Invasion of the Movement Snatchers:
A Social Justice Cause Falls Prey to the
Doctrine of “Necessary Evil”

By James LaVeck

You never know when a PR agency is being effective, you’ll just find your views slowly shifting—PR Executive

Few of us realize that some U.S. industries pay hundreds of millions of dollars to public relations firms charged with the removal of any and all obstacles to their acquisition of profit. High on the list of these obstacles are grassroots social justice movements.

In a 2002 article on their Center for Media and Democracy website, authors and social activists John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton described the activities of MBD, one such PR firm involved in the dismantlement of citizens’ movements concerned about problems ranging from acid rain, dioxin, biotechnology and toxic wastes, to apartheid, nuclear energy, acid rain, dioxin, biotechnology and toxic wastes, to apartheid, nuclear energy, and social movements like those working in the animal industry.

“Nothing means more to MBD than its massive PR agency that works with the meat, dairy, and poultry industries,” the authors wrote. “The firm is also involved in campaigns directed at environmental, human rights, immigration, and health movements. MBD is also involved in the military, and has been employed by the National Rifle Association.”

MBD was started in 1984 by 13 former government and corporate public relations professionals who “came together to form a different kind of public relations firm: one whose clients are concerned with social justice issues and who are working to bring about positive social change.”

Stauber and Rampton note that MBD’s founders are “hardly alone in their commercial assault on social movements.”

Their favorite method,” wrote Stauber and Rampton, is “a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy heavily dependent on co-option. First identify the ‘radicals’—typically, organizations or individuals who are unwilling to compromise and who are demanding fundamental changes to redress the problem at hand. Then, identify the ‘realists’—typically, organizations with significant budgets and staffs working in the same relative area of public concern as the radicals. Then, approach these realists, often through a friendly third party, start a dialogue and eventually cut a deal, a temporary concession, but the fundamental concerns raised by the ‘radicals’ are swept aside.” (Emphasis added.)

What does this troubling scenario have to do with animal advocates and our movement to end the exploitation of sentient beings? Well, it turns out the first time Stauber and Rampton wrote about MBD, it was in reference to a presentation given by Ronald Duchin—the “D” in MBD—to none other than the Culturists’ Association (see page 66 of Toxic Sludge is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry). The year was 1991, and Duchin, a graduate of the Army War College and former special assistant to the Secretary of Defense, was outlining the most effective strategy for “dealing with” the meat industry’s biggest irritant: us.

Duchin recommended the following three-step plan:

1) Isolate the radicals
2) Cultivate the idealists and educate them into becoming ‘realists’
3) Co-opt the opportunists into agreeing with industry

Duchin acknowledged in his speech that idealists were hard to work with, and that because of their inherent altruism and lack of fear, that they gain nothing personally from holding their views, the public tends to believe in them. He then offered the cattlemen a clever strategy. He said that if idealists can somehow convinced that their opposition to a product or an industry inadvertently caused harm to someone, they could not live with the contradiction and would be forced to change their views, to adopt a more “realistic” position.

Duchin next told the cattlemen about how to work with movement “opportunists,” people who engage in activism for visibility, power, followers, and perhaps, employment. The key to dealing with opportunists is to provide them with “at least the perception of a partial victory.”

The widespread adoption of “cage-free” eggs? A few seats at the table with the group developing standards for producing “Animal Compassionate” lamb? Uncrated “pink” veal? Today, these and similar developments are being widely characterized as victories for the animal movement with reputations for staunchly opposing animal exploitation.

The Bilk of Human Kindness

It’s not pleasant to think about the possibility that our movement could be in the process of being co-opted and neutralized according to a blueprint laid out 15 years ago by a meat industry consulting firm. But for the animal exploiting industries, there are billions of dollars at stake, and it stands to reason that they are going to commit serious resources to the protection of their interests, and they are going to play to win. Consider how the relentless pressure to bring stock performance ever higher, quarter after quarter, can drive corporate executives into a hypercompetitive frenzy. As a result, one regularly reads of industrial espionage, media smear campaigns, attempts to corrupt political leaders, accounting scandals and brutal takeover battles. Is there any reason to believe that people caught up in such a system might be any less ruthless when dealing with a citizens’ movement that seeks to put them out of business?

