

Animal liberation and Marxism - An interview with members of the Assoziation Dämmerung (Hamburg)

Sunday 1 March 2015, by [BERNHOLD Christin](#), [WITT-STAHL Susann](#), [WITTGEN Christian](#), [ZUROWSKI Maciej](#) (Date first published: 23 January 2014).

Maciej Zurowski attended the weekend school of the Assoziation Dämmerung in Hamburg and spoke to Susann Witt-Stahl, Christian Wittgen and Christin Bernhold.

'Animal liberation' has traditionally been a non-issue for the Marxist left. To those of us dedicated to human liberation, animal rights activism appears a curious and sentimental displacement of solidarity onto beings incapable of understanding or of returning it - at best, a symptom of our alienation from fellow humans.

At times, a fixation with animal suffering seems to shade into various degrees of misanthropy. Who has not been repelled by activists willing to jeopardise the lives of lab workers by sending letter bombs to pharmaceutical companies? And who in their right mind does not run a mile upon hearing the words, 'I prefer animals to humans'?

The political ties of animal liberationists do not help. Invariably linked to the 'Small is beautiful' localism of anarchist, green and deep-green varieties, their persuasion seems to carry broadly anti-modern, backward-looking overtones. At the same time, the softer, lifestyle end of the spectrum has long been coopted: savvy companies peddle overpriced, animal-free clobber to slumming crusties, and barely a neighbourhood undergoes gentrification without the inevitable vegan food shops marking the arrival of the new clientele.

To the extent Marxists feel any kinship to the animal liberation movement at all, their sentiments tend to be tolerated - rather than critically discussed - by apparatchiks willing to turn a blind eye to the odd bee in a young foot soldier's bonnet. But such cases are rare, and ultimately the animal liberation movement does not do itself any favours by substituting garish moralising for political argument.

It is a rather different story with the Assoziation Dämmerung from Hamburg. As I reported in January 2013, the group originally emerged from the autonomist animal liberation milieu of the 1980s, yet gradually advanced towards a Marxism heavily informed by the Frankfurt School. [1] Last November, it organised a weekend school under the title, 'One struggle, one fight? Nature is waiting for the revolution too'. Despite the somewhat broad - though perfectly plausible - implications of the title, speakers focused almost exclusively on our relationship to animals under capitalism, with contributions ranging from analyses of the political economy of the meat industry through to questions of revolutionary morality.

I attended the school and the next day interviewed Susann Witt-Stahl and Christian Wittgen from the Assoziation Dämmerung and a supporter of theirs, Christin Bernhold, who is active in the German Left Party and its youth organisation, Linksjugend Solid. What had originally made me curious about the school was a provocative comment on the part of Susann last January: she accused "most Marxists" - including our CPGB delegation - of arguing like neo- Kantians, rather than historical materialists, when it comes to the animal question. Furthermore, I became increasingly aware over the following months that the customary explanation as to why Marxists are anthropocentric - however correct such a position may be or feel - rarely amounts to more than 'That's just the way it is': ie, the very first phrase that historical

materialists ought to abandon.

Maciej Zurowski

Can you tell us a bit about the Assoziation Dämmerung?

Susann Witt-Stahl: The AD is a Marxist group which mainly focuses on the critique of ideology, and organises events to discuss theory and questions relevant to contemporary leftwing movements. Importantly for us, there is a class-struggle component to what we do; this means we do not want to fight these struggles just in debates, but on the street and in the workplace as well. We aim to practise active solidarity with the movements we debate.

Your autumn school carried the slogan, 'Nature is waiting for revolution too', though it mainly focused on animal liberation. What does Marxism have to do with that - is it not an anthropocentric movement?

Christian Wittgen: Since capitalism is the object of our critique, Marxists should address all that capitalism destroys. If you do that consistently, you will soon realise that capitalism does not merely exploit and oppress the class of wage labourers. Indeed, you will find references in the works of Marx - from his earliest writings through to his late works on economy - to the fact that nature, and therefore explicitly animals, are subjugated and exploited by capital.

