us imagine new ways of co-existing. This requires paying more attention to what they do and say. Recent research on cognition, languages, cultures, and politics of nonhuman animals shows that the worlds of nonhuman animals are much richer, and in some ways much closer to those of humans, than thought before.<sup>18</sup> More attention for these studies is needed in philosophy, and other fields of animal studies, in order not to repeat existing stereotypes about nonhuman animal cognition and behavior. Learning about other animals' languages and cultures can also be helpful in interaction with them. In political interaction with other animals, concepts such as democracy, solidarity, civil disobedience and freedom, can and should be used as tools in envisioning change; they can help us think. However, if we see their meaning as fixed and simply add other animals to existing institutions, normative and practical problems are likely to arise. Instead, we should find out with other animals what political concepts could mean in interspecies contexts.

Street dog agency can function as a starting point for new relations, as an example of incorporating nonhuman animal agency in social change. Human interventions directed at helping street dogs currently often focus on neutering them and releasing them back onto the streets, or capturing them and bringing them to shelters where they wait to be adopted. Although these types of interventions might sometimes be necessary because the dogs are in danger, they also seem to imply that dogs can only be happy when they are living with a human family that takes care of all their needs. While street dogs

often suffer from many problems – disease, injuries, violence, hunger –they are not will-less victims who wait for human saviors. They form communities and carve out lives for themselves with varying degrees of contact with humans.

Comparing the lives of street dogs in India and unwanted dogs in the United Kingdom, Krithika Srinivasan<sup>19</sup> questions whether the situation in the UK, usually perceived as more animal friendly, really is better for the dogs. Apart from the fact that many dogs are killed in UK shelters, they are always neutered, which limits their freedom of reproduction and opportunities to form families and have sexual relations, and their freedom of movement is severely limited. Indian dogs do have freedom of movement and live in packs, in which family members can stay together, and in some cases also live in harmony with humans around them. Their lives are not free of danger and their situation can certainly be improved, but there are many valuable aspects, especially if the humans in their area provide them with some care (such as rabies vaccinations).

Street dogs in Istanbul also form their own communities; they are part of the city and co-shape the city.<sup>20</sup> Their influence is not limited to spatial or geographical arrangements; they also leave their mark on the lives and histories of humans. Dogs often seek out houses they guard, and are fed in return; these acts and the relationships with humans that follow from them play a role in many stories about the city.



Moscow subway dog, 2009. Photo: [opocuu.com/moscowmetro.htm](http://opocuu.com/moscowmetro.htm)

In Moscow, street dogs taught themselves to use the subway. These dogs live in the suburbs because there is more space for them there, and it is safer there than it is in the city center. There is however also less food, and during daytime they use the subway to go to the market. They avoid ticket barriers and slip through gates when humans open them, and they behave well when they are on the trains. They know when to get off because of sounds and smells, and probably also the duration of the journey. By using public transport they show that nonhuman animals, who are often seen as on the side of nature (in contrast to humans, who are seen as part of culture) can adapt to new inventions and circumstances, and learn to use them for their own benefit.<sup>21</sup> With their behavior these dogs challenge stereotypes and influence media as well as public opinion; photographs and videos of them waiting for the next stop make rounds on the internet. When the city council of Moscow threatened to kill the dogs, these images and stories were used by activists to generate goodwill amongst human citizens.<sup>22</sup>

While their existence should not be glamourized – street dogs often do not live to be two years of age, winters are cold in Russia, and life is generally tough – they – as the street dogs in Istanbul, India and other places – do show us something about the plurality of ways in which dogs and humans can co-exist. Honoring dog agency does not simply mean leaving the dogs to their own devices. The Moscow dogs descend from, and sometimes are, domesticated dogs who were unwanted and left alone on the streets. Not all of them have the physical and mental capacities to survive.

Additionally, human infrastructure and architecture influences the lives of animals of other species. Humans take up space and resources, and create situations that pose dangers to others, for example with traffic. For these and other reasons (for example the process of domestication) human societies have certain duties towards nonhuman animals. This, however, does not automatically lead to a duty to ‘rescue’ dogs off the streets and discipline them into human society. Some dogs are offspring of generations of feral dogs, and are closer to wild animals than domesticated animals. They might value relations with members of their own species more than relations with humans, and they might prefer a life outside to the boundaries of a human-dog household. So instead of imposing a human rescue model on them, we need to think about other ways to improve relations with them.

There are many possible ways in which we can start to build new relations with street dogs. Laws and policies should be changed, to prohibit the killing and torturing of dogs. Animal ambulances and hospitals can assist nonhuman animals who are ill or injured. The architecture of public spaces could take their presence into account by building doghouses, or other spaces, where they can rest and are protected against the cold. Traffic and existing forms of infrastructure should be reconsidered. Vaccination programs can prevent rabies. Education can teach dogs and humans about living with other

animals, and promote respectful relations. Shelters could be open during the days, so dogs can come and go as they please, or they can install dog doors. Dogs who are persistent in seeking out human company could be adopted. How the situation will evolve depends on the preferences of individuals and social groups, and also external circumstances, such as weather conditions. If humans stop hurting dogs they might want to be closer to them; if their social status changes they might prefer to live on their own.

Working towards change with stray dogs is not one practice. It can involve feeding them, building dog houses, participating in street protests (former street dogs also often take part in these protests), educating others, lobbying for political change, making documentaries, writing with dogs, or taking them into your home and letting them shape your life. The situation for other animals is often so bad that human activists cannot afford not to use all options they have to improve it. It is however important to remember other animals are subjects with their own perspective on life; it is problematic to argue their interests need to be taken into account because they are subjects, while at the same time determining for them how this should be done. In order not to repeat paternalism and anthropocentrism, we need to listen to other animals and act, think, feel, and learn, with them.

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**Cover photo:** Kasatka attacking trainer Ken Peters, Seaworld, 2006. Still image from the documentary *Blackfish*.

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### About Eva Meijer

Eva Meijer is working on a PhD in philosophy at the University of Amsterdam, 'Political Animal Voices', developing a theory of political animal voice. She teaches the course 'Animal Ethics and Politics' and is chair of the Dutch study group for Animal Ethics, as well as a founding member of Minding Animals The Netherlands. Recent publications include a book on nonhuman animal languages, \*Dierentalen\*, and a fictional biography of bird scientist Len Howard, \*Het vogelhuis\*. In addition to her academic work, Meijer works as a novelist, visual artist and singer songwriter. Her website is [www.evameijer.nl](http://www.evameijer.nl)

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