Stauber and Rampton, after years of investigating the activities of the PR industry, point out the tendency of activists to deny the possibility that we could be duped, “activists like to believe that we are too committed to our causes, too worldly and aware to be sweet-talked into unwitting submission by sitting down and partnering with the enemy.” But according to PR industry guru Denise Deegan, notes Stauber, “industry continues to regard this sort of ‘dialogue’ as its most effective method for managing activists.”

Stauber and Rampton’s work is hardy based on armchair theorizing. Rather, it is derived from exhaustive study of the history of real life grassroots movements that, like the animal movement, have attempted to confront industry abuse. They studied, for example, how the MBRB PR firm grew out of a successful campaign to neutralize a massive boycott of the Nestle corporation. In the late 70s, Nestle was attempting to persuade million of third world women to use synthetic infant formula instead of breast feeding their babies. “Inactivists,” note Stauber and Rampton, “this boycott was touted as a major victory, but in the corporate world it is understood that industry really won the day by pulling the rug out from under the campaign. By making selective concessions to the activists, Nestle succeeded in negotiating an end to the boycott. Later, activists were dismayed to discover that its infant formula marketing practices are continuing with only token changes. Third world children continue to die, but today their plight receives little attention, and activists have found that a boycott, once terminated, is not easily turned back on.”

Playing to Win-Win

So this is serious. Let’s go through it again and reflect upon how recent developments in the animal movement might map onto the PR industry playbook as summarized by Stauber and Rampton.

First identify the ‘radicals’ who are unwilling to compromise and who are demanding fundamental changes to redress the problem at hand.

When we switch from asking people to eliminate or reduce their consumption of animal products, to publicly endorsing “humane” animal products, are we not, in effect, calling off our own boycott?

Think about it. “A boycott, once terminated, is not easily turned back on.”

Hypothetically, that could be anyone who believes animals have rights, that exploit them is wrong, and that the solution is encouraging people to boycott all animal products, with a long term goal of abolishing the property status of animals. We’re not talking about radical tactics, but radical ideas. We’re talking about community educators, amateur investigators, protesters, attorneys, bloggers, artists, nurses, animal rescuers, merchants, writers, leafleeters, clergyfolk, dieticians, former farmers, humane educators, college students, sanctuary workers, yoga instructors, teenagers, musicians, doctors, and all kinds of everyday activists who practice veganism as an expression of Gandhian nonviolence, as a refusal to cooperate in any way with those profiting from the oppression of others.

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What does this troubling scenario have to do with animal advocates and our movement to end the exploitation of sentient beings? Well, it turns out the first time Stauber and Rampton wrote about MBD, it was in reference to a presenta- tion given by Ronald Duchin—the “Dean” of MBD—to none other than the Cultivators’ Association (see page 66 of Toxic Sludge is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry). The year was 1991, and Duchin, a graduate of the Army War College and former special assistant to the Secretary of Defense, was outlining the most effective strategy for “dealing with” the meat industry’s biggest irritant: us.

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Stauber and Rampton’s work is hardly based on armchair theorizing. Rather, it is derived from exhaustive study of the history of real-life grassroots movements that, like the animal movement, have attempted to confront industry abuse. They studied, for example, how the MBD PR firm grew out of a successful campaign to neutralize a massive boycott of the Nestlé corporation. In the late 70s, Nestlé was attempting to persuade milk buyers of third world countries to use synthetic infant formula instead of breast-feeding their babies. “Inactivists lore,” note Stauber and Rampton, “this boycott was touted as a major victory, but in the corporate world it is understood that industry really won the day by pulling the rug out from under the campaign. By making selective concessions to the activists, Nestlé succeeded in negotiating an end to the boycott.”

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Derwin, at Woodstock Farm Animal Sanctuary. Photo by Wiebke Wichell, courtesy of www.flickr.com/photos/inkedyogachick

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large multi-million dollar animal protection organizations with significant farmed animal campaigns.

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Hypothetically, this could be an offer made by someone like John Mackey, CEO of Whole Foods, one of the nation’s leading retailers of both meat and organic produce, to partner with animal advocates and meat industry “visionaries” to develop new standards for the “human” exploitation of animals. However, in order to participate, the “realists” must de facto contradict their own position by ceasing their open advocacy for veganism and no longer the right approach.