Take this as a starting point, and you will begin to understand how the mode of production and the social practices in which we participate distort our view not only of our relationship to the means of production, our work environment and the commodities we produce, but equally that of our relationship to animals and nature. This distorted view - which is, to a certain extent, shared by the oppressed and the oppressor class - must be criticised just like the exploitation of humans.

Christin Bernhold: As a Marxist, one should know that due to the development of productive forces and a number of social factors, we have arrived at a stage where there is no longer a necessity for socially produced suffering. We know that suffering is something that humans share with animals and that we have the possibility to abolish it. These are just the most banal and straightforward reasons why the movement for liberation must include the liberation of animals.

What classic Marxist texts are you drawing on?

CW: Of course, you have to take Marx's own theoretical development into account. You will find bits in his early work: eg, *On the Jewish question*, where he empathetically makes reference to Thomas Münzer, arguing that creatures must be liberated too. Ditto the 'Paris manuscripts', [2] where he argues that the world we are fighting for will be one where humans are naturalised and nature humanised. These are also some relevant passages in the early philosophical works, where it is evident that Marx had a different view of the relationship between society and nature than some 'classical Marxists' did.

To give you another example, there is a paragraph in *The German ideology* where Marx displays a genuinely historical-materialist understanding of our relationship to animals. [3] But you will find references in all stages of his theoretical development, including where he undertakes a comprehensive analysis and critique of capitalism: ie, *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. Take the end of the 13th chapter of *Capital* volume 1, where Marx - having described the formal and real subsumption of productive forces - plainly states that capitalism exploits not only labour, but nature as a source of wealth. You will find near identical formulations in the *Critique of the Gotha program me* - something that today's left prefers to ignore.

That is also something we have persistently criticised the Socialist Workers Party for. It has now 'clarified' its formerly Lassallean platform formulation somewhat.

CB: We would also like to remind the left that Marx's description of capitalism constitutes a critique of that mode of production. So when he describes animals as cattle used as a means of production in *Capital*, then this is not to be read as affirmative.

SWS: Nature and animals are present all the way through the Marx-Engels works; it is up to you to track down the relevant bits to put them together. Marx saw animals for what they really are, which was unbelievably insightful for his time. There is a very interesting, though commonly overlooked, footnote in *Capital* volume 1, where he reports an observation he made on a farm. What Marx finds remarkable is the difference between the way humans treated animals when they were serfs and the way they treat them as doubly free wage labourers. As serfs, they viewed animals as fellow sufferers which, like them, were utilised as means of production and therefore endured the same mode of exploitation. When they moved up a rung and became wage labourers, they began to beat and abuse animals, as they were now told that they were free human beings - even though they actually remained unfree and were exploited in a different manner.

Of course, Marx is not primarily concerned with the suffering of animals here - although I am under the distinct impression that he does not like it very much, or else he would scarcely mention the cruelty of it all. As you know, Marx never writes in an indignant manner, including when he depicts human misery in the factories; he offers descriptions, which constitute his critique as well as his outcry. To me, that footnote demonstrates that Marx realised why we view animals as dirt, objects or beings that may be disregarded: because we exploit them. It is not the other way round. And that's where most Marxists turn into pure idealists. They say: 'Oh well, animals are inferior, they just serve us as means of production'. They never wonder what determines this view in the first place.

When a CPGB delegation visited Hamburg in January, you accused us of stooping to a neo-Kantian level of arguing when it comes to animals. What did you mean by that?

SWS: The most important feature we share with animals is that we possess a tormentable body. Most Marxists disregard the significance of this commonality, which effectively means that they hold the body in very low esteem. They restrict themselves to defining the differences and only want to talk about reason, which is where neo-Kantianism comes in: consistent historical materialists would never be so assertive about an understanding of reason that is basically identical with the way bourgeois society defines and fetishises it.

Don't get me wrong: reason is important, and I do not wish to minimise it. However, to many Marxists, humans possess reason; animals do not - and that's the end of the story. The problem is that this is unscientific and wrong, given that early forms of reason already exist in nature. At a primal level, animals act reasonably: eg, by storing up winter supplies. Of course, it is not identical with reason as humans possess it - but we must recognise that reason didn't just fall from the sky, and that is where most Marxists revert to idealism.

