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Interview with Charles Patterson

THE INTERVIEW

Charles Patterson

Interviewer: Richard Schwartz

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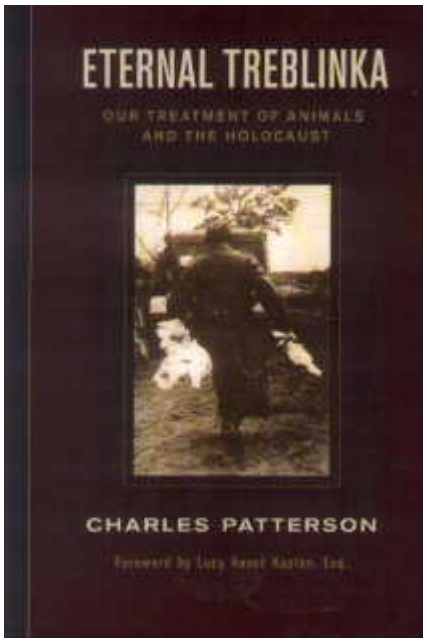
(A history scholar and teacher, who in his childhood lost his father fighting the Nazis in Europe, Charles Patterson was deeply moved by the plight of the victims of Nazi atrocities in Germany. But it was much later, he says, that he saw a parallel between modern society's exploitation and slaughter of animals and the Holocaust, which prompted him to write Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust.

His book Eternal Treblinka (Lantern Books, 2002), won rave reviews in our journal. Naturally we couldn't contain our desire to know more about him. We at the "Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Book Reviews" approached him for an online interview and he graciously agreed. The interview was conducted for well over a month by Biman Basu. Some excerpts....

The book by Patterson. Click on the book to go to the main page of its reviews



Qu.1. What prompted you to take up such a topic for the book?

Ans. It took a long time for me to recognize the parallels between the Nazi Holocaust and the exploitation and slaughter of animals. The seeds of my interest in World War II and the Holocaust were no doubt planted when I was a boy. My father, whom I never got to know, left home to fight the Nazis in Europe but never returned. Only much later in my life did I realize that my intense interest in World War II and the Holocaust may have been my way of looking for my dead father and feeling connected to him.

While doing my doctoral studies in religion and history at Columbia University in New York City, I made friends with a German Jewish refugee who had been traumatized by her experience living as a teenage girl in Nazi Germany for six years. Her story moved me deeply, so I read extensively and took courses about the Holocaust to learn more.

Later when I became a history teacher and looked for, but could not find, a book on the Holocaust and its background suitable for my students, I wrote my first book - *Anti-Semitism: The Road to the Holocaust and Beyond* - to fill the gap. The summer after its publication I attended the Yad Vashem Institute for Holocaust Education in Jerusalem. Back in the United States, I became a reviewer of books and films for *Martyrdom and Resistance*, the world's oldest periodical devoted to the Holocaust, now published by the International Society of Yad Vashem.

My awareness of the scope of modern society's exploitation and slaughter of animals has been a much more recent development. I grew up and spent most of my adult life oblivious to the extent to which human society is built on institutionalised violence against animals. For a long time it never occurred to me to challenge or even question it. The late AIDS and animal activist Steven Simmons described the attitude behind animal exploitation as follows: "Animals are innocent casualties of the world view that asserts that some lives are more valuable than others, that the powerful are entitled to exploit the powerless, and that the weak must be sacrificed for the greater good." Once I realized this was the same attitude behind the Holocaust, I began to see the connections that are the subject of *Eternal Treblinka*.

Charles Patterson



A history scholar and teacher, who in his childhood lost his father fighting the Nazis in Europe, Charles Patterson was deeply moved by the plight of the victims of Nazi atrocities in Germany. But it was much later, he says, that he saw a parallel between modern society's exploitation and slaughter of animals and the Holocaust, which prompted him to write *Eternal Treblinka*. This e-interview was conducted by Biman Basu.

Qu.2. When you quote Steven Simmons, don't you think that the same rule applies throughout the animal kingdom - that the weak ones are sacrificed by those more powerful, mainly for food? After all, carnivores kill and eat weaker animals. What's wrong if we humans do the same?

Ans. The natural world is certainly a dangerous place for animals, the more so now that the human master species is invading their habitats to exploit and kill them all around the world. However, unlike predatory carnivores who are programmed to behave the way they do in order to survive, human beings have much more of a choice. We can choose between good and evil, kindness and cruelty, and we have a much wider range of foods to choose from (at least the lucky ones do). People who look at violence in the animal kingdom and see there a justification for human violence tend to see terror and cruelty everywhere they look - everywhere except in their own hearts.

Take the example of Adolf Hitler. Since he believed that might makes right and the strong deserve to inherit the earth, he had utter contempt for the vegetarian non-violent philosophy and ridiculed Gandhi. Since his most basic belief was that nature is ruled by the law of struggle, he was a big fan of predatory animals. He wanted young Germans to model themselves after them so they could be brutal, authoritarian, fearless, and cruel ("The youth that will grow up in my fortresses will frighten the world."). He did not want them to be weak or gentle or compassionate. "The light of the free, marvellous beast of prey must once again shine from their eyes," he said. "I want my youth to be strong and beautiful."

Qu.3. Did you have any first hand experience of a German concentration camp, or are your views based only on the experience of a few survivors?

Ans. Dachau, the first German concentration camp, was opened before I was born, so I was only a small American boy living in New Britain, Connecticut, when the Germans were exterminating Jews, Gypsies, and other people whom they considered "sub-human." If you're asking if I ever personally witnessed Nazi atrocities or a German concentration camp, the answer is no. I have never been inside a slaughterhouse either.

