

CRITICAL POLITICAL THEORY AND RADICAL PRACTICE

THE POLITICS OF TOTAL LIBERATION

Revolution for the 21st Century

Steven Best



CRITICAL POLITICAL THEORY AND RADICAL PRACTICE

Mainstream political theory has been experiencing an identity crisis for as long as I can remember. From even a cursory glance at the major journals, it still seems preoccupied either with textual exegesis of a conservatively construed canon, fashionable postmodern forms of deconstruction, or the reduction of ideas to the context in which they were formulated and the prejudices of the author. Usually written in esoteric style and intended only for disciplinary experts, political theory has lost both its critical character and its concern for political practice. Behaviorist and positivist political “scientists” tend to view it as a branch of philosophical metaphysics or as akin to literary criticism. They are not completely wrong. There is currently no venue that highlights the practical implications of theory or its connections with the larger world. I was subsequently delighted when Palgrave Macmillan offered me the opportunity of editing *Critical Political Theory and Radical Practice*.

When I was a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, during the 1970s, critical theory was virtually unknown in the United States. The academic mainstream was late in catching up and, when it finally did during the late 1980s, it predictably embraced the more metaphysical and subjectivist trends of critical theory. Traditionalists had little use for an approach in which critique of a position or analysis of an event was predicated on positive ideals and practical political aims. In this vein, like liberalism, socialism was a dirty word and knowledge of its various tendencies and traditions was virtually non-existent. Today, however, the situation is somewhat different. Strident right-wing politicians have openly condemned “critical thinking” particularly as it pertains to cultural pluralism and American history. Such parochial validations of tradition have implications for practical politics. And, if only for this reason, it is necessary to confront them. A new generation of academics is becoming engaged with immanent critique, interdisciplinary work, actual political problems, and more broadly the link between theory and practice. *Critical Political Theory and Radical Practice* offers them a new home for their intellectual labors.

The series introduces new authors, unorthodox themes, critical interpretations of the classics and salient works by older and more established thinkers. Each after his or her fashion will explore the ways in which political theory can enrich our understanding of the arts and social sciences. Criminal justice, psychology, sociology, theatre and a host of other disciplines come into play for a critical political theory. The series also opens new avenues by engaging alternative traditions, animal rights, Islamic politics, mass movements, sovereignty, and the institutional problems of power. *Critical Political Theory and Radical Practice* thus fills an important niche. Innovatively blending tradition and experimentation, this intellectual enterprise with a political intent will, I hope, help reinvigorate what is fast becoming a petrified field of study and perhaps provide a bit of inspiration for future scholars and activists.

STEPHEN ERIC BRONNER

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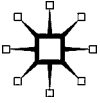
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The Politics of Total Liberation
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THE POLITICS OF TOTAL LIBERATION

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For Willis and Erica, the Loves of my Life.

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Foreword

We have all always lived on the same planet. Now we are all in the same boat. Human overpopulation, the ever-increasing power of our technology, and the demand of our omniscient, neoliberal economic system of infinite growth on the basis of finite resources threaten the earth with total destruction. Rescue, Dr. Steven Best tells us, will only come in the form of total liberation. Piecemeal approaches will not work. In the face of our universal victimization, Best issues a clarion call for a total revolution that will liberate humans, animals, and the environment from the lethal impact of human intelligence stupidly employed. *The Politics of Total Liberation* is a seminal work that will shape the social justice, animal rights, and environmental protection dialogues for decades to come.

Profound and acute in its analysis, clear and accessible in its style, *The Politics of Total Liberation* paints a stark picture of the future that awaits us all if we do not turn our society away from its trajectory of total destruction—a future that includes devastating climate change, catastrophic extinctions of irreplaceable flora and fauna, and the self-destruction of human society, perhaps of the human species itself. As Best demonstrates, only a revolution can save us, an unprecedented revolution on behalf of ourselves, the animals, and the earth—a new kind of revolution for the twenty-first century.