We are doing ourselves a great disservice if we don't accept that our body is the most important part of our being. Without your body, you are nothing - unless, of course, if you are an idealist and believe in the existence of a soul. It would not hurt if Marxists also discovered their own bodies through the discussion of animals and nature. The way in which they hold their bodies in low regard - as opposed to their reason, which they never cease to celebrate - is not entirely dissimilar to the way somatophobic idealists are terrified of the physicality they share with animals. I am sure you are aware of all the castigation humans have inflicted upon themselves to repress the 'beast within': their sexuality.

Marxists can learn about themselves by learning about animals. As Marco Maurizi, a Marxist from Rome, put it, "Humans themselves are the first victims of speciesism". [4]

Christin, last night you stated that there could be no socialist revolution without the liberation

of animals. This met with strong objections from the vice-chair of the 'official' German Communist Party, Hans-Peter Brenner, who pointed to what he considers successful socialist revolutions. There was also some confusion as to what you meant by 'socialist revolution'. Could you elaborate?

CB: Yes, it's probably better if I rephrase my statement: there can be no social liberation if the liberation of animals does not factor into it both theoretically and politically. Obviously, I did not mean that it's impossible for Cuba to kick out the Yankees and partially reorganise national production without at the same time liberating animals. I am talking about that comprehensive social liberation which you might want to call the development towards communism.

Do you know Horkheimer's metaphor about the skyscraper? [5] The exploitation of animals is located in the basement of that skyscraper, not least because capitalist exploitation is also founded on this type of exploitation. As Susann mentioned when referring to our physicality, it is closely linked to the exploitation of humans. Hence, the Frankfurt School's 'critical theory' often spoke of a threefold exploitation: the exploitation of man by man, the exploitation of nature by man, and the exploitation of the self, which is linked to the repression of one's own nature in order to function in capitalism.

Christian, you said that you encounter hostile and defensive attitudes towards animal liberation politics, especially from those who are otherwise your closest comrades in Die Linke: ie, the left of the party. How do you explain that soft lefts tend to be more open-minded about animal liberation and other social movements?

CW: I think there are complex reasons for this. As for the traditional Marxist communist left, I do think that it was informed by a distinct ideology of progress, which amounted to a faith in the productive forces. This has now receded somewhat, but it is still present. While this ideology rarely talks about inner nature, it views human domination over outer nature as the matrix of social progress. In contrast, we argue that the productive forces are now sufficiently developed, and that the relations of production are the real barrier to progress.

There is also the widespread notion that turning to nature constitutes a betrayal of progress and of the enlightenment. We criticise the anthropocentric view - humanity as the summit of creation, so to speak - as a fairly simplified view of the enlightenment. Although we 'decentre' humankind to a certain degree, we most certainly do not forsake it.

So what would happen if we had an international revolution, and some parts of the world suffered food shortages which could only be helped by continuing or even intensifying meat production? Would you put humans first?

CW: I don't think we will ever encounter this problem, and I will tell you why: if we abolished the meat industry, this would massively increase our potential to supply food for everybody virtually overnight. What we presently have is food production for the purpose of feeding cattle, which means that less people can be fed, as meat production continues. Therefore, abandoning the meat industry under a proletarian dictatorship would actually make progress towards communism easier.

But to go back to your original question, I also think that the animal liberation movement itself is to blame for its isolation from the Marxist left. Compared to other movements, animal liberation is still very new and, as such, it has committed mistakes and has suffered its fair share of infantile disorders. In its beginnings, it was often informed by a left-libertarian type of anti-communism, and it was certainly idealist in many respects. No doubt that was the understandable result of an elemental empathy with animals, but it was a real obstacle at the level of political discourse.

But then few people arrive at a communist position through informed historical-materialist analysis. Initial reasons are basic and often naive.

CB: Exactly. But that is also the explanation why the soft left tends to be more 'open-minded'

about the purely moralistic approach that characterises much of the animal liberation movement. It isn't particularly surprising, for instance, that the Emancipatory Left network in Die Linke is quite open to such moralism, simply because it approaches its own key topics - such as feminism and anti-racism - in the same, essentially bourgeois, manner.

