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Animal Liberation is Climate Justice

Struggles and Strategies from Below

Laura Schleifer & Dan Fischer

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Winter 2022

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culture.⁵⁴ Reallocation of that money to plant farming would alleviate problems caused by animal agriculture; benefit public health, especially in low-income areas, by increasing plant food availability and affordability;⁵⁵ economically support transitioning farmers and ranchers; provide jobs for workers that avoid the dangers and horrors of slaughter; free up land; and improve ecological regeneration potential.

Additionally, participation in human liberation movements is crucial to the achievement of both human and animal liberation. Movements for prison abolition, Black Lives Matter, No Human Is Illegal, and #LandBack address the injustices underlying the exploitation and victimization of marginalized communities by these industries, and how their liberation is intertwined with that of non-humans. Collective liberation depends upon a proliferation of alliances between human, animal, and ecology movements.

We can also learn from Indigenous ways of understanding nature and our role within it. In 2010, about 35,000 international attendees, many from Indigenous nations, gathered in Cochabamba, Bolivia, to participate in the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. Their radical proposals included both a social-systemic transformation beyond capitalism, and the principle that "Every [living] being has the right to well-being and to live free from torture or cruel treatment by human beings."

By striving for the total liberation of *all* species, we work toward dismantling systems and tools of oppression and creating a sustainable, even regenerative, future. The apparent alternative is increasing suffering, injustice, and ultimately the extinction of life on earth. Which side are you on?

⁵⁴ Sally Ho, "U.S. Animal Agriculture Subsidies Soared in 2020 Despite Climate Health Danger," *Green Queen*, Nov. 24, 2021.

⁵⁵ "Food Deserts," Food Empowerment Project.

Twenty twenty-one was the Year of the Flood(s)—and droughts, fires, famines, and plague. Floods swelled from Chinese subways to Alpine villages; fires raged from the Canadian-U.S. Pacific Northwest to Greece and Turkey; Madagascar suffered drought-induced famine; locusts ravaged crops from East Africa to India to the Arabian Peninsula; flesh-eating bacteria spawned in the Atlantic; the coronavirus killed millions; and right-wingers began begrudgingly acknowledging the eco-apocalypse, shifting from climate change denialism to increasingly Malthusian, eco-fascistic narratives.¹

Meanwhile, world leaders discussed how to save capitalism from global warming. The much-hyped 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) regurgitated reformist policies that aimed to preserve the very system causing this catastrophe. Its accomplishments included pledges to reduce coal usage and end global deforestation by 2030, and a recommitment to limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. This target (let alone 1 degree, as scientist James Hansen advocates) seems purely aspirational considering our current trajectory toward 3 degrees or higher. Moreover, these voluntary measures may never even materialize at all.

It's particularly difficult to take such pledges seriously when the discussion at COP26 barely touched on a leading cause of global warming, deforestation, species extinction, water depletion, ocean "dead zones" and plastics, soil erosion, air pollution, world hunger, antibiotic resistance, and infectious diseases—including, most likely, COVID-19.² The delegates chowed on meat, fish, and dairy-based meals, which comprised 60 percent of the conference's menu, ignoring these meals' high carbon footprint. To quote Carl Le Blanc of the Phoenix-based nonprofit Climate Healers: "The

¹ Oliver Milman, "Climate Denial is Waning on the Right. What's Replacing It Might Be Just as Scary," *Guardian*, Nov. 21, 2021.

² Phoebe Weston and Jonathan Watts, "The Cow in the Room: Why Is No One Talking about Farming at Cop26?," 2021.

cow in the room is being ignored at this COP. Animal agriculture has been taken off the agenda and put on the menu.”³

In accounting for climate change, a focus on cows is essential for several reasons. First, farmed animals—mainly cows raised for beef and dairy—produce roughly one-third of the world’s methane emissions. Despite being shorter-lived than carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane is the more potent greenhouse gas by far—by a factor of eighty to one hundred. Second, land used by the cattle industry has a staggering opportunity cost. Scientists found this year that if the world abolished animal agriculture and restored the liberated land to forest and wild grassland, the flora and soil could sequester 772 billion tons of CO₂.

Although the UN released a special report two years ago stressing that one of the most effective ways to mitigate warming is a plant-based diet,⁴ not one day of COP26 was devoted to the issue, in stark contrast to the time dedicated to energy, transport, and finance. Even as protests outside the conference called attention to this issue, the delegates inside ignored it.

One reason cited for the omission was that addressing animal agriculture would unfairly target historically oppressed communities, continuing the Global North’s legacy of dominating and controlling those they’ve colonized.⁵ While this may seem motivated by the noble impulse to be “sensitive” to colonial dynamics, the knowledge that these same imperialist nations’ delegates also removed from the conference’s concluding agreement the so-called Loss and Damages Finance Facility,⁶ which mandated

³ Matthew N. Hayek, Helen Harwatt, William J. Ripple, and Nathaniel D. Mueller, “The Carbon Opportunity Cost of Animal-Sourced Food Production on Land,” *Nature News*, Nature Publishing Group, Sept. 7, 2020.

⁴ “We Need to Talk about Meat.” United Nations Climate Change Conference, May 19, 2021.

⁵ Alex Lockwood, “Animal Agriculture Was Critically Ignored at COP26—But Why?,” *Sentient Media*, Nov. 16, 2021.