Next, go with the realists to the ‘idealists’ who have learned about the problem through the work of the radicals. Convince the idealists that a‘win win solution tendered by the realists is best for the community as a whole.

Hypothetically, these could be the small, idealistic organizations that are convinced to join the larger organizations endorsing the “human” standards mini-revolution. Together, they persuade frontline educators and citizen activists that solely advocating for veganism is no longer the right approach.

Activists must now simultaneously support “human” meat and “cage-free” eggs as a purported transitional step for people who won’t give up consuming animal products today. To do otherwise, it is argued, is tantamount to abandoning billions of animals now trapped in the existing meat industry.

Confronted with this seeming “contradiction,” large numbers of movement idealists shift their views and begin adopting some of the “realists’ position, a textbook application of Duchin’s turn-idealists-into-realists formula. This new “realism” includes public advocacy of non-vegan behavior—cruelty to “human” animals along with public advocacy of vegan behavior—boycotting of all animal products. Evidently, these newly transformed idealists even begin to refer to themselves as “realists,” and to those who hold on to their own former values for non-participation as “purists” and “absolutists,” sometimes even “selfish” or “self-righteous” in their “moral rigidity.”

Meat ing People Where They Are

It is striking, and deeply troubling, how this new way of thinking of ourselves and our advocacy conform so perfectly to Mr. Duchin’s roadmap for our future, and how it so precisely echoes the “dilemma” of how the deed will be done—conditions, treatment, standards and regulation.

This new framework, public calls by animal advocates for the boycott of all animal products, for nonparticipation in exploitation, have no place. Such talk is now an embarrassment for the participating animal groups, and a joke for the meat industry people. Such talk is now relegated to the realm of “radicalism.”

Let us not be too quick to assume that others are not ready to absorb the full force of truths we ourselves hold as self-evident.

Whole Foods’ John Mackey, who talks of how he would lose his position as CEO, the very basis of his ability to make a difference, were he to impose his personal values and deny his customers the opportunity to purchase a wide variety of animal products. Therefore, given his concern for animals, Mackey is morally obligated to do what he needs to do in order to maintain his position at the top, and to use the power he has to create a newlined “animal compassion” meat products, while working with participating animal groups to convince the public to buy them—thus, in Mackey’s own words, “pioneering an entirely new way for people to relate to farm animals, with the animals’ welfare becoming the most important goal.”

Likewise, some leaders of participating animal groups might reason that, were they to “impose” veganism and the abolition of animal exploitation on the public by refusing to offer them an approved “human” animal product alternative, they too would lose the membership and members that they believe are the basis of their ability to make a difference. Rather, in order to have clout and credibility with the widest range of funders, legislators, journalists and other “mainstream” people, they need to “meet people where they are” and offer “options.”

They seem to believe that they are, in fact, morally obligated to work with industry to develop and market “human” animal products—alongside public advocacy for veganism. An approach that they claim will help the public and the meat industry transition away from the most egregious forms of animal torture.

In order to see where this new “meet people where they are” approach is leading animal products—alongside public advocacy of vegan behavior—boycotting of all animal products. Evidently, these newly transformed idealists even begin to refer to themselves as “realists,” and to those who hold on to their own former values for non-participation as “purists” and “absolutists,” sometimes even “selfish” or “self-righteous” in their “moral rigidity.”

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It is striking, and deeply troubling, how this new way of thinking of ourselves and our advocacy conform so perfectly to Mr. Duchin’s roadmap for our future, and how it so precisely echoes the “dilemma” of ethics and social justice—it is now about consumer choice. The selling of meat is no longer about commodification, exploitation and profits—it is now about animal welfare. Veganism is no longer a moral imperative—it’s now a charmingly eccent- tric lifestyle choice.

Bringing us to Stauber and Rampton’s finale: Once this has been accomplished, the ‘radicals’ can be shut out as extremists, the PR fix is in, and the deal can be touted in the media to make the corporation and its ‘moderate’ nonprofit partners look heroic for solving the problem. Result: industry may have to make some smaller or temporary concessions, but the fundamental concerns raised by the ‘radicals’ are swept aside.

