

Intersectionality and Animals

by patrice jones

Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" as a way of understanding and speaking about the complex and compounding interactions between different forms of oppression. In the same way that surveyors need trigonometry and engineers need calculus, activists need intersectionality as a conceptual tool. Without this tool, it is impossible to accurately assess the problem to be solved and difficult to design effective strategies.

The interactions among race, sex, and class oppression were the initial focus of intersectional investigation. We have since come to understand how these interact with other factors, such as disability or nationality. More recently, we've slowly come to see how these intersecting biases both enable and are compounded by human pollution and exploitation of the environment. And now we face the urgent task of including nonhuman animals in our intersectional analyses.

Social and environmental justice activists must come to understand how speciesism is foundational to intra-species oppression, setting the terms of and helping to maintain the many ways that people exploit each other and the earth. At the same time, animal advocates must come to understand that every act of abuse or injustice against animals occurs within social and material circumstances that cannot be adequately addressed without an understanding of intersectionality.

Extended to include speciesism and exploitation of animals among the oppressive ideologies and practices it surveys, intersectionality offers both animal and social/environmental justice activists a deeper and more complete understanding of the systems in which the problems on which they work (and they themselves) are enmeshed and, therefore, increases the likelihood of conceiving and implementing truly effective strategies. As a bonus, this extended understanding of intersectionality opens up avenues for cooperation and collaboration across movements.

Essential Insights

Crenshaw chose the word "intersection" aptly. When you are standing at the center of the intersection of Main Street and First Avenue, it is not possible to say which of those two roads you are on—you are on both of them at the same time. Thinking about job discrimination against women of color, Crenshaw saw that it often was not possible to say whether the discrimination was due to either racial bias or gender bias—it was both at once, in alloys not predictable by simple admixture.

The interactions between racism and sexism turn out to be multiplicative rather than additive. The functions of those interactions cannot be disaggregated. Racial stereotypes are gendered. Violence against women is enabled by racism.

Sexism, racism, and other forms of bias among people not only share sources and characteristics, they also interact in a mutually-reinforcing manner. This can most easily be seen in Suzanne Pharr's insight that homophobia is "a weapon of sexism." While it certainly is true that some bias against LGBTQ folks comes down to prejudice rooted in ignorance, the structural function of

homophobia (and transphobia too) is to maintain the man-on-top gender system. You don't have to actually be gay to be gay bashed. You don't have to identify as trans to be subject to transphobia. All that you have to do to be vulnerable to these forms of bias is transgress gender roles. That means that LGBTQ liberation is a necessary project of feminism *and* that LGBTQ liberation cannot be truly realized until we have solved sexism.

Ecofeminist scholars such as Lori Gruen and Marti Kheel have shown that a "logic of domination" structures Eurocentric thinking about not only race and gender but also earth and animals. This logic artificially (and falsely!) divides the world into opposed dualisms—male vs female, human vs animal, culture vs nature, reason vs emotion, etc.—according to superiority to one of each pair. The terms on each side of the hierarchical divide are linked: Men are seen as more rational, women and people of color are seen as closer to nature, classes of people are put down by calling them animal names.

If you want to dismantle a structure, the thing to do is knock out the joints. So, activists who want to make the most impact will look for ways to work at the intersections, ideally doing so in ways that make tangible progress on a specific problem while at the same time helping to undermine the structure of the intersecting system of oppressions.

If it is not possible to find such an intersection at which to work, it is still necessary to keep intersectionality in mind when selecting tactics and rhetoric, so as to avoid unintentionally undermining your own goals by inadvertently participating in the subordination of somebody else.

Preparing to Work Intersectionally

Every new tool requires some practice to use. This is particularly true for intersectionality, which requires us to see patterns, recognize relationships, and analyze complex interactions among multiple variables. Those of us who were schooled in the U.S. or Europe have been trained to think in exactly the opposite direction and thus may need to make an affirmative effort to learn to think in terms of commonalities rather than distinctions, context rather than abstraction, and systems rather than individuals.

Here are some simple exercises you can do:

- Think of two forms of oppression, such as sexism and speciesism, and challenge yourself to come up with ways that they intersect.
- Think of a problem, such as prisons or zoos, and challenge yourself to identify how many different forms of oppression intersect in it.
- Think of a tactic of oppression, such as stereotyping or forced labor, and challenge yourself to identify the ways that this is deployed in different forms of oppression.
- Think of a goal of oppression, such as profiteering or control of reproduction, and challenge yourself to see how this is sought by means of different forms of oppression.
- Think of an impact of one form of oppression, such as the

emotional callousness necessary for meat-eating, and challenge yourself to identify the ways that this reverberates so as to support other forms of oppression.