⁶ Navin Singh Khadka, “COP26: Rich Countries ‘Pushing Back’ on Paying for Climate Loss,” *BBC News*, Nov. 8, 2021.

To transform our approach, we can begin by transitioning to a vegan lifestyle to the fullest extent practicable,⁵¹ which, according to an Oxford University study,⁵² is the “single biggest way to reduce our environmental impact” and dramatically reduce the damage done to marginalized people and nonhuman animals. Additionally, leftists have much to teach vegans regarding the importance of taking collective action rather than advocating for individualist or consumerist pseudo solutions. As leftists, we can provide meaningful support for the many initiatives mentioned above, as well as start our own: we can create vegan mutual aid and food justice initiatives, from food distribution to community gardens and food forests; create job opportunities for ex-slaughterhouse workers; teach courses on vegan cooking and human-animal-Earth liberation; work with local schools, hospitals, and restaurants to help them transition to serving plant-based meals; and start animal rescue initiatives, habitat restoration efforts and sanctuaries, involving children to teach the next generation to respect all life.

Another critically needed action is to shift tax subsidies from funding animal exploitation to plant foods.⁵³ Because raising and slaughtering animals is so resource intensive, the actual price of “meat,” milk, and eggs is far costlier than that of growing plants for human consumption, which is why poor countries eat the fewest animals and wealthy countries consume the most. Thus, taxpayer subsidies are poured into the animal exploitation industries to artificially lower costs, making many believe it’s eating *plants* that’s expensive! Outrageously, despite animal agriculture’s role in creating both the ecological crisis and zoonotic diseases like COVID-19, last year the United States allocated record funds to animal agri-

⁵¹ Veganarchist Memes, “Dear Leftist Critics of Veganism: Veganism Is Not Ableist or Classist,” *Medium*, Aug. 28, 2020.

⁵² Petter, cited above at note 15.

⁵³ See Christina Sewell, “Removing the Meat Subsidy; Our Cognitive Dissonance around Animal Agriculture,” *Columbia SIPA Journal of International Affairs* (Feb. 11, 2020).

Conclusion: Peace with Life on Earth

Although socialists advocate for transformative change, many sound like COP26 delegates when addressing the issue of how the oppression of nonhumans affects life on earth. How can we advocate for the abolition of private property while treating other sentient beings *as* property? How can we unequivocally oppose exploitation while exploiting the labor and bodies of humans and nonhumans through an industry based on systematic killing? How can we oppose extractive industries while extracting and consuming body parts? How can we overturn the paradigm of domination and systemic violence while participating in a practice based on it?

It's time the left steps up to the literal and figurative plate. First, we need to stop erasing the suffering and efforts of marginalized people through dismissal of resistance to animal exploitation as "white" and/or "privileged." As Guinean climate activist Abdourahamane Ly puts it, "Every week you lot come up with some new 'hot take' why veganism is racist and colonialist. And every week BIPOC vegans say, 'Hey, can you not erase us and use us for clout?' And you say no."⁵⁰

Second, we need to stop exempting the violence and exploitation we're committing against our fellow animals from our opposition to oppression. A truly liberatory framework would view these issues holistically, understanding their interrelationship and how colonialism, imperialism, militarism, capitalism, and other oppressive systems impact people, ecosystems, *and* animals. To exclude animals from that analysis is to engage in the very form of compartmentalization that underlies our social and ecological crises. Worse yet, to refuse to address these issues holistically has provided fodder for the capitalist class to continue its path of destruction unabated, endangering the entire fate of life on earth.

⁵⁰ Ly, Abdourahamane, Twitter Post. March 26, 2021, 2:32 AM.

compensation be paid to poorer countries for climate damages, should put any uncertainty about their true motives to rest. This is just one manifestation of how the call for sensitivity toward oppressed groups is exploited by those most responsible for current crises in order to avoid making transformative changes within their own societies.⁷

Unfortunately, the Western left bears some responsibility for this manipulative usage of political correctness, due both to its collective failure to reject the neoliberal exploitation of identity politics, and to its constant smearing of veganism and animal liberation as "middle class and white."⁸ While it's certainly true that vegan and animal advocacy are often conducted in colonial, Eurocentric ways, that does not mean there are no liberatory ways of advancing these goals, or that no marginalized individuals do this type of work themselves. Around the world, Indigenous, colonized, and working-class people engage in praxis that recognizes how the fates of other species enmesh with our own, and that our collective survival depends upon the liberation of humans and other species alike.

Animal Agribusiness as Colonial Force

"We demand that the copious lands in the hands of ranchers ... be turned over to our communities, which totally lack land," declared Mexico's Zapatista National Liberation Army in early 1994.⁹ Although rarely framed as such, this Indigenous peasants' revolt largely centered on a struggle to reclaim land from the commercial cattle industry. Opponents of veganism insist that abstention from

⁷ See Nancy Leong, *Identity Capitalists: The Powerful Insiders Who Exploit Diversity to Maintain Inequality* (Stanford University Press, 2021).

⁸ This argument has been widely put forward, for example by the anarchist Peter Gelderloos and the ecosocialist Max Ajl.

