

Editors' Forum / Hot Spots

Zoo-Fascism, Russia: To Hell with Equality and Ownerless Dogs

FROM THE SERIES: [American Fascism](#)

A view of the crowd northeast of the Washington Monument, shortly before President Trump's speech, January 6, 2021. Photo by Gregory Starrett.

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“Dog bites man” isn’t news. But this story did get some [regional coverage](#): a pack of street dogs attacked a young woman in Ulan-Ude on December 23, 2020, right outside her house. Tatiana Loskutnikova was saved from death by a neighbor, but her injuries are dire. Had publication ethics allowed it, I’d show you the photo leaked by first responders. Eyeballs stare unblinkingly from a bloodied skull. This is what it looks like when animals tear off a human face.

Accusations of fascism were close at hand. “Buryatia has again disgraced itself before all of Russia!” [wrote a leader](#) of the regional branch of the liberal opposition party Yabloko, “Buryat authorities are accused of fascist methods and of attempting to violate Federal Law! What we have here is not democracy, not autocracy, but a regular ochlocracy, when the government is led by an emotionally unbalanced crowd.” This politician was not, however, concerned that [street dogs regularly maul people in Russia](#). She was concerned that public outcry over this tragedy [could put the street dogs in danger](#).

What does it mean to call something fascist, and what consequences does such righteous denouncement engender?

The Soviet “victory over fascist invaders” is ideologically sacralized in Russia today: affirmed in the Constitution, endlessly celebrated in the state-controlled media. The nefarious image of these fascist others drives patriotic demands to root out foreign meddling and 5th Column treason. But another image of fascism is no less influential: that of fascism as personal moral failure. This image fascist indifference to others’ pain and to the discrimination they suffer drives liberal demands for greater equality between all suffering beings. Particularly, it justifies the new [Federal Law N498](#) —“Concerning the Responsible Treatment of Animals”—a law which makes it illegal to euthanize, kill, or otherwise cull healthy street dogs. Recognized as urban denizens, legally “ownerless animals” must instead be castrated and “returned to their former habitat,” or else housed in municipally funded kennels until they die of natural causes.

[Animal protection laws have a long history](#), but N498 is a beast of its times. Adopted in 2018, it draws on an emergent humanitarian discourse that figures animals as subjects of law and society, rather than species of wildlife and objects of property law. So no scientists—whose purview is the natural world—were involved in its drafting: no zoologists, ecologists, doctors, veterinarians, or ethologists. Instead, representatives of various state ministries [formed a working group](#) with “civil society animal-protection activists and media representatives.” The demands of this working group were both humanistic and moral: they defined “an animal as a creature that experiences emotions, pain, and therefore needs protection.”

In pain, we are all equal. There is neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, neither Jew nor chicken. Boiled down to the image of suffering, crimes against humanity drive new demands for animal rights. The death of six million Jews in Nazi concentration camps is [compared to the slaughter of broiler chickens](#): “animals feel pain, fear and loneliness. We’re asking people to recognise that what Jews and others went through in the Holocaust is what animals go through every day in factory farms.”

Legal scholars typically trace this “nondiscrimination approach to animal welfare” (Satz 2009) to Peter Singer’s essay “[Animal Liberation](#),” published in 1973 in the *New York Review of Books*. In this foundational text, Singer argues that humans have no moral ground to discriminate against nonhumans: that speciesism is no different than racism. Predictably, the essay alludes to Nazi extermination campaigns, claiming that the “typical consumer’s mixture of ignorance [about factory farming], reluctance to find out the truth, and vague belief that nothing really bad could be allowed allowed seems analogous to the attitudes of ‘decent Germans’ to the death camps.” And it shows a curious disregard of vulnerable human life. [Singer writes](#):

What . . . are we to do about genuine conflicts of interest like rats biting slum children? I am not sure of the answer, but the essential point is just that we do see this as a conflict of interests, that we recognize that rats have interests too. Then we may begin to think about other ways of resolving the conflict—perhaps by leaving out rat baits that sterilize the rats instead of killing them.

In 1973, the image of “rats biting slum children” was more than an idle abstraction. Poor American children were indeed being eaten by rats. Predominantly, those children were Black. “The knowledge that many children in the world’s most affluent nation are attacked, maimed and even killed by rats should fill every American with shame,” claimed Lyndon Johnson in 1967, petitioning Congress for federal resources toward a “Rat Extermination and Control Bill” (McLaughlin 2011, 542). Amid the race riots of that turbulent summer, Congress rejected his petition. Then, after much heated political debate, it agreed. Through it all, rats had made national headlines. It is to them, surely, that Singer alludes.

We’ve come far since Nazi animal protection laws forbade vivisection and Kosher slaughter—while also, conveniently, demonizing Jews (Arluke and Sax 1992). Today’s animal rights organizations explain that “[bigotry begins when categories such as race, age, gender, sex, sexual orientation, or species are used to justify discrimination](#).” Today, we are invited to celebrate the American invasion of Iraq for the rescue of stray Iraqi dogs (Bose 2017); to compare the interests of “slum children” to the interests of rats seeking to feed on them as they sleep in their cribs; to ask: “who is more innocent, chickens or Palestinians?” (Weiss 2016: 701).

It’s hard to say no to equality. But leaving society to be governed by the ostensibly natural order of markets and animal teeth strikes me as a poor replacement for justice.

And what if refusing to discriminate between children and rats is itself also fascist?

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