

One

The Activists and I

Why, I wondered, would people spend so much time protesting animal research? Did they think lab rats were more important than people? On February 20, 1989, while working as a part-time sociology instructor in a mid-size college town—which I refer to in this book as the College Town—I decided to go to a campus meeting of animal rights activists to find out. The students put me in touch with a statewide organization in which I spent the next three years visiting information tables and attending meetings, protests, vegetarian meals, and social gatherings. Twenty animal rights activists whom I met along the way agreed to sit down with me over a tape recorder and talk about how they became involved with the movement.

Looking back, I see that my questions hinted at my initial cynicism about the animal rights movement. I had invited animal rights activists to construct an elaborate argument for me about why biomedical research is particularly evil compared to other kinds of animal use and why even lab rats deserve special treatment. I came away with a fanciful description of a society that has been led astray by sci-

ence, technology, and industrialization: the proverbial Fall from Eden. The end of animal research would herald a new age in which people would live in harmony with nature and one another.

This description was similar to some of the sociological accounts I had already read about the animal rights movement. These suggest that the movement can be explained by the growth of a consistent anti-science, technology, and business attitude.¹ Some critics of the animal rights movement have taken a negative spin on this, declaring that animal rights activists are not sincere about helping animals, that they are only masking an anti-science agenda.²

My initial essays reflect this view. Animal rights activists, I wrote, are driven by interests that are above and beyond their concern for animals. To be fair, I portrayed animal researchers equally narrowly. Their interests, I said, are to keep the animal rights activists and the general public out of science so they can maintain their prestige and autonomy. This meshed well with what other sociologists have written about scientists: that they strive to preserve their authority, status, and power by creating boundaries between scientists and laymen, science and pseudo-science.³

But how was I to explain the emotional bonds with animals and the altruism that activists on both sides of the controversy profess? Indeed, most animal rights activists are involved in humane or animal protection societies, and many animal researchers pursued biology because they love nature. Science, for them, is a way to help it. I conceded that activists on both sides do feel pity for animals, but I interpreted these feelings merely as social constructs or rhetoric manufactured by the animal rights and

animal research supporters. In saying this, I concurred with what many sociologists say about public controversies: that they are purely "dramas" contrived to pull people in, but nothing more.⁴

I looked back at what I had written. By saying that the activists were "constructing" emotions, I seemed to be suggesting that they did not really feel them or that their emotions were not really there. They were a figment of the imagination. I felt cynical again, as if I were one of the commentators who see animal rights activists and animal researchers as furthering their own interests. As field researchers, we are told that we are supposed to see the world as our informants see it, to put ourselves in their shoes.⁵ But I was writing an account that I knew both animal rights activists and animal researchers would see as distasteful portrayals of themselves.

It struck me that while being cynical, I had missed something. I had been attending animal rights meetings without really attending to how the animal rights activists actually felt about animal cruelty. Nor was I putting myself in the activists' shoes. By ignoring my own feelings about animal cruelty, I was not letting myself be moved by animal rights literature in the way that animal rights activists were. I recalled in my fieldnotes, for instance, how I became nervous and evasive when informants or even colleagues and friends would ask, "Well, who's side are you on?" To be sure, I felt revulsion and anger when watching animal rights videos about animal research. I also sympathized with animal researchers who were very caring about their animals. But I did not want to admit these feelings openly. Why?

Above all, I knew that whichever side I took would get

me into uncomfortable discussions. Most of the animal rights activists I met had read and thought a lot about animal rights issues, particularly animal research. They could always find an opposing argument. When I debated with them, I felt humiliated, as if I were responsible for animal cruelty by my own ignorance.

I also thought that taking a position would turn the other side against me or my work and deny me access to interviews and meetings. There were good reasons for these concerns. Early in my involvement in the animal rights movement, I learned that some animal rights activists suspected me of being a spy for the animal researchers. I felt that I had to provide them with letters of identification. Animal researchers were even more suspicious about me and what I would write. Elsewhere in the country, animal rights activists, posing as research staff, had dealt cruel blows to animal researchers by "infiltrating" their institutions and painting them and their facilities in a dismal light.⁶ Why should researchers trust me?

But it was not just my informants in the controversy that I worried about. I was reluctant to express my feelings and opinions to colleagues and friends. I was worried that they would think that I had been "sucked in" by one side and that my work was biased. I had always been suspicious of colleagues who were studying groups with whom they were involved or sympathetic, such as feminists who studied women's organizations. I suspected that they would use their research to further their personal goals, rather than find sociological "truths," as if these ideals were inseparable.

Finally, I did not want to express my feelings about animal research because I was worried that people would mis-

take *me* for being an animal rights activist or an animal research sympathizer. I was embarrassed about what these identities entailed. In fact I was embarrassed about the whole issue of animal protection. On one hand I enjoyed the fact that the animal rights movement was a “fringe group” and was often in the news. On the other hand I had a nagging feeling that its popularity was due to its timeliness rather than its timelessness.⁷ The animal rights movement appeared to be sporadic, trendy, and frivolous, in contrast to the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, or Amnesty International. Even the environmental movement—which does not fight for the rights of people—seemed more important, with its global and political concerns.

I read into others clues about my marginality. I thought that I detected a glazed look on the faces of people who had never thought or heard about animal rights. I recall finding myself making polite conversation at a buffet dinner with a distinguished sociologist; juggling his plate and wineglass in his hands, he urged me to study the larger national organizations rather than student activists, who might make my work look “trivial.” A few years later, at a sociology convention, a professor for whom I once worked as a teaching assistant and whom I respected enormously asked me why participant observers usually study “exotic” groups rather than bank clerks. My heart sank. Was the animal rights movement really exotic? Had I become too absorbed with the controversy to realize? And during an interview for a job in Southeast Asia, one interviewer implied to me that animal protection is a Western sensibility, as if people in other cultures do not keep pets.

Accepting that “You are what you study,”⁸ I began to find ways to overcome my uneasiness. I would tell people that I was studying “ethics—how people resolve ethical dilemmas.” If they probed further, I would say, “Science and ethics—moral dilemmas faced by scientists.” Science and ethics, as I mention above, were becoming big issues in the mid-1980s. Only when I was really pressed on the subject would I mutter something about animals. But all along, I was avoiding both my informants’ and my own feelings about animal cruelty.

Once I had the more stable job as a full-time lecturer, I began to think again about my feelings in the animal research controversy. I was also influenced by the small number of sociologists who dare to bare all, and to analyze their own feelings in order to analyze those of the people they study.⁹ This made me realize that by denying my own feelings I had been missing another story. For a start, I was inadvertently doing exactly what animal rights activists and animal researchers do all the time.

You see, like many animal rights activists, I may have been drawn to the animal rights movement because I myself had always been bothered by the contradiction that we both eat animals and keep them as pets. I was curious to know how other people—people who had really thought about the issue—resolved the dilemma.

It was unusually cold on that February night when I attended my first animal rights meeting in 1989. Light snow had dusted the grassy spots between buildings and had become puckered with rain. I dressed in a down jacket that I had bought for a trip to Chicago a few years earlier. I can still picture that coat, bright blue and hanging on a peg at