⁹ Joseph Whitmeyer and Rosemary Hopcroft, "Community, Capitalism, and Rebellion in Chiapas," *Sociological Perspectives* 39, no. 4 (1996), 523.

animal products would be “colonial” and wipe out many traditional Indigenous cultural practices. While this can be true in cases where white, settler, and/or non-Indigenous vegans attempt to tell Indigenous people what to do, the opposite is *staggeringly* true: Animal agriculture is one of the greatest drivers of colonization in human history.¹⁰

This is due to the enormous amount of land and resources required for animal farming compared to plant farming. Currently, 26 percent of earth’s ice-free surface is used for ranching. Additionally, one third of all crops, including 80 percent of global soy production, is used for livestock feed. Of the world’s agricultural land, nearly 80 percent is used for animal agriculture rather than for growing crops for direct human consumption. Since raising animals is so resource intensive, cultures that consume meat- and dairy-heavy diets need much more land and water than others. In the pre-colonial Americas, most people did not practice animal agriculture,¹¹ but lived mostly on plants, supplemented by hunting and fishing. The animals typically found on U.S. farms—cows, pigs, chickens, sheep, and goats—were transported from Europe by colonizers desiring meat and dairy, and later, profits, as they began exporting animal products back to Europe. Colonial expansion in the Americas increasingly became a lopsided “conflict” between “cowboys” seeking more land for cattle ranching and “Indians.”¹²

Today, animal agriculture still drives colonization. In Central and South America, cattle ranching and livestock feed production join extraction and logging industries as primary land thieves.

¹⁰ David Nibert, “Cows, Profits and Genocide: The Oppressive Side of ‘Beef’ Consumption,” paper presented at Brock University’s “Thinking about Animals: Domination, Captivity, Liberation” conference, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada, March 15–16, 2007.

¹¹ “Why Didn’t American Indians Have Domesticated Animals?,” Probaway, Aug. 4, 2009.

¹² Jamison Pfeifer, “How Beef Colonized the West and America’s Dinner Plate,” *High Country News*, 2019.

source intensive and polluting than conventional farming.⁴⁷ Thus, replacing it with small-scale ranching would do nothing but make eating animals more expensive, continuing the subjugation and exploitation of other animals—and its attendant violence, suffering, and harm—not to feed the poor, but for the pleasure and profit of the rich.

Lab-grown, or “clean,” “meat” faces ethical, technological, and economic obstacles, making it as unlikely to replace normal meat as “clean” coal is to replace regular coal. Currently, it requires the use of fetal bovine serum, a slaughterhouse by-product for which a pregnant cow is killed; then her fetus is ripped from her womb and bled to death so humans can take the blood.⁴⁸ Such “clean” practices certainly do not challenge the human exploitation of other animals. On a technological level, reporting an array of researchers’ findings, journalist Joe Fassler explains:

For cultured meat to move the needle on climate, a sequence of as-yet-unforeseen breakthroughs will still be necessary. We’ll need to train cells to behave in ways that no cells have behaved before. We’ll need to engineer bioreactors that defy widely accepted principles of chemistry and physics. We’ll need to build an entirely new nutrient supply chain using sustainable agricultural practices, inventing forms of bulk amino acid production that are cheap, precise, and safe. Investors will need to care less about money. Germs will have to more or less behave.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ James McWilliams, “The Myth of Sustainable Meat,” *New York Times*, April 12, 2012.

⁴⁸ Nick Thieme, “Why Do We Use Blood Extracted from Cow Fetuses to Make Fake Meat?,” *Slate*, July 11, 2017.

⁴⁹ Joe Fassler, “Lab-grown meat is supposed to be inevitable. The science tells a different story,” *Courier*, Sept. 22, 2021.

False Solutions

Unfortunately, some leftists, rather than accepting the necessity of radically challenging the oppression of human and nonhuman beings, insist technological fixes such as so-called regenerative ranching and lab-grown meat will solve animal agriculture-induced problems. Regenerative ranchers claim certain cattle ranching methods will reduce carbon to preindustrial levels. Lab-grown meat enthusiasts, for their part, claim highly expensive factories can grow enough meat from animal cells to replace normal meat production. Essentially, these boosters seek solutions from above—from large ranchers and biotech investors—rather than from below.

The godfather of regenerative ranching, Zimbabwean ecologist Allan Savory, claims his adaptive, knowledge-intensive methods of high-intensity cattle grazing on rotating areas of land can “fight desertification and reverse climate change.” Although his work is supported by some prominent environmentalists, scientists are strongly skeptical. In 2017, the Food Climate and Research Network published a metastudy examining three hundred scientific articles. It found that regenerative ranching has a very limited ability to sequester carbon, and that the benefits are outweighed by the practice’s high levels of methane emissions. Lead author Tara Garnett summarized: “This report concludes that grass-fed livestock are not a climate solution. Grazing livestock are net contributors to the climate problem, as are all livestock.”