This may be the most important book of the twenty-first century. It identifies the common fate that awaits human beings, animals, and the earth if we do not take drastic action soon: extinction, lifelessness, and utter and irredeemable failure. Identifying the causes of the advancing

cataclysm as the explosion of the human population, the frightful power of our technology, and the omniscidal nature of capitalism, it prescribes a cure: a revolution in our way of thinking and living that protects human beings, our nonhuman neighbors, and the Earth that sustains us all.

The Politics of Total Liberation is a clear-headed, abundantly documented, and thoroughly frightening description of the crossroads at which we now stand. It is also a message of hope. By launching a new kind of revolution, a holistic revolution in our way of thinking and living, undertaken on behalf of all of the victims of a rapacious capitalist system that feeds off the lives of the weak and the defenseless, we can save the earth and all who live on it. This vision of a brighter future, built on his incisive analysis of our dark present, places Best securely in the forefront of contemporary social philosophers.

A leading historian and analyst of postmodernism, critical theory, and continental philosophy, Dr. Best is also well known as a staunch advocate of animal liberation and environmental protection. With *The Politics of Total Liberation*, he establishes himself as a preeminent critic of twenty-first-century neoliberal society. Vast in scope, profound in its analysis, and accessible in style, this succeeds far better than any book I have yet seen at diagnosing the critical illness afflicting the earth and all who live upon it and in prescribing the cure.

Read *The Politics of Total Liberation*. If you care about the impoverishment, wage-enslavement, and disenfranchisement of the 99 percent in America, Europe, and throughout the world, read *The Politics of Total Liberation*. If you care about the enslavement and slaughter of billions of sentient, sensitive animals for human appetite and convenience, read *The Politics of Total Liberation*. If you care about climate change and the destruction of the earth, read this book. If you only read one book about the crisis facing humanity, animals, and the earth, read *The Politics of Total Liberation*. Learn from its clear, well-documented analysis, and take heart from its call for a new kind of revolution, a universal revolution for the twenty-first century.

Norm Phelps, author of *Changing the Game: Why Animal Rights Is the Hardest Battle Ever Fought, How We Can Win It*, and *The Longest Struggle: Animal Advocacy from Pythagoras to PETA*.

Preface: Crisis and the Crossroads of History

In dystopian and apocalyptic times such as ours, one of accelerating global social and ecological crises, this book attempts to articulate a revolutionary politics of total liberation for the twenty-first century.

To date, all political approaches and social movements have been fragmentary, weak, noninclusive, and regressive in their views toward nonhuman animals. In the last three decades, there have been initial and tentative alliances among various social justice and environmental causes, with growing recognition that the collective assault on people and the natural world has common roots in a growth-oriented capitalist system and agricultural society. But, due to neglect on all sides, these alliances did not include the causes of vegan and animal rights/liberation movements. These movements overflow with potential for advancing progressive values (such as rights, liberty, justice, equality, community, and peace), for creating ecological societies, and for overcoming human alienation from other animal species and the earth as a whole.

Alliance politics generally is a challenging issue, as people prefer to focus on their own identities and causes rather than supporting related perspectives and other movements, especially ones that they disdain or disregard out of ignorance.¹ This has to change, and new political ideologies, strategies, and relationships must be formulated, for everything else has failed and the stakes could not be higher. At

risk is nothing less than the future of life on a planet that has been pushed beyond all limits to adapt to human existence but which is prepared to shake us off entirely and allow the evolutionary process to continue without us. This century—indeed, the next decades or even the next few years—is decisive, for what we do or fail to do now will determine the fate of all species, our own fates, and evolutionary history on this planet for millennia to come. The urgency could not be greater; there is no time to waste: it is now do-or-die.

Although diverse in theme, the chapters in this book form a coherent whole and address my core concerns as they relate to the current crisis conditions. The most promising and relevant politics for this century, I believe, will not focus solely on class struggle or fragmented identity politics pursued along single-issue lines concerning race, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth. It will be, rather, a politics of *total liberation* that grasps commonalities among various forms of oppression, that recognizes the interdependence and common goals of various liberation movements, and that forges appropriate political alliances and necessary global responses.

