On May 16, 2011 the Food Network’s television program *Top Chef Canada* drew international condemnation for its “French Feast” episode, which required contestants to create a meal using the flesh of horses. While *CBC News* predictably reported “a giant stew of controversy,” the *Globe and Mail* noted that the issue was being hotly debated on CNN, the Huffington Post and Facebook. The Food Network responded to calls for a boycott with claims that it was “embracing different food cultures in our programming” and food writers were trotted out to praise the delicious taste of horse flesh.

Lauren Scott, a representative of Humane Society International/Canada called the Food Network’s choice to include horse flesh “reckless and offensive” and pointed out:

> The slaughter of horses for human consumption is inherently cruel and is a complete betrayal of these intelligent, sensitive animals. Many of the horses who end up slaughtered for food are raised as companion animals and are condemned to this horrific end following a lifetime of service to people.

Scott’s observations are accurate. Cashing in on legislation that shut down horse slaughter operations in the US, Canada allows horses to be transported for days on end in crowded trucks, deprived of food and water, and then driven by whips and electric shocks into filthy slaughterhouses where the terrified animals struggle in vain to escape their fate, meaning that most are not killed “humanely,” as the industry claims, by a swift and accurate shot to the head from a captive-bolt pistol but rather that they are wounded repeatedly, turning the process into as gruesome and squalid an ordeal as can be imagined.

A few examples of readers’ comments taken from the CBC page that reported the story demonstrate the range of inchoate and confused thinking that surrounded the issue. One reader, Comedyflyer, stated:
One of the symbols of Canada is a Mountie SITTING on a black horse....not eating a black horse, nor is the Mountie handing out HORSE-BURGERS! My culture does not eat horses and while I respect other cultures I would like mine respected as well! Cultures based on cruelty should be in the history books …

Here, nonhuman animals become symbols of national identity and cultural markers. Comedyflyer rejects the killing and consumption of certain animals as “cruelty” to be rejected while the killing and consumption of other animals seems to be acceptable. Indeed, other commentators, such as rickyp proclaimed their right to kill and consume any animal and denounced compassion towards animals as interference with personal freedom:

Here we go again, upsetting the animal lovers again!! Deciding for me, what is acceptable and what is not. I WILL EAT WHAT I WANT! WHEN I WANT! AND HOW I WANT!

While some readers did note that other animals such as pigs, chickens and cows also suffer when they are used for human consumption, that these animals were also worthy of consideration and that only a diet free from animal products could be considered ethical, the very idea that we should reconsider our treatment of other animals incensed a number of readers, exemplified by Evilmidnightbomber:

There is a place in this world for all of nature's creatures...right next to the side of fries and house salad. We are meat eaters, we are the top of the food chain, we got the opposable thumbs first, deal with it.

Of course, all forums that provide readers with opportunities to comment anonymously and without repercussion are invitations for loutishness but controversies about animals as food draw particularly volatile responses. The intensity of these responses, whether in defense of the animals or of their continued exploitation at our hands, indicates the ambivalence and anxiety that surrounds our relationships with the other sentient beings we dominate. Our entire society is based upon the exploitation of animals, whether for food, clothing, objects of research or tools for entertainment, but we increasingly recognize that there is something fundamentally wrong about our use of these individuals. Indeed, this is the central ethical and philosophical issue of our time.

This special issue of the Brock Review takes up some aspects of our relationships with nonhuman animals. While there is now a growing body of work addressing these questions in cognitive ethology, literature, philosophy and sociology, little attention has been directed to them in the field of political science, with the exception of Robert Garner. This is a telling omission, since our relations with nonhuman animals are fundamentally political, involving matters of power,
domination and control and are essential to the economic structure of our society. Here, in “Animal Liberation: A View from Political Science,” Paul Hamilton stakes out some of the broad routes that political scientists might follow into such discussions, while also addressing some of the internal politics of the animal protection movement, namely the contentious rights/welfare debate. Hamilton characterizes this as a false dichotomy, arguing that advances in animal welfare contribute to a growing greater consideration for animals generally. However, “animal welfare” is a very slippery term and, indeed, the same industries that are based upon the mass killing of animals can, with no apparent sense of irony, also claim to have the “welfare” of these animals as their highest priority. Nevertheless, Hamilton argues that welfare campaigns are important for creating fundamental changes in social consciousness and behaviour. Based on this understanding, for example, it would be ethically consistent for animal advocates, including abolitionists, to oppose such monstrosities as Canada’s horse slaughter industry, not because of any special status and consideration given to horses but because it is cruel and morally wrong to kill healthy animals and opposing the slaughter of horses logically leads to questions about the killing of other animals.