Moreover, although five out of six farms globally are small-scale operations of two hectares or less, comprising only 10 to 25 percent of the world’s farmland, they produce a disproportionate 35 percent of the world’s food, mainly because they focus on crops for human consumption. This means about 75 to 90 percent of the world’s farmland is controlled by larger-scale farming interests. In the United States, a whopping 99 percent of “meat” is factory farm produced. Indeed, factory farming was created because it is *less re-*

For example, invasions by ranchers are resisted by Nukanchiruna, Chaibajú, and Uaima communities in Colombia and by Mayangna, Miskito, and Kriol communities in Nicaragua. In addition to stealing land, ranching pollutes local water supplies and causes global warming-induced droughts that force Indigenous people off their land. When Indigenous people have attempted to resist this land-grabbing, they have often been attacked and murdered by the land thieves. Last year, the watchdog group Global Witness documented the murder of 227 environmental campaigners, one-third of whom were Indigenous.¹³ Numerous attacks stemmed from commercial agriculture, including ranching. The Business and Human Rights Resource Centre documented 604 “business-related human rights issues in 2020,” finding “the most dangerous sectors were agribusiness and mining.”¹⁴

Animal agribusiness also drives world hunger, as food that could be fed to humans directly is used for livestock feed. While many might claim famine is not about lack of food, but rather lack of distribution under capitalism, it’s worth asking why people who were food sovereign prior to being ejected from their land (often by animal agribusiness) are now dependent on “distribution” for their survival. As climate change intensifies, actual food shortages, as opposed to manufactured scarcity, are becoming more of a reality. The organization A Well-Fed World addresses this issue by combining vegan food distribution to the world’s poorest with education for wealthier nations on how animal consumption there drives food insecurity elsewhere.

Those living in capitalist/colonizer societies of settler heritage should consider the impact their own lifestyles are having on Indigenous communities. If the world went vegan, it would free up a land mass the size of the United States, the European Union,

¹³ “Global Witness Reports 227 Land and Environmental Activists Murdered in a Single Year, the Worst Figure on Record,” *Global Witness*, September 13, 2021.

¹⁴ “Attacks and Risk to Business and Human Rights Defenders Worsened in 2020,” Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, March 2, 2021.

the United Kingdom, China, and Australia combined,¹⁵ enabling its return to Indigenous peoples to sustainably inhabit and restore. Land could also be freed up for reparations to Black Americans, whose enslaved ancestors were promised, but have yet to receive, forty acres each. This would empower the creation of more Black autonomous communities like Mississippi's Cooperation Jackson. There is much potential for collaboration between veganism as a liberatory praxis and #LandBack and reparations movements—a mission currently being explored by initiatives like Black Vegfest's liberation farm project, which teaches Black people organic, veganic farming and helps them reconnect with the land and their own history from a Black liberationist and animal liberationist perspective.

Animal Liberation from Agribusiness and Fishing Workers

Last year, an industry usually hidden from “polite” society suddenly began entering public consciousness—the animal killing industrial complex. It began with the emergence of a bona fide global plague. Although the origins of COVID-19 are still a matter of debate, Michael Worobey's analysis in November's *Science* locates the first known human infection in a marine animal vendor in a quasi-slaughterhouse called a wet market. The virus then spread rampantly through slaughterhouses worldwide.

Soon, slaughterhouses began shutting down as tens of thousands of workers fell ill and hundreds died. Farmers lamented having to kill “their” animals—which seemed strange, considering the animals would've been killed anyway, until one realized such “dirty work” is not usually done by farmers but rather outsourced to society's most disenfranchised: the undocumented immigrants,

¹⁵ Olivia Petter, “Veganism Is the ‘Single Biggest Way’ to Reduce Our Environmental Impact, Study Finds,” *Independent*, Sept. 24, 2020.

escape farms, elephants revolt against captors, and runaway cows learn to survive in the wild. One example involves a goat named Fred who escaped from a New Jersey auction house in 2017. Remaining on the run, he returned over a year later. A few hours after police received a report that he was in the area, about 75 goats and sheep mysteriously escaped. All signs indicate Fred was their liberator. Soon after police corralled sixty of the animals back into the facility, Fred returned once again and banged his head against the gate, trying to reopen it. Even the auction house manager proclaimed, “I think he's the culprit. He must have banged that fence and let [the animals] out last night. I'm almost positive.” Other stories, like the veterinarian's account of a cow who took extreme measures to save her calf from the dairy industry,⁴³ the slaughterhouse-bound cow who escaped to a Polish island,⁴⁴ and the brave pregnant sow who escaped slaughter by jumping out of a moving truck⁴⁵ also give a compelling glimpse of nonhuman agency in animals' own liberation struggle.

Such stories, regularly reported and surely more frequently occurring, can potentially galvanize popular empathy for and solidarity with animals. Recognizing animals as co-resisters offers humans both moral and practical strength to resist climate change. Ecofeminist scholar and activist patrice jones powerfully writes, “I do know that we are not alone in the struggle to save the earth. The sooner we see that and act accordingly, the sooner we can begin to end our own awful estrangement and help to heal those we have hurt.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Holly Cheever, “A Bovine Sophie's Choice,” *Creatures.org*, 2011.

⁴⁴ “Runaway Cow Escapes Slaughterhouse to Live on Polish Island,” *BBC News*, Feb. 19, 2018.

⁴⁵ Kristen Avery, “Pregnant Pig Is Being Taken to Slaughterhouse, Then She Jumps Out of Moving Truck to Give Birth,” *LittleThings*, May 22, 2017.

⁴⁶ patrice jones, “Stomping with the Elephants: Feminist Principles for Radical Solidarity,” in Steven Best and Anthony Nocella II, eds., *Igniting a Revolution: Voices in Defense of the Earth* (AK Press, 2006), 331.