By “total liberation” I do not mean a metaphysical utopia to be realized in perfect form. I refer, instead, to the process of understanding human, animal, and earth liberation movements in relation to one another and building bridges around interrelated issues such as democracy and ecology, sustainability and veganism, and social justice and animal rights. To be sure, total liberation is an ideal, a vision, and a goal to strive for, one that invokes visions of freedom, community, and harmony. But the struggle ahead is permanent and formidable, one to be conducted within the constraints of human nature and the limits imposed by ecology. Human, animal, and earth liberation movements are different components of one inseparable struggle—against hierarchy, domination, and unsustainable social forms—none of which is possible without the others.

Through our predatory behaviors, systems of exploitation, and growth-oriented societies, we have lived in contradiction to one another, other species, and the planet for so long that we have brought about a new geologic epoch. We have hastened the end of the Holocene

Era, which endured over the last ten thousand years, and thereby have precipitated the arrival of the Anthropocene Era—whose very name proclaims our global dominance and the severe environmental impact of *Homo sapiens* (see the Conclusion). In our current Anthropocene period of runaway climate change, the sixth great extinction crisis in earth’s history, resource scarcity, global capitalism, aggressive neoliberalism, economic crashes, increasing centralization of power, rampant militarism, chronic warfare, and suffering and struggle everywhere, we have come to a historical crossroads where momentous choices have to be made and implemented.

The omniscidal regimes of “civilization” and global capitalism have reached their zenith and will end—whether through an ascendant global resistance stronger than this dying world system, or through the cataclysmic adjustments the planet already has initiated, such as those that will ensure its evolution for billions of years to come. But such adaptations will create conditions utterly hostile to supporting humans and countless other species. Anything short of radical, systemic, and comprehensive social changes, of a formidable revolutionary movement against oppressive global capitalism and hierarchical domination of all kinds, will yield false hopes, pseudosolutions, useless reforms, dead ends, and protracted suffering. The time for partial visions, separate struggles, and fragmented resistance is over, and the hour of revolutionary alliance politics and total liberation has arrived.

Yet, alarmingly, we have not yet, as a species or critical mass, awoken to the true gravity of the global crisis in the social and natural worlds, and thus the magnitude of the challenges we face. The big picture proves elusive, antiquated paradigms prevail, and dogmatism and complacency strangle possibilities from all angles. Although few realize it, the human, animal, and earth liberation movements desperately need one another, and the weaknesses and limitations of each can only be overcome through the strengths and contributions of the others.

If fragmented revolts can mature into a coherent global revolutionary process, the starting point for social transformation is to join

hands across the barricades; to engage in respectful dialogue; to communicate, educate, and learn as equals; and to overcome partial histories, critiques, and battles in favor of progressive systemic change. A politics of total liberation could forge alliances more positive and powerful than anything yet created. It could emancipate not just one class, interest group, or even the entire human species from the grip of a nihilistic power elite (that value nothing but power and profit), but also animal communities everywhere, ecosystems worldwide, and the dynamic energies of evolution and speciation currently blocked by human “progress” (see chapter 6).

By listening and learning, working united not dividedly, establishing a unity in difference and a differentiated unity, forging a plurality of critiques and tactics that assail all points and mobilizes resistance from every social quarter, a flank of allied groups and positions can drive a battering ram into the structures of repression and domination. They can unlock every cage and open the doors to a myriad of possible futures.

But humans will awake, if ever, late in the process of advanced crisis and decay. Nothing guarantees that we will succeed rather than fail. But pessimism is suicide, despair is surrender, the stakes are too high, and our responsibilities are too great for us to flounder. Despite our violent history as a predatory and colonizing species, what humanity can and cannot achieve is still unknown. Our capacities and limitations are still being worked out in the laboratory of history and political struggle, yet this evolutionary experiment nonetheless might soon end in extinction. Let us not only hope, but also struggle, for a far different outcome.