CW: One should not forget, however, that many traditional lefts chose to ignore all and any social movements that came to the fore in the mid- 20th century. Of course, there were clashes and conflicts, and many new social movements strove to distance themselves from the traditional left from the outset. But the traditional left did not exactly cover itself in glory by critically engaging with movements such as feminism and animal liberation either. It simply decided that these were not relevant forces because they did not focus on workplace struggles and were therefore of little use to human liberation and socialism.

Can I ask you about veganism? It has been pointed out that meat just happens to be the cheapest, most readily available form of nutrition for working class people. So veganism is a luxury lifestyle in terms of both money and time. How essential is the prefigurative aspect to you? Does it really matter whether individuals cease to eat meat today or not? And how do you intend to link this issue to the concerns of the proletariat, including its rapidly growing underclass layer?

CB: Veganism is important to me in the sense that it negates the consumption of a murdered, tormentable body. However, this remains at a purely moralistic level if you don't consider it part of a broader political project. The fact that there are so many people for whom it is not possible to be vegan or vegetarian only confirms that this is - indeed has to be - a project of political economy. Naturally, I don't want to moralistically point my finger at poor or starving people and tell them not to eat meat. What I want to do is demonstrate how this society functions, including how it creates a situation where a lot of people could not afford to stop eating meat even if they wanted to.

Let us not forget that meat production in the capitalist core countries is partly responsible for the fact that a lot of people elsewhere go hungry. The critique of political economy then - including a critique of the ways humans are exploited in this scenario - is my top priority. Nonetheless, I think that something like a critique of consumption is also correct.

Herbert Marcuse in this context has spoken about the fact that "false needs" are produced in a capitalist society. "False" in the sense, that certain needs might be imposed on the individual by social powers, which benefit from its suppression. False needs perpetuate the exploitation of wage labour, aggressiveness, misery and injustice. [6]

SWS: If you accept our ideas yet continue to eat meat, it is also true that you remain trapped in a process of self-alienation. You cannot eat animals if you truly perceive them as tormentable bodies. If you eat animals, you will inevitably have a different relationship to them: they are just things, objects to you - not beings that strive for happiness or at least want to avoid suffering. That's why it is crucial that animals are reified, so the business with them can continue. We are speciesist because the exploitation of animals is an important pillar of the capitalist economy, not the other way round.

At an individual level, I want to break with this logic. I just don't want to eat tormentable bodies and reproduce this alienation and false consciousness with every piece of meat I consume. I also believe it is important for communists to act in a way that calls attention to the conditions they criticise. We do that in many other areas: eg, human sexuality. Of course, this always carries moral implications, but that is not a problem to me, as long as it is revolutionary, communist morality. Why not do the same with regards to animals?

You are right that veganism is a lifestyle question today, but that is not veganism's fault - rather, the problem is a wrong economy, which opens up markets and creates privileges for certain social classes.

CW: Anybody who has ever been vegan or vegetarian knows that it gets you in a lot of situations where

you are expected to justify yourself. Many people conceive veganism as a kind of boycott, which I think is the wrong economic approach and not the reason why I do it. It is, however, a political instrument. People either ask with genuine interest why you are vegan, or they react aggressively. Naturally, there are moments when you don't want *that* conversation again. Still, it always triggers a debate.

Is it not the case, though, that capitalism coopts social movements and subcultures because they can be coopted: ie, because they do not actually pose a threat? And would it not follow that meat production is not fundamental to its organisation? On a related note, one might argue that capitalism is not fundamentally racist: ie, it can coopt anti-racism because it does not necessarily need racism.

CW: Of course capitalism absorbs certain movements and subcultures - it has successfully managed to penetrate every pore of subculture and functionalise it for its own ends. At the same time, that does not fundamentally mean that culture cannot be part of a resistance movement. One must be clear that subculture is always accompanied by a political-economic project. If you really conceive your individual vegan lifestyle as the main political issue, as some people in our movement do, you are on the wrong track. That is, indeed, a line that we are trying to draw: do not delude yourself that your culture by itself is somehow synonymous with political progress.

CB: I do not think capitalism can absorb veganism to such a degree that meat production becomes unnecessary. Capitalism has a massive interest in incorporating parts of the vegan movement, creating new markets and new consumer needs. But I think there is a very distinct line drawn when people become involved in a political project that aims to change society.