Young peoples' turn toward plant-based diets is evident in the trajectories of Climate Strike organizers Greta Thunberg in Sweden and Vanessa Nakate in Uganda. Thunberg keeps a vegan diet and suggests the world must move in that direction as well. Nakate "has recently edged towards vegetarianism, an unusual choice in Uganda," reports the *Financial Times*. Nakate tells them she would like to have a vegetarian wedding and that she is conscious of "the impact of meat and dairy products." Another climate justice activist, *TedX* speaker and Genesis for Animals founder Genesis Butler, 13, went vegan at age six after watching her mother breast-feeding her sister and realizing cow's milk is stolen breast milk meant for calves.

Clearly, youth are propelling the current shift toward vegan diets. Veganism increased in the UK by 360 percent from 2006 to 2016, and in the United States sixfold from 2015 to 2018.⁴² Some 70 percent of the world population reports they are reducing or avoiding meat consumption. Data analyst Fiona Dyer told *Forbes* that younger generations, particularly millennials, are driving this trend. Building on that momentum, the U.S. organization Raven Corps is building a national network of youth activists aged 15 to 22 that includes veganism/animal liberation in their overall approach to social justice.

Animal Liberation from Animals

Finally, an approach to animal liberation that is truly "from below" would recognize animals' key role in struggling for their own freedom and well-being. Animals themselves are joining the struggle, as documented in Jason Hribal's *Fear of the Animal Planet* and Sarat Colling's *Animal Resistance in the Global Capitalist Era*. Pigs

⁴² Sarah Marsh, "The rise of vegan teenagers: 'More people are into it because of Instagram,'" *Guardian*, May 27, 2016. Michael Pellman Rowland, "Millennials Are Driving the Worldwide Shift Away From Meat," *Forbes*, May 23, 2018.

enslaved prisoners, ex-convicts, and other profoundly indigent people staffing slaughterhouses.

This raised questions about why the meatpacking industry was such a hotbed of COVID spread. Was it the freezing temperatures needed to preserve carcasses? The workers' inability to cover their faces when coughing/sneezing due to disassembly lines moving so fast? Their generally weakened immune systems, given their long hours and unhealthy environment? While many commentators rushed to say there was little to no risk of catching COVID from "meat," live animals don't enter slaughterhouses as "meat," and they breathe just like humans do. Moreover, it's telling that other factory settings did not experience similar outbreaks, whereas mink farms did. Additionally, infectious diseases have a long history of being formed and spread through animal agriculture.¹⁶ Thus, the high rates of COVID in slaughterhouses hardly seem coincidental.

Even before COVID, slaughterhouse work was extremely dangerous. Because so many workers lack legal rights, either because they are undocumented or have felony convictions, labor abuse is rampant. Musculoskeletal damage from repetitive motion and injuries caused by exhaustion while handling sharp equipment, slipping and falling on entrails, and so on are widespread. Due to high consumer demand for animal products, lines move so quickly that workers must wear diapers to avoid bathroom breaks and go long periods without rest, food, or water—all of which increase their risk of injury due to fatigue and dehydration. Fearing deportation or re-criminalization, workers rarely report violations; and to avoid legal repercussions, companies rarely send them for proper medical treatment when sick or injured. Sexual abuse is pervasive. Due to high employee turnover rates caused by deportation, injuries, sick-

¹⁶ Romain Espinosa, Damian Tago, and Nicolas Treich, "Infectious Diseases and Meat Production," *Environmental and Resource Economics* 76, no. 4 (2020), 1019–44.

ness, or simply returning to their countries of origin, employers regard workers as disposable, just like the animals they slaughter.

While some of these dangers resemble the occupational hazards of other agricultural jobs, slaughterhouse workers also suffer mental health effects from killing sentient beings. In addition to the trauma of working under such brutal conditions, they also endure PITS—Perpetrator-Induced Traumatic Stress. Much like soldiers, executioners, and others tasked with inflicting systemic violence, slaughterhouse workers suffer high rates of addiction, anxiety, depression, and suicide. Families and communities suffer too, as workers then release their trauma through displaced violence, leading to abnormally high rates of domestic violence and other forms of violent crime in those areas.¹⁷

Commercial fishing, the world’s top killer of wildlife and an inhibitor of oceans’ carbon sequestration, relies heavily on slave labor, with up to a quarter of fishing boats carrying captive workers. Fishing workers often face physical and sexual abuse and filthy living conditions, unable to escape while at sea for months on end. Fish farm workers endure high disease rates and hazards like drowning, bites, and electrocution, plus long hours, low pay, and frequent sexual harassment. On top of having a much-higher carbon footprint than plant-based farming, fish farming often blocks access to coasts and is connected to violence against local communities.¹⁸

As leftists, our solidarity with these individuals is imperative. Many might consider the “solution” to be greater legal workers’ rights and industry regulation, rather than the more radical goal of industry eradication. However, there is no way to regulate away the central trauma induced by forcing a subjugated class to kill thinking, feeling beings who don’t want to die. Additionally, con-

¹⁷ Amy Fitzgerald, Thomas Dietz, and Linda Kalof, “Slaughterhouses and Increased Crime Rates,” *Sage Publications*, 2009.