Please note that you may need to educate yourself while doing these exercises. You can't expect yourself to see the links between speciesism and racism, for example, if you don't know anything about racism!

Preliminary Findings

Activists have just begun to sketch the intersections among speciesism and other forms of oppression. Already, our findings are exciting and potentially very useful. Here are just a few examples of what we learn when using the exercises above to think about the relationships among exploitation of animals and social/environmental injustice:

- The "big three" excuses for animal exploitation —might makes right, we have abilities they don't have, and God said so— all also are used to explain away (or not bother to explain) social injustice. These ways of thinking lead to war, discrimination, and other ills.
- Sexism and speciesism have been so entangled for so long — dating back to the days when daughters and dairy cows both were the property of male heads of households— that neither can be fully understood without reference to the other.
- What has been called "reprocentrism" is not only foundational to animal exploitation but also central to patriarchy and capitalism. Incessant reproduction (of people, animals, and products) has brought us to the brink of planetary disaster.
- The psychological maneuver by which people lifted themselves up and out of ecosystems in order to turn both land and animals into property to be bought and sold not only underpins speciesism and environmental despoliation but also tends to lead to the individualism and alienation that are key factors in capitalism and other ailments.
- Speciesism seems so natural that species privilege is even more invisible than white privilege or male privilege. The invisibility of privilege, then, is a matter of joint concern for several movements.
- Slaughterhouse workers, vivisectionists, and even everyday meat-eaters tend to be forthright in saying that they "just don't think about" the suffering they cause. This mental habit of not-thinking-about-suffering also facilitates social injustice, as when U.S. consumers just don't think about the suffering of underpaid or even enslaved workers.

Here are just a few ways that particular forms of animal exploitation intersect with social and environmental injustice:

- Dairy production requires the forced impregnation of cows, from whom the calves are taken shortly after birth. This physical and emotional violation of female animals for profit creates products which the powerful and highly subsidized dairy industry place in every public school, despite the fact that the majority of children of color are lactose intolerant.
- Zoos began as expressions of empire in which both people and animals were exhibited. Zoos continue to express the ultimate human hubris by insisting that we can manufacture ecosystems

—an African savannah in Philadelphia! an arctic ocean in Florida!— and "save" endangered animals not by returning their habitats to them but by controlling their reproduction.

- Circuses and other uses of animals in entertainment also are spectacles of human control of nature. Many of these, such as cockfighting and rodeos, also represent spectacles of socially constructed masculinity.
- Hands-on exploitation of animals tends to promote not only emotional callousness but also contempt for weakness. Thus we see high rates of violence against partners and children in communities where factory farms and slaughterhouses tend to be located. Environmental injustice leads these highly polluting installations to be located in low-income regions and communities of color.

Intersectional Activism in Practice

Here are some examples of animal liberation activism at the intersections:

At **VINE Sanctuary** we have used our ground-breaking work rehabilitating fighting roosters to illuminate and challenge the use of animals in the social construction of gender. We've also used our standpoint as an LGBTQ-run organization to promote the "queering" of animal liberation.

The **Food Empowerment Project** promotes access to fresh produce and dairy alternatives in communities of color.

The **Sistah Vegan Project** promotes veganism as an anticolonial, antiracist, and feminist practice.

In Poland, ecofeminist animal rights organizers affiliated with **Otwarte Klatki** shared skills and resources with residents of more than 20 rural villages, thereby empowering them to mount their own successful campaigns against industrial fur farms.

In Brazil, the animal rights organization **VEDDAS** has allied with indigenous people to challenge a proposed dam.

Here are just a few examples of work that could be done at intersections of speciesism and other forms of injustice:

- Food justice and vegan organizations could work collaboratively to increase access to both fresh produce and dairy alternatives in low-income communities.
- Feminist and animal rights activists could work together to ensure that every domestic violence shelter is linked to a humane society or animal rescue organization willing to foster the companion animals who are often abused themselves and frequently the reason battered women do not seek shelter.
- Disability rights and anti-vivisection activists could work together to challenge the for-profit animal testing industry that exploits animals while failing to establish the safety or efficacy of drugs.
- ____ <== Your idea here! Imagine it. Try it. Tell us how it goes!

patrice jones is a cofounder of VINE Sanctuary:

www.bravebirds.org

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