The Animal Welfare Industrial Complex

Whether our movement came to its present state in whole or in part through PR industry machinations, or if it is simply self-destructing of its own accord, we should be shocked and deeply concerned that the structure of today’s animal movement so closely resembles the vision of moral compromise, division and debilitation put forth by a meat industry PR consultant so many years ago. However it was accomplished, it is undeniable that the firewall of linguistic precision, critical thought and philosophical integrity needed to protect our movement from such degradation has been all but torn down.

It’s troubling to think about how things could have gone this far so fast, but it stands to reason that Mr. Duchin and his ilk haven’t been twiddling their thumbs for the past 15 years. As animal organizations and the meat industry co-mingle their affairs in an increasingly bewildering tangle, their language, values, interests and goals are becoming indistinguishable, creating a kind of “animal welfare industrial com- plex” in which the “players”—dominant figures of the industry and the corporate animal movement—will regularly meet in private to negotiate the price of public concern for animal suffering.

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Now, through the combined efforts of industry and the participating animal organizations, the "reasonable" person’s response to being made aware of the plight of farmed animals becomes not veganism, not reduction of meat, dairy and egg consumption, but rather, the purchase of "humanely" animal products.

Simultaneously, the focus of public dialogue irrevocably shifts from the questionable morality of using and killing animals, to an elaborate, endless wrangle over how the deed will be done—conditions, treatment, standards and regulation.

In this new framework, public calls by animal advocates for the boycott of all animal products, for nonparticipation in exploitation, have no place. Such talk is now an embarrassment for the participating animal groups, and a joke for the meat industry people. Such talk is now relegated to the realm of "radicalism."

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Madhav Gandhi. Image: © Bettmann/CORBIS

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go a pocketful of “partial victories” as well as
a few gratitudes like conference sponsor-
ships and high profile publicity opportuni-
ties. By making the process so orderly and
timely, without ever letting down to a few key
players with an unspoken understanding of
the arrangement, all parties involved will
receive a regular supply of what they need to
keep growing at a rapid clip. Moreover.
More customers/members. More political
connections. More ability to dictate the
terms of public discourse.

Recently, I was hypothesizing that animal welfare industrial complex fit
comfortably into the Orwellian culture of our post-911 society, where civil rights and
the rule of law are being systematically under-
mined in the name of protecting our “free-
dom.” Central to it all is our acceptance of
the doctrine of “necessary evil,” which leads us
to a false perception of a rule of law system
absolutely necessary if we are to accomplish
in a worldwide network of secret prisons,
thousands of people suspected, but not
necessary evil, there is nothing fundamen-
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Although the C.I.A. has faced criticism over
the use of harsh techniques, one senior intelli-
gen official said detainees had not been misin-
treated. They were given dental and
vision care as well as the Koran, prayer rags
tag clocks to schedule prayers, the official
said. They were even given reading material,
DVDs and access to exercise equipment.

This is not usual from domelitc caged pets.
These animals enjoy a very full life, with
plenty of space and light, inside suitable
buildings over winter and outside at pasture
for the rest of the year, a varied diet, and the
care of a foster cow when available.

Yes, poor orphaned calves destined for
the butcher’s knife are now going to be
lovingly nurtured by a “foster mom”
before their lives are prematurely snuffed
out. And lest anyone feel bad about the
breeders of the baby cows’ existence, the
industry helpfully points out that “with
a life span of six months, they live twice
as long as the slowest growing chicken, they have the same life-span as
a good organic pig, and longer than many
organic lamb.”

In this era, to be a vegan advocate, to
correctly encourage others to boycott
participation in the exploitation of
animals, one must do so much more than
expose people to the injustice of animal
exploitation, help them overcome the force
of their own personal habits, resist family
and societal pressure, and see through the
outrageous deceptions of the meat indus-
try. It is true, one must use their fallacy of “humane” happy meat products
enthusiastically endorsed, promoted and
in some cases even developed by a number
of organizations that are, essentially, the
public face of animal advocacy.

If abolition of exploitation is our
ultimate goal, as is so often claimed, and
the veganism is the single most powerful
personal expression of opposition to
animal exploitation, why on earth would
any animal organization participate in
making the job of vegan activists and
educators so much harder?