¹⁸ “Workers in the Fishing Industry,” Food Empowerment Project, accessed Dec. 18, 2021.

porary Black vegans fight racial health disparities by empowering Black communities with veganism, as explored in documentaries like *The Invisible Vegan* and *They’re Trying to Kill Us*. Some, like agroecologist Eugene Cooke, promote food justice through urban farming, while others, like Thrive Baltimore founder and Afro-Vegan Society Executive Director Brenda Sanders, focus on making veganism accessible to entire low-income Black communities. New York City also hosts an annual Black Vegfest, thanks to *Brotha Vegan* author Omowale Adewale. Additionally, critical theorists like Christopher Sebastian, A. Breeze Harper, Che Gossett, Christopher Carter, Syl Ko, and Black Vegans Rock founder Aph Ko, as well as those in the broader racial justice movement like Benedicte Boisseron, Joshua Bennett, and Zakkiyah Iman Jackson, deconstruct “human” identity under white supremacy and explore animal subjugation’s ties to racial subjugation.

In recognizing the ties between their own liberation struggles and the struggle for all life on earth, these activists and organizations are building a powerful foundation for many human, animal, and ecological justice movements to come together into one mass, multidimensional movement for collective liberation from below. It is here that the solution to our current existential crises lies—not in the false manipulations and machinations from above.

Animal Liberation from Youth

Demonstrating that children need to be conditioned to see animals as food, a survey found that over 80 percent of U.S. children aged four to seven considered cows and pigs “not okay to eat.”⁴¹ Although they ate hamburgers and bacon, the overwhelming majority did not know these were made from animals.

⁴¹ Erin R. Hahn, Meghan Gillogly, and Bailey E. Bradford, “Children Are Unsuspecting Meat Eaters: An Opportunity to Address Climate Change,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology*. Academic Press, Oct. 9, 2021.

ecologist Spencer Roberts calls “a Green New Deal of careers in public service for rural folk, including not only building housing, health care, education, and clean energy infrastructure, but also re-seeding endangered flora, reintroducing endemic grazers, and re-generating wildlife habitat on formerly farmed land.”³⁸

Globally, Indigenous people increasingly reject animal exploitation. For examples, we can look to the Maori vegan movement in Aotearoa (aka New Zealand); Indigenous decolonial species liberationists like queer Nahuatl activist Wotko Tristan and the queer vegan Xicanx collective Mariposas Rebeldes; Wiradjuri performer and activist Carolyn Ienna; animal activists from Canada’s Kwe, Anishanaabe, and Ceg-A-Kin Nakoda Nations; and Mi’kmaw scholar Margaret Robinson. According to Robinson, even non-vegan Indigenous people often share much common ground with vegans and animal liberationists due to traditional aboriginal ways of seeing animals and nature as subjects, rather than as objects and commodities.³⁹

Finally, Black veganism is its own dynamic movement.⁴⁰ Examining interconnections between racial justice, animal liberation, and plant-based living from a perspective that considers racialized health disparities, environmental racism, Black criminalization, and subjugation through racialized “animalization,” Black veganism is both scholarly inquiry and liberatory praxis. Its roots originated in the civil rights and Black Power movements, from civil rights activists Dick Gregory and Coretta Scott King and Dexter King, to Black feminist and abolitionist scholar Angela Davis, who argues “there is a connection between our treatment of animals and of people at the bottom of the hierarchy.” Contem-

³⁸ Spencer Roberts, “Boycotting Animal Products as a Collective Act of Protest,” *Current Affairs*, March 4, 2021.

³⁹ April Johnson, “This Indigenous Scholar Says Veganism Is More than a Lifestyle for White People,” *Vice*, Mar. 27, 2018.

⁴⁰ See Kim Severson, “Black Vegans Step Out, for Their Health and Other Causes,” *New York Times*, Nov. 28, 2017.

sumer demand for animal products endangers workers by forcing them to work at such high speeds. In another tragic irony, many workers exploited or enslaved by animal-exploitation industries globally may have been forced into that situation through displacement caused by the world’s biggest land appropriator—animal agriculture.

What would leftist solidarity with animal agriculture workers look like? The organization Food Empowerment Project is one example. Founded by Xicana animal rights advocate Lauren Ornelas, it promotes veganism while also materially supporting workers in *all* food-producing industries. Through its comprehensive approach to food-related ethical issues, it includes animal liberation as one part of a broader goal of total liberation.

Additionally, solidarity with slaughterhouse workers would entail active support for workers’ strikes, and efforts to create opportunities to help them escape that industry altogether, including the creation of jobs that help rather than harm animals, such as running a sanctuary or restoring habitats. Leftists and animal liberationists should also amplify the voices of former slaughterhouse workers exposing the horrors of that industry and its victimization of humans and nonhumans, such as Susana Soto, a Mexican immigrant who quit her slaughterhouse job after realizing the connection between the way her employer was beating his wife and the violence his business was inflicting on chickens, and now is a vegan animal rights activist.¹⁹ We can also build mutual aid networks to sustain slaughterhouse workers attempting to exit that industry and organize to redirect current tax subsidies funding animal agriculture to fund plant agriculture instead. Toward the bigger goal of bringing down this industry and catalyzing a large-scale transition to plant-based food systems, slaughterhouse workers themselves also have the power to block supply chains

¹⁹ Amy Percival, “This Former Slaughterhouse Worker’s Story Will Make You Go Vegan,” *Live Kindly*, Dec. 15, 2020.

through mass organized refusal to work. After all, slaughterhouses and meat packing facilities comprise a small bottleneck for industrial animal agriculture—particularly in the world’s top cow slaughterer, Brazil, and top chicken slaughterer, the United States.