SWS: Social relations are determined by the needs of capitalism. I completely agree with what Ulrike Meinhof wrote in 1967: the fascists needed the Jews as hate objects in order to carry through their policies - that was the false consciousness which fascism required at the time. The new fascism needs Jews on its side and takes action against others.

The notion that capitalism is essentially racist is problematic, insofar as it verges on idealism: ie, it somewhat implies that ideology is the foundational basis of the problem rather than its expression, superstructure and legitimation. Nevertheless, I think there is some truth to this statement, given that all that aggression, discrimination, and the practice of declaring groups of people fair game merely seems to shift from one group to another.

I do not share the opinion that racism has disappeared - it's just that neoliberalism has produced a new variety of cultural racism. It's true that skin colour, genetics and 'blood' are no longer the issue, and in that sense, neoliberalism is colour-blind. Suddenly, it's okay to be black, gay or a woman - who would have thought capitalism would ever allow us to be so many different things?

But just because it's OK to be a woman, that doesn't make capitalism feminist; all it does is use women in a specific way. By the way, the changing face of racism is a development that Adorno predicted in the 1960s. He had an excellent analysis, and some of the things he foresaw were quite incredible, especially when you consider that he was dead by the time neoliberalism began its triumphal march.

But back to veganism: in my view, it also has the function of sensitising and debarbarising you - it is a very small step in the progress of civilisation. Rather than it being a form of sacrifice, I would say it is actually a little piece of freedom that is possible to achieve even under capitalist rule. Suffice to say, I will take every opportunity to be as free and humane as I can, and I will not let go of it. It is sometimes good to wrest a bit of humanity from capitalism, provided that you do not succumb to the illusion that your veganism will somehow put an end to the system.

Some people are so disappointed that the project of animal liberation has not made a more serious impact on the left that they think an entirely 'new left' is needed - if you find it impossible to convince the advanced part of the class of your ideas, how do you expect to convince the masses? I am also wondering whether you overestimate the elemental

identification of humans with other oppressed species. How likely is it that the working class will identify with animal liberation as its own issue?

SWS: At the school yesterday Matthias Rude gave plenty of historical examples for collective working class solidarity with animals. Where I do not entirely agree with him is on how essential the degree of historical solidarity is to our project. Sometimes, such accounts are somewhat glorified, and people conclude things which were not historically as significant as they would like to believe. Matthias's findings are valuable in their own right, but personally I would not necessarily shout them from the rooftops and attach so much historical hope to them.

I do think, however, that his examples of elemental identification are important, in the sense that they demonstrate how certain basic impulses were manifest throughout history: people always felt a certain unease about the treatment of animals. Not necessarily in the sense that they felt sentimental about those poor creatures, but in that they could partly see themselves in them - it was a form of identification, and an affirmation of their own unfreedom and oppression. [7]

Finally, there is the problem of dehumanisation. I recommend you read an aphorism in *Minima moralia*, [8] where Adorno hints how the fact that we feel free to kill creatures because they are 'just' animals actually poses a greater danger to the lives of human beings. If one is capable of degrading animals, it is also easier to treat humans like animals. Consider the genocide in Rwanda: suddenly, the Tutsis were depicted as cockroaches. Or remember the Nazi movie, *The eternal Jew*, which suggested that Jews are like rats and ought to be exterminated. When Adorno wrote that, he was not even particularly worried about animals - he only knew that it was possible to treat humans like animals as long as animals were degraded: ie, that the degradation of animals was a precondition. [9]

CB: You are wondering whether we exaggerate the historical identification, but the point is not to glorify the past or hope to win the whole working class movement with our next one or two congresses. It is just that our group has recognised the objective necessity of this project. This does not mean that we believe our time has arrived, but if we do not try to advance our political project now, then we will not have made any progress in 20 years time. I do not believe that massive steps will be made by our left project in the next 10 years - or by any other left project, for that matter. It is a life project.

