The abolitionist departure

During my graduate studies at Colorado State University, I enthusiastically enrolled in a Nonhuman Animal rights philosophy seminar in the hopes of broadening my sociological knowledge of Nonhuman Animal issues in preparation for my upcoming dissertation work. In this course, we explored ethical theories and the various weak justifications employed to defend the human exploitation of other animals. We debated the role of cognition, capacity for suffering, and death as harm. We deconstructed the immorality of vivisection, speciesist agricultural systems, and exploitative relationships with companion animals. In short, we were taught that Nonhuman Animals matter.

Sometimes we discussed vegetarianism, but veganism was never seriously considered. This omission would come into sharp relief later in the semester when our professor generously treated us to a pizza party. I was shocked when a stack of pepperoni pizzas arrived to the classroom. The very same students who had for months nodded along to our professor’s lectures on the moral standing of Nonhuman Animals were diving into a dinner of pig’s flesh and curdled breast milk from dairy cows long since slaughtered for hamburger. Was I in the right room?

Not long after, our professor led us on a field trip to the Colorado State University (CSU) research “farm,” where a number of cows, sheeps, and other animals were living under the “husbandry” of researchers and students. Along our tour, we met a fistulated cow. A gaping hole had been cut directly into her side straight through to one of her stomachs so that her digestion could be observed for research purposes. Despite having spent hours in the classroom studying the socially constructed and fundamentally arbitrary human/nonhuman divide, students could...
barely contain their excitement as they lined up for their chance to penetrate the restrained victim with their curious hands. The students laughed with each other, and many posed while their friends took pictures. In the classroom, students of Nonhuman Animal rights were learning to respect other animals as sentient persons. In the field, they were learning that it is acceptable to imprison, objectify, and violate other animals. More than acceptable, it can be *fun*.

At the end of the course, our professor offered the class some parting advice on where we might locally purchase “humanely raised” Nonhuman Animal flesh and other such products. This final lesson was understood as congruent with “rights” because Nonhuman Animals need not be protected from use and death, only especially egregious suffering. This protectionist conception of rights incorporates the suffering and death inevitably associated with the majority of Nonhuman Animal use. In other words, this perspective does not necessarily consider it problematic that cows, pigs, and other animals are killed for humans to consume. Killing becomes a problem only when Nonhuman Animals are not treated in a way that privileged humans – those who intend to kill and eat them – consider “humane.” The meaning of humaneness is, both in theory and in practice, extremely variable. Some might envision that humaneness entails providing access to grass and sunshine, while others might reject these as luxuries and consider humaneness as relevant only to the reduction of stress in the slaughter line. In any case, the inescapable fact that Nonhuman Animals are being *used* and *killed* is often divorced from any conception of humaneness.

In this sense, the status quo of Nonhuman Animal rights philosophy and practice is quite suspect. I share these examples to demonstrate the troubling disconnect that often exists between intention and practice in the social justice space. It is difficult to accept that eating pepperoni pizza, violating fistulated cows, and shopping for Colorado home-on-the-range “happy meat” is congruent with humanity’s moral obligation to other animals. But what accounts for this perplexity? How could students engage rational arguments at the seminar table, only to ignore or adulterate them when applied practically? According to ethicist Bernie Rollin (2006, p.166), it is relatively simple: human use of other animals is not going to end. Given this reality, ethicists should focus on improving the system to ease their suffering. The logic of welfare reform suggests that, given the magnitude of Nonhuman Animal suffering and the public’s supposed unwillingness to go vegan and reject speciesism full stop, reforms are the sensible and responsible compromise (Phelps, 2013, no pagination). With so few options at hand, reforms work to