When slaughterhouse workers planned strikes last summer, leftists and animal liberationists missed an opportunity to build solidarity with them. And this example is but one episode in a longer history that reveals why animal liberationists should be socialists, and socialists should be vegan. As long as societies rely upon the production of animal “products,” they will always require someone to kill them and thus need an underclass. And as long as an underclass exists, there will always be someone economically desperate enough to do it.

Environmental Racism and Classism

In addition to land theft, labor exploitation, and literal enslavement, animal exploitation industries terrorize marginalized human communities via environmental racism and classism. Because factory farms and slaughterhouses are massive polluters, their surrounding communities are always poor and typically Black and Brown. These communities then suffer the effects of contaminants poisoning the land, water, and air.

In 2020, a study revealed that animal agriculture-induced air pollution causes 12,700 deaths per year in the United States alone.²⁰ One danger is ammonia-spiked fecal matter particles, which lodge themselves in lungs, leading to eventual death. The Natural Resources Defense Council states: “People living near or working at factory farms inhale hundreds of gases formed as manure decomposes. For instance, one gas released by lagoons, hydrogen sulfide, is dangerous even at low levels. Its irreversible effects include

²⁰ Sarah Kaplan, “Air Pollution from Farms Leads to 17,900 U.S. Deaths Per Year, Study Finds,” *Washington Post*, May 10, 2021.

with the country’s anti-apartheid movement, such as the animal rights organization One Struggle, which morphed into Anarchists Against the Wall in 2003. In the occupied West Bank, the Palestinian Animal League rescues and treats animals while promoting veganism and opposing Zionism. The West Bank is also home to the Daily Hugz sanctuary and the Bethlehem Animal and Environment Association animal shelter. Gaza’s Sulala Animal Rescue works to save animals injured or rendered homeless by Israeli bombings, while Plant the Land provides vegan food aid and plants food to develop Palestinian food sovereignty in resistance to Israeli sanctions. Vegans for BDS works to build vegan support for the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

In 2021, Cuban animal rights groups successfully pushed that government to implement an animal protection law.³⁷ Cuba’s queer, feminist, Afro-Cuban hip-hop group Krudas Cubensi has been advocating for veganism as part of a holistic approach to liberation. Some Xicanx and Caribbean activists are combining food justice work in North America with Latin American and Caribbean outreach; Boricuan (“Puerto Rican”) activist Michelle Carrera started Chilis on Wheels as a vegan food justice initiative for New York City homeless populations, and expanded to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria in 2017. Others, like Colombian activist Fernando Cuenca, became animal liberationists after experiencing war and connecting that to the violence on our plates.

The international peasant network La Via Campesina, which includes pastoralists, says that “we urgently need to reduce meat consumption.” Of course, pastoral communities require a just transition away from their current livelihoods, perhaps in the form of the “conservation basic income” advocated by environmental sociologist Bram Büscher and anthropologist Robert Fletcher, or what

³⁷ Nelson Acosta, “Cuba Passes Animal Welfare Law after Civil Society Pressure,” Reuters, Feb. 27, 2021.

Society and Uganda's Lead Vegan orphanage combine youth programs with vegan education and animal rescue. In Rwanda, former poachers now lead gorilla protection efforts and community renewal projects, while Zimbabwe's all-female anti-poaching unit Akashinga prevents poaching through community support rather than punishment.

In Western Asia, Turkey's vegan movement is flourishing, an extension of the Istanbul culture of collectively caring for street dogs and cats. The animal liberation group Yod has also been building alliances with feminist, ecological, and other liberatory movements.³⁴ Additionally, many Indigenous Kurdish guerillas, particularly among the women in YJA-Star, have stopped eating meat. Spokesperson Evren Kocabiçak explains this reflects a "social ecological consciousness" that considers "the culture of hunting as one of the factors that create war and violence." Kocabiçak emphasizes an aspiration to "live without causing any harm to the environment we live in, all while maintaining friendship with the animals."³⁵ Elsewhere in the region, Lebanese vegan YouTuber Seb Alex joined local Beirut vegans following the 2020 explosions to provide vegan food aid and animal rescue to human and nonhuman area residents whose lives and homes were shattered, and opened the Lebanese Vegan Social Club, the first vegan advocacy and animal rights center in that part of the world.

In the Holy Land, despite Israel's so-called vegan-washing efforts to portray itself as a "vegan nation,"³⁶ Palestinian Israelis (aka Israeli Arabs) are twice as likely to be vegan as Israeli Jews, although the Jewish vegan population overlaps considerably

³⁴ Szilvi Aichi, *Interface: A Journal For and About Social Movements*, (May 2015).

³⁵ Evren Kocabiçak, "The World's First Army of Women," in Dilar Dirik, David Levi Strauss, Michael Taussig, and Peter Lamborn Wilson, eds., *To Dare Imagining: Rojava Revolution* (Autonopedia, 2016), 69.