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CHAPTER 1

The Animal Standpoint

If we look at history from the animal standpoint, that is, from the crucial role that animals have played in human evolution and the consequences of human domination of nonhuman animals, we can glean new and invaluable insights into psychological, social, historical, and ecological phenomena, problems, and crises. The animal standpoint is used here to shed new light on the origins, dynamics, and development of dominator cultures, as well as to redefine the dysfunctional power systems that structure our relationships to one another, to other species, and to the natural world, in hierarchical rather than complementary terms.

Animal standpoint theory, as I use it, looks at the fundamental role animals play in sustaining the natural world and shaping the human world in co-evolutionary relations. While animals have constituted human existence in beneficial ways, they have seldom been willing partners. The main thesis of animal standpoint theory is that animals have been key determining forces of human psychology, social life, and history overall, and that the domination of human over nonhuman animals underpins the domination of humans over one another and over the natural world.

Thus, this approach stresses the systemic consequences of human exploitation of nonhuman animals, the interrelatedness of our fates, and the profound need for revolutionary changes in the way human

beings both define themselves and relate to other species and to the earth as a whole. This chapter explores the animal standpoint in three different dimensions: (1) for the light it sheds on historical dynamics, the origin and development of dominator cultures, and current social, and ecological crises; (2) for its power to undermine speciesism,¹ and advance egalitarian arguments and liberation ethics, while debunking persistent myths regarding a benign human nature; and (3) for its ability to expose the faulty logic of dogmatic pacifism and to validate militant tactics in defense of animals and the earth.

Toward a New Perspective

Animal standpoint theory draws from a number of key influences and transcends them in bold new directions. First, it absorbs the perspectivalist philosophy of nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.² Perception and cognition are always perspectival, Nietzsche argued, and he scorned those who believed that the scientist has privileged access to reality expressed in “objective” knowledge and truths. For Nietzsche there are no explanations, only interpretations, and science itself is interpretation. Individuals always come to any type of knowing or inquiry already burdened by a host of presuppositions, biases, and limitations. A perspective is thus an optic, a way of seeing, and the more perspectives one has at one’s disposal, the better one can see. In order to avoid limited and partial vision, Nietzsche says, one should employ a *variety* of perspectives in the service of knowledge. We typically endeavor to acquire a *single* viewpoint or attitude toward all the occurrences and events of life, but reality is too complex and many-sided to grasp from one outlook.³ The animal standpoint underscores the fact that history is always written from a particular view, not just from an elitist, patriarchal, or racist bias, but also from a *speciesist* bias—the assumption that humans are superior to animals and utterly unique by virtue of their alleged rationality, such that all nonhuman animals are mere means to their ends.

Second, the animal standpoint is an extension of feminist standpoint theory, which was developed to illuminate patriarchal domination and

its debilitating impact on women and humanity as a whole.⁴ A key idea of standpoint theory—which traces back to the master-slave theory of nineteenth-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel—is that from a subjugated and “inferior” social standing, an oppressed person or group can glean unique and important insights into the nature of social reality, such as are opaque or unavailable to the oppressor’s biased position. Standpoint theory employs the insights of socially marginalized figures to identify the partial, limited, and flawed modes of understanding held by those “inside” the dominant culture, and to underscore problems with the social order.⁵ As Carolyn Merchant demonstrates in *The Death of Nature*, for example, feminist standpoint theory exposes how the alienated and violent psychology of patriarchy oppresses women yet also informs the “rape of nature,” thereby transforming the earth and animals into inert resources for human use and exploitation.⁶ Similarly, people of color and postcolonial and critical race theorists can illuminate colonial domination, slavery, and racist pathology, all central to the origins of modernity and global capitalism. In a correlative way, the animal standpoint reveals the social and ecological consequences of speciesism and the disastrous consequences of our alienation from nature and of the pathological humanist project to “dominate” and “master” it.