SWS: One question is whether we should simply liquidate ourselves into the broader Marxist movement in the sense that we join the most important organisations and push to have these debates. Someone who thinks about animals in this way will have an entirely different approach to the analysis of fascism, for instance. In my view, in order to fully understand fascism and the mechanisms it sets free - eg, the project of dehumanisation that fascism needs in order to win people to the idea that terror and violence against certain groups is legitimate - you need some knowledge of the relationship between humans and animals. Not many anti-fascists would dream of investing any time and thought into this, and I do think that we have something to contribute. There are many other issues, too. At the moment, it is fair to say that we operate to a certain degree as 'sectarians'.

I would suggest you write more theory, or perhaps set up a publication where people can follow your debates. It would be an illusion to believe you can somehow bypass the existing left, and it is hard to influence people simply by being moralistic or shouting at them. That is how I perceived animal liberationists before I met you guys, which is probably why I never took any interest in the subject.

CB: You are correct, but it is not only a question of theory. It is also one of political practice. I am convinced that we can only work in the labour movement and on the existing left if we want our ideas to become popular. We will not have any success if we only print a couple of pamphlets or even a regular publication of the anti-speciesist Marxist left and do not work with the existing left. If we show up at the factory gates and try to hand out our pamphlets, nobody will take any interest at all if we are not part of their movement. Ditto the left: I don't think we can convince people if we occasionally show up just to flog our pamphlets, but remain outsiders otherwise.

CW: We are active in the labour movement. For instance, we actively participated in what was the longest

strike in Hamburg in recent history. The result is that some striking workers, who would otherwise not have been exposed to our ideas had a look at our texts, and some reactions were positive. In short, it is important to work in the movement, but also be clear about your differences.

SWS: As to a publication, I do not think we are in a position to have one. You are forgetting that as Marxists, we are a tiny minority of the animal liberation movement. The majority adheres to some bourgeois animal ethics, and there are even those who look at all meat-eaters and meat industry workers as their enemies.

It is the same with all social movements. Take feminism: I am sure you know gender studies, which is completely dominated by post-structuralism - everything Marxist has been pushed out of feminism, as has been the case in so many other areas since the so-called 'linguistic U-turn'. Analogously, animal liberation now has something called animal studies, which constitutes the theoretical mainstream of the movement: these people represent a neo-idealist approach without even being aware of it - they argue that humans treat animals this way because they think badly of them, not the other way round.

Finally, Christin, could you explain what you mean by 'revolutionary *Realpolitik*'?

CB: The method of what I call 'revolutionary *Realpolitik*' depends on the subject matter you are dealing with. Generally, I would say that revolutionary *Realpolitik* is distinguished by the fact that it neither confines itself to reformism nor does it exclusively talk about a revolution in the distant future without attempting to conceive a clear strategy how to get there and take relevant steps in there here and now.

In the realm of animal liberation, this means that we do not fight for bigger cages. It is crucial to devise a strategy which contains demands with a relevant content for today, but which also points beyond: ie, to the revolution that we need to really end the misery. Ditto human liberation: we do not just campaign for higher wages to help the social democratic unions to maintain social peace, but also for shorter working hours, bans on subcontracted labour and so on - anything that improves the condition of the working class can help us prepare for more serious future struggles.

P.S.

* <http://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/994/animal-liberation-and-marxism/>

Footnotes

[1] 'Emerging from autonomism' Weekly Worker February 14 2013.

[2] www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm.

[3] "Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life"
(www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm).

[4] <http://apesfromutopia.blogspot.de/2011/03/nine-theses-on-speciesism.html>.

[5] M Horkheimer Dawn and decline: notes 1926- 1931 and 1950-1969 New York 1978, p66.

[6] Compare www.marxists.org/reference/archive/marcuse/works/one-dimensional-man/ch01.htm, 10th

paragraph from the top.

[7] An instance that Weekly Worker readers might be familiar with is Rosa Luxemburg's tortured December 1917 letter to Sonia Liebkecht from prison, in which she depicts how a buffalo, taken as German war loot, is mistreated in the prison yard before her eyes. See www.columbia.edu/itc/history/winter/w3206/edit/luxemburg.html.

[8] www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1951/mm.

[9] According to some accounts, members of the Khmer Rouge were routinely trained to torture and kill animals in order to overcome their inhibitions in this regard concerning humans - MZ.