³⁶ Nick McAlpin, "How Israel Uses Animal Rights to 'Vegan-Wash' the Occupation," *New Arab*, July 18 2019.

seizures, comas and even death."²¹ In North Carolina, the nation's second-largest pig producer, five hundred residents successfully sued the industry for irreparable damage to their health, as well as for lowering their home values (an outcome that also worsened the legacy of redlining).²² In addition, hospitals located near these facilities report 30 percent more deaths among patients with kidney disease, 50 percent more deaths among patients with anemia, and 130 percent more deaths among patients with sepsis than in other locations. Rates of child asthma, low birth-weight babies, and infant mortality were also much higher in these communities.²³

Animal agriculture is also a major cause of global freshwater pollution.²⁴ In the United States alone, animal agriculture produces one billion tons of phosphorus- and nitrogen-rich waste annually, contaminating 145,000 miles of rivers and streams, nearly one million acres of lakes, reservoirs, and ponds, and over three thousand square miles of bays and estuaries. This impacts low-income communities, such as Casco, Wisconsin, which found its drinking water supply to be contaminated by nearby dairy farms. "Blue baby syndrome," which causes infant fatality, is rampant in these areas, as are miscarriages and disease outbreaks due to bacteria- and virus-infested drinking water.²⁵

This pollution has far-reaching effects. For instance, chemical and manure runoff from Midwestern U.S. farms floats down the

²¹ Rachel Tepper, "Waste Lagoon At Cattle Feedlot Captured on Satellite Photo," *Huffington Post*, Aug. 21, 2013.

²² Gary Robertson, "Court Upholds Hog Verdict; Smithfield Announces Settlement," *Associated Press*, Nov. 19, 2020.

²³ Olga Naidenko, "Duke University Study: N.C. Residents Living Near Large Hog Farms Have Elevated Disease, Death Risks," *Environmental Working Group*, Dec. 16, 2021.

²⁴ Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, "Factory Farms & Water Pollution".

²⁵ Jackie Wang, Nicole Tyau, and Chelsea Rae Ybanez, "Farming Activity Contaminates Water Despite Best Practices," *Center for Public Integrity*, Aug. 16, 2017.

Mississippi River and dumps into the Gulf of Mexico, where it creates the world's second biggest ocean dead zone. This affects both the local ecosystem and the local population, contaminating drinking water, causing toxic algae blooms, and deoxygenation that leads to mass die-offs of marine wildlife.²⁶

Additionally, water depletion is exacerbated by droughts resulting from climate change, which is also connected to animal agriculture.²⁷

Animal Liberation from the Majority World

Far from being predominantly a marker of “first world” or “white” privilege, vegetarianism and veganism are growing fastest in the Global South. Nigeria, Pakistan, and Indonesia saw the largest increase in vegetarianism from 2016 to 2017. Bangladesh ranks as having the lowest per capita meat consumption globally, followed by India, Burundi, Sri Lanka, Rwanda, and other countries in the Global South. According to a 2016 global survey by Nielsen, the population of Africa and the Middle East is 16 percent vegetarian and 6 percent vegan, making it the second most vegetarian region after East Asia, which is 19 percent vegetarian and 9 percent vegan. North America and Europe are last in both categories, with only 5 to 6 percent vegetarianism and 2 percent veganism. Even within these continents, poorer²⁸ and more melanated communities are most likely to lean plant-based. In the United States, African Americans are about three times as

²⁶ Martin Caldwell, “As Massive Dead Zone Blooms in Gulf, Hold Industrial Farming Companies Responsible,” *Mighty Earth*, Aug. 1, 2019.

²⁷ Nathan Halverson, “We’re Running out of Water, and the World’s Powers Are Very Worried,” *Reveal*, June 30, 2021.

²⁸ Hal Herzog, “Vegetarianism and Money: Surprising Results from a New Study,” *Psychology Today*, Aug. 24, 2015.

likely as white residents to be vegetarian, and more than twice as likely to be vegan.²⁹

These trends make sense given the roots of the philosophy of animal liberation in the majority world. Widely influential ideas of nonviolence toward living beings emerged in ancient Indian and other Asian religions millennia ago. Additionally, Syrian poet Al-Ma’arri was an early advocate of veganism a thousand years ago. These legacies continue in contemporary Asia. China has the largest population of vegans on earth, which is growing exponentially, and the country has pledged to reduce meat consumption by 50 percent by 2030.³⁰ Chinese youth are also increasingly active in animal rights activism,³¹ as are Koreans³² and other East Asians.

Traditional African diets were mainly plant-based, and a growing movement reinvigorates those culinary traditions. Nicola Kagoro, a Zimbabwean chef, told the *Guardian*, “I particularly think it’s important to spread veganism around Africa because it originated in Africa. Our ancestors didn’t eat as much meat. It is through colonization that we learned these crazy meat-eating practices.” Today’s vegan food movement largely began with Jamaica’s 1930s Rastafarian diet. Their plant-based lifestyle, as journalist Paige Curtis explains, “is part of a broader belief in Black sovereignty, health, and ecological harmony.”³³ Additionally, African climate justice activists like Indigenous Guinean vegan Abdourahamane Ly and Nigerian journalist Joshua Borokinni are connecting animal liberation to ecology and decolonization, while organizations like Liberian Animal Welfare and Conservation

²⁹ Vidya Rao, “Black and Vegan: Why so Many Black Americans Are Embracing the Plant-Based Life,” *TODAY.com*, Feb. 26, 2021.

³⁰ Oliver Milman and Stuart Leavenworth, “China’s Plan to Cut Meat Consumption by 50% Cheered by Climate Campaigners,” *The Guardian*, June 20, 2016.

³¹ Peter J. Li, “Animal Rights Activism in China,” MCLC Resource Center, March 7, 2018.

³² “Kara,” Studio FNT.

³³ Paige Curtis, “The Unsung Caribbean Roots of the Vegan Food Movement,” July 21, 2021.