Already, sanctuary workers, educators
and frontline vegan activists are reporting
that too many people are now coming
fronted with the reality of farmed animal
exploitation, increasingly indicate that
they will express their concern for farmed
animals in large or small, not by boycotting
the consumption of animal products, but
by purchasing animal products marketed as
“humane.” Whole Foods, not surprisingly,
is one of the leaders of this new
movement.

“Humane” animal products appear to
be a nearly perfect antidote to the inner
conflict brought about by awareness of
the exploitation of animals. But sadly, by
trading a sacred truth for a clever lie, “humane” labels
add to the common pool of creativity and
truth for a clever lie, “humane” labels
add to the common pool of creativity and
groups. Each person who joins in signals
powerful, and well suits the dignity of the cause.
Less inspired and less committed are the ones who have
achieved theتحول to it all is our acceptance of
the doctrine of “necessary evil,” which leads us
to a false perception of a rule of law system
absolutely necessary if we are to accomplish
in a worldwide network of secret prisons,
thousands of people suspected, but not
necessary evil, there is nothing fundamen-
tably into the Orwellian culture of our
animal welfare industrial complex fit com-
fortably into the Orwellian culture of our

Although the C.I.A. has faced criticism over
the use of harsh techniques, one senior intelli-
gen official said detainees had not been misin-
treated. They were given dental and
vision care as well as the Koran, prayer rags
tag clocks to schedule prayers, the official
said. They were even given reading material,
DVDs and access to exercise equipment.

This is not usual from domelitc caged pets.
These animals enjoy a very full life, with
plenty of space and light, inside suitable
buildings over winter and outside at pasture
for the rest of the year, a varied diet, and the
care of a foster cow when available.

Yes, poor orphaned calves destined for
the butcher’s knife are now going to be
lovingly nurtured by a “foster mom”
before their lives are prematurely snuffed
out. And lest anyone feel bad about the
breeders of the baby cows’ existence, the
industry helpfully points out that “with
a life span of six months, they live twice
as long as the slowest growing chicken, they have the same life-span as
a good organic pig, and longer than many
organic lamb.”

In this era, to be a vegan advocate, to
correctly encourage others to boycott
participation in the exploitation of
animals, one must do so much more than
expose people to the injustice of animal
exploitation, help them overcome the force
of their own personal habits, resist family
and societal pressure, and see through the
outrageous deceptions of the meat indus-
try. It is true, one must use their fallacy of “humane” happy meat products
enthusiastically endorsed, promoted and
in some cases even developed by a number
of organizations that are, essentially, the
public face of animal advocacy.

If abolition of exploitation is our
ultimate goal, as is so often claimed, and
the veganism is the single most powerful
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animal exploitation, why on earth would
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Invasion of the Movement Snatchers

Continued from page 21

Although the C.I.A. has faced criticism over the use of harsh techniques, one former intelligence official said detainees had not been mistreated. They were given dental and vision care as well as the Koran, prayer rugs and clocks to schedule prayers, the official said. They were also given reading material, DVDs and access to exercise equipment.

This is not real from domly lit crowded pens. These animals enjoy a very full life, with plenty of space and light, inside suitable buildings over winter and outside at pasture for the rest of the year, a varied diet, and the care of a foster cow when available.

Yes, poor orphaned calves destined for the butcher’s knife are now going to be lovingly nurtured by a “foster mom” before their lives are prematurely snuffed out. And lest anyone feel bad about the brevity of the baby cows’ existence, the industry helpfully points out that “with a life span of six months, they live twice as long as even the slowest growing chicken, they have the same life span as a good organic pig, and longer than many organic lamb.”

So those who consume the flesh of these cute calves are actually helping to solve an “animal welfare problem.” By eating the unwanted male offspring of dairy cows, we will spare these unlucky newborns from a merely repugnant alternative—a shorter and more brutal life in a crate. One cannot help but recall the quote attributed to an army lieutenant during the Vietnam War: “We had to destroy the village in order to save it.”

According to a newspaper report, nine days after the launch of this “Good Meat” campaign, veal sales at one New York supermarket chain rose 45 percent. Notably, the campaign’s website features the endorsement and logo of a large, well-known European animal advocacy organization whose name begins with the word “compassion.”

Hence, a decades-long boycott becomes good to eat veal?

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