Third, the animal standpoint builds on the modern leftist tradition that examines history from the perspective of the conquered rather than the conquerors. History written “from below” is integral to Marxist and populist theories that focus on the struggles of peasants, serfs, and urban working classes. It motivated the genealogies of Michel Foucault that aimed to recoup marginalized voices buried by conventional (“bourgeois”) history as well as by the totalizing Marxist narrative that reduced all social dynamics to class struggle.⁷ The animal standpoint therefore provides the ultimate turning-of-the-tables narrative shift, for what group has been more oppressed, for the longest period of time, and in the most intensive and invasive ways, than nonhuman animals? If history is a struggle between the masters and slaves, as Marx contended, humans in general are the masters and exploitable animals are their slaves (see chapter 2).

Environmental Determinism and Animal Agency

In the mid-nineteenth century, Karl Marx initiated a new approach to writing history that shifted emphasis from gods and kings to production, trade, labor, and class conflict. Whereas historiography was mired in the “idealist” view that history is driven by God or ideas, Marx revealed the underlying material forces of history in economics, production, and class struggle.

Marx was entirely conventional, however, in limiting historical dynamics to relations among human actors, rather than also examining the larger field of action that included human and animal interrelations and how animals—as an exploited labor power and productive force—decisively shaped history. Radical humanists like Marx congratulate themselves on demystifying history by “resolving theology into anthropology” (Ludwig Feuerbach) in a “scientific” manner. But the mystification is only relocated, not removed, when historians see social relations as the primary causal forces in history, isolated from the significant roles played by animals and the environment. Just as the story of ruling classes cannot be understood apart from their relations to oppressed classes, so too human history cannot be grasped outside the context of the powerful determining effects of animals and nature on human society.

Since the nineteenth century, geographers and ecologists have developed theories of “environmental determinism” which reject the view that history is constituted solely through human-to-human interactions. In a devastating and humbling blow to humanists, environmental determinists emphasized that geography, physical terrain, climate, and other natural forces play a strong, often decisive, role in shaping a wide array of phenomena, ranging from the emergence of bipedal evolution (hence predating our earliest ancestors) to the organization of human societies to varying psychological temperaments. Once introduced into the disciplines of anthropology, historiography, sociology, and psychology, the focus shifted from humans as the sole or main generative forces in social change to the vital role that the natural environment, geography, and climate play in the emergence and development of societies. While a huge

advance over the anthropocentric conceit that only humans shape human actions, and certainly over the theocentric dogma that social dynamics are the effects of a God or an “Unmoved Mover,” environmental determinists nonetheless discount the importance of animals in constituting both the natural and social worlds. As with humanists, environmental theorists often reify animal agency, culture, and influence by reducing animals to “natural history” or mere moving in the machinery of nature. This falsifies the psychological, intellectual, social, and moral complexity of animals; it also fails to grasp how animals change environments, and to explain that they are not merely changed by them.

From large predators such as wolves in the Americas to the dung beetles in the rainforests of Brazil to pollinators everywhere, animals play critical roles in ecological diversity and stability.⁸ Wolves keep populations in check, help prevent overgrazing near rivers and streams, provide food for scavengers, and increase the fitness of future generations of their prey by feeding on the weakest individuals. Dung beetles spread seeds in the animal manure they transport throughout forests, while pollinators such as bees and butterflies germinate plants (including at least a third of which are staples in the human diet). Each species helps to serve and sustain biodiversity. Environmentalists fail to emphasize that factory farming, agribusiness, and exploiting animals for food is a leading contributor to—if not the main cause of—the most serious environmental problems threatening biodiversity, sustainability, and planetary balance. Water pollution, destruction of the oceans, decimation of rainforests and habitats, desertification, resource scarcity, and climate change are all directly traceable to animal exploitation (see chapter 4).⁹

Whether in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, literary studies, or philosophy, theorists view animals as passive objects determined by biology and genetics, devoid of subjectivity and culture of their own. They frame animals as nothing more than resources, commodities, and the “raw materials” of human thought and action, be they objects of prestige, sacrifice, food, or transport devices. They assume that only humans are conscious, self-directing, and purposeful agents