> *...No, I don't agree with the view that what happened in Nazi Germany was not normal human behaviour but the result of the aberrant behaviour of a small group of powerful individuals...As a historian, I see human aggression, arrogance, violence, and conflict as very much at the core of human history. It is more "normal" than most of us would like to admit...*

Qu.4. What made you think that human treatment of animals could be linked to the bestial treatment of the inmates of Hitler's extermination camps?

Ans. That's an interesting way the question is phrased: our treatment of animals is "human" (sounds like "humane"), while the Nazi treatment of their victims was "bestial" (animal-like). Try rephrasing the question by reversing the adjectives: "What made you think that our bestial treatment of animals could be linked to the human treatment of the inmates of Hitler's extermination camps?"

To answer your question (however it's phrased): the parallels between the exploitation and slaughter of animals and the exploitation and slaughter of people are obvious, although I must confess that it took me many years to see them.

The modern industrialized slaughter of humans and animals began with the killing animals in Chicago slaughterhouses in the early 20th-century America. In his memoir the industrialist Henry Ford wrote that he got his idea for the assembly-line production that he used to manufacture his automobiles from a visit he made to a Chicago slaughterhouse as a young man. There he observed and admired the efficient assembly-line way the animals were slaughtered and cut up into pieces of meat for human consumption.

Ford's anti-Semitism and business success made him highly popular in Nazi Germany. Hitler called him his "hero" and spread his anti-Semitic publications throughout Germany. The assembly-line method that processed human beings at the German death camps was as efficient and effective as the assembly-line method of processing animals had been at American slaughterhouses. In my book I devote a chapter (Chap. 5) to a discussion of the similar features of American and German killing centres.

Qu.5. Would you agree that hunting for food has been a normal part of human life since time immemorial and that the 'assembly-line' slaughter of animals practised in some countries today is only a means of meeting the increased demands?

Biman Basu - The interviewer



Biman Basu, the interviewer has written over 15 books, most of which have been translated in several languages. He has been associated with science writing for more than four decades. He is one of India's star interviewers having interviewed such eminent scientists as Herman Bondi, Roger Penrose, and Nobel laureates Severo Ochoa, and George Porter. He has been associated with *Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Book Reviews* since its inception.

Ans. No comments.

Qu.6. Would you agree that what happened in Nazi Germany was not normal human behaviour but the result of the aberrant behaviour of a small group of powerful individuals?

Ans. No, I don't agree. Unfortunately, war, genocide, and mass murder are "normal human behaviour" because they happen with such regularity. You can look at history either as periods of peace interrupted by war or as periods of war, conflict, and violence interrupted by lulls and intermissions. As a historian, I see human aggression, arrogance, violence, and conflict as very much at the core of human history. It is more "normal" than most of us would like to admit because we humans find it difficult to give up certain illusions about ourselves. We shrink from looking squarely at the truth about who we are and what we do because we're afraid it might upset us.

The evidence of history shows what cruel and monstrous deeds human beings are capable of, both collectively and as individuals. That is why for me the Holocaust was not merely "the aberrant behaviour of a small group of powerful individuals." Rather it was a vividly painful demonstration

of what we are capable of. Mega-crimes of genocidal dimensions are always lurking under the surface of human history waiting to happen because it's happening all the time to the animals we victimize. The Yiddish writer and Nobel Laureate, Isaac Bashevis Singer, wrote that when it comes to animals, we're all Nazis. For the animals it's an "eternal Treblinka."

Qu.7. Since humans still slaughter animals for food and use animals for a variety of scientific experiments, do you think what happened in Nazi Germany can happen again?

Ans. Definitely. The industrialized mass killing of innocent beings did not end in 1945; it merely shifted back to the "eternal" exploitation and slaughter of animals, which serves as the model and impetus for human oppression and violence. As long as there are slaughterhouses, the potential for Treblinka and Auschwitz will always be present. As the Jewish German philosopher Theodor Adorno said: "Auschwitz begins whenever someone looks at a slaughterhouse and thinks: they're only animals."

> *...I doubt if vegetarianism could eliminate human violence, but hopefully it can help reduce it. As long as we condone the slaughter of animals on the assumption that the powerful (us) are entitled to exploit the powerless (them), we will continue to be destructive and violent toward each other...*

Qu.8. Do you think non-vegetarianism has something to do with human violence against humans?

Ans. I do. Institutionalised cruelty against animals fuels the atrocities that people inflict on each other by causing the hardness of heart that makes them possible. That's really the thesis of my book: first humans exploit and slaughter animals; then they treat other people like animals and do the same to them. I have a chapter in my book (Chap. 2) about how vilifying people as animals - rats, pigs, dogs, apes, vermin, beasts, etc. - has always been a prelude to their exploitation and destruction.

Qu.9. In your opinion, can vegetarianism eliminate human violence?

Ans. I doubt it, but hopefully it can help reduce it. As long as we condone the slaughter of animals on the assumption that the powerful (us) are entitled to exploit the powerless (them), we will continue to be destructive and violent toward each other. Adolf Hitler claimed, "He who does not possess power loses the right to life." It's ironical that although he lost the war, his fascist view has emerged triumphant. Human civilization operates on the assumption that since cows, sheep, pigs, chickens, and other animals cannot defend themselves, they do not have the right to live. Hence, we think we are free to do with them whatever we want. Certainly the most important way for us to help animals is not to eat them. That's the least any of us can do - keep the slaughterhouse out of our mouth.

This interview at AFC (Animal Friends Croatia).

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Interview by Richard Schwartz, Ph.D

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Interviews - Collective Index (Appearing in *Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology*)

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Interview appearing in next issue (Volume 2, Number 2, July - December 2003)

Interview with Margaret Stark, in *Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology (sister publication)* (Volume 3, Number 2, July - December 2002)

-Editor-in-Chief