Cross-Cultural Examination of the Animal Rights Movement

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Cherry’s *Culture and Activism* is a cross-cultural study on the animal rights movement in France and the United States. Although the movements in France and the United States share a similar foundation, their paths have radically differed. The activists in both countries share similar values, goals, and strategies, but the animal rights movement in the United States has flourished while it has remained stagnant in France. Cherry builds off the theories of Bourdieu (1977), Giddens (1984), Jasper (2006), and Hays (1994) to explain how the dynamic interaction between culture, structure, and agency shapes and constrains activists’ ability to achieve cultural change. She explains that these decisions are not simply made by the beliefs and attitudes of individual activist, but instead they are shaped by specific cultures and structures that either permit or stifle the use of social movement tactics.

Cherry begins her analysis by presenting the history of the modern animal rights movement and the key philosophies that developed various ethical frameworks for defending animal rights. Although the two movements share a vision, a goal, and similar origins, French activism remains focused on nonhuman animal protection, particularly for companion animals, while activism in the United States now targets industrialized animal agriculture.

Cherry uses ethnographic and interview data on activists from the United States and France to explain why the particular strategies and cultural resources that have driven the animal rights movement in the United States failed in France. She looks at the ability of activists to promote veganism and animal rights based on five cultural resources: environmental protection, religious theology, health benefits, the availability of vegan food, and the media. For each topic, she asks the following questions: How does the cultural context of each country shape the discourse surrounding each resource? Will this tactic resonate with the general population? Will the activists be perceived in a positive fashion? If not, will they be able to alter the tactic to gain a more positive
image? Is there any institutional support for this strategy or will they encounter a backlash? Do they think this approach will be useful in promoting their short-term or long-term goals?

Cherry found that in the United States, most of these strategies were supported by the culture and provided opportunities for growth. There is a strong environmental movement that supports the “meatless Monday” campaign, and the Christian theology of “sacred stewardship” challenges theories of human dominion over the earth and nonhuman animals. The medical and health industries now embrace a plant-based diet as part of a healthy food plan that can prevent and reverse many diseases. The availability of mock meats and other pre-packaged vegan food makes it easier for activists to promote making “compassionate” food choices by voting with their dollars at restaurants and supermarkets. Finally, activists used the media and celebrity endorsement to bring both positive and controversial attention to the movement, including campaigns that have been interpreted as sexist and racist.

With the exception of environmental protection, these same cultural strategies were more challenging for French activists. Theology that supports sacred stewardship does not work in a secular nation like France. Meat, particularly foie gras, is considered to be central to French identity and gastronomy, while vegetarians are perceived to be crazy cult members. Furthermore, promoting vegan food at events is a difficult strategy due to a lack of meat and dairy alternatives. This is compounded by the fact that the medical and health professions declare veganism to be dangerous to one’s health. In addition, since the media portrays veganism in a negative light, celebrities are reluctant to endorse animal rights organizations in campaigns and fundraisers.

Referring to these cultural references as tools in the toolkit, Cherry explores how activists choose which strategies and tactics to use. She argues that these decisions are not made on the individual level but instead are determined in relation to the institutional logic of the social movement. Cherry (2016) states that “group cultures, identities, and the symbolic boundaries surrounding them are not only formed through individual tastes in tactics or as challenges to mainstream culture; they are also formed through internal debates within a movement” (p. 105). As a result, the culture of the social movements functions as structure and shapes action (p. 109).

The animal rights movement has exploded in the United States by promoting an ideology of pragmatism and effective advocacy. Activists were more willing to use a multi-prong approach to bring ideas about animal rights to the mainstream. Although most animal rights activists believe in animal abolition and veganism, activist organizations recognized that the public is more likely to support animal welfare rather than animal rights. Thus in order