However, other so-called advances in animal welfare are questionable. In “Mustangs and Prisoners: Narratives of Capture and Domestication,” Natalie Hansen discusses mustang-prisoner training programs in the USA that match individual male prison inmates with wild horses captured from federal land. Seen as competitors for grazing land by livestock owners, these horses were regularly captured and sold to slaughterhouses before the 1971 passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act gave them some protection. However, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) still captures large numbers of these animals and keeps them imprisoned in its facilities. The BLM began programs which allow the public to purchase horses which have been tamed and the mustang-prisoner training initiative was started as a means to facilitate the sale of these horses. The programs have been seen as a benefit to humans and horses, as angry, aggressive men learn to use other techniques of control and the horses are sold to new homes. However, Hansen suggests that they may be less advantageous to both. Most obviously, the horses lose their autonomy and self-determination and the “bond of trust” celebrated in these programs is essentially a reinforcement of the idea of human domination over other animals. Both the humans and the horses are captives who must adapt to the conditions of their imprisonment to survive. At the root, however, are the unexamined structural and institutional problems that produced an “overpopulation” of wild horses in the first place.
In her essay “How Happy is Your Meat? Confronting (Dis)connectedness in the ‘Alternative’ Meat Industry,” Kathryn Gillespie looks at another recent phenomenon frequently presented as an animal welfare advance, that of “humanely” produced meat and critically examines the proposal that these various arrangements will allow consumers to obtain animal flesh in ethical ways. As she points out, this is simply another form of doublespeak that obscures the process of killing individual sentient beings and allows consumers to remain disconnected from these violent actions. While the Mobile Slaughter Units now used by some farmers to kill animals on their own property do offer increased “animal welfare” by eliminating the horrors of long distance transport to regular slaughterhouses, the techniques of killing animals remain essentially the same. The basic fact of killing is obscured by a romanticized discourse about family farms. Gillespie also examines the discourses of connectedness in marketing propaganda, as industries use terms such as “free range,” “organic,” “grass-fed” or “natural” to promote the idea that farmed animals live happy lives, ignoring the essential fact that all of them are killed and dismembered. Many of these terms are broad and misleading and not subject to any real standards, so there is no guarantee that these animals are treated any better than those raised in normal factory farm conditions. The picturesque images of rustic tranquility and tradition provide reassuring myths to mollify customers, who pay premium prices to salve their consciences. Rather than a humane alternative, what these represent is a form of “silent collusion” between producers and consumers, a form of deliberate ignorance that allows consumers to avoid examining their complicity.

My own essay, “The Myth of Animal Rights Terrorism” also deals with the politics of animal rights by looking at industry-backed efforts to marginalize and demonize animal advocates as “terrorists.” Just as the tobacco industry and oil companies have purchased the services of public relations companies to denounce scientific evidence concerning cancer or global warming, so have animal exploitation industries hired their own propagandists to delegitimize their critics and portray them as dangerous threats to society. Industry propaganda not only presents the exploitation and killing of nonhuman animals as acceptable but it portrays compassionate people who seek to rescue these animals from institutionalized abuse as violent criminals. By exaggerating the danger of animal advocates and portraying themselves as victims, those who control factory farms and vivisection laboratories can draw attention away from the institutionalized atrocities they perpetrate. Police and private security companies also have a vested interest in showing that there is a proliferation of dangerous threats to society, necessitating their own existence and increased funding.
One of the most common techniques used to dismiss concern for other animals is to point out that human societies are beset by innumerable problems and to assert that we must solve these first before turning our attention to other species. However, as Patricia Denys argues here in her essay “Animals and Women as Meat,” the exploitation of nonhuman animals and of humans is frequently interconnected. Building on the work of Carol J. Adams, Denys points out that both nonhuman animals and women are regarded as consumable. Both are considered as meat and both are fragmented and sexualized in the bizarre and disturbing imagery of fast food advertising which frequently eroticizes murder and dismemberment and turns the suffering of animals into cartoonish jokes. In “Tied Oppressions: An analysis of how sexist imagery reinforces speciesist sentiment,” Carol Glasser also examines the connection between the exploitation of nonhuman animals and of women. Glasser sees both forms of oppression as being rooted in the same system of patriarchal domination. She points out that effective understanding and collaboration between social movements can be undermined by prioritization of one group’s agenda over the concerns of others. Glasser argues that just as women’s movements often ignore or even endorse the abuse and exploitation of animals (by serving animal flesh at fundraising events or supporting vivisection), some animal advocacy groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) continue to use sexist imagery to “sell” their campaigns and points out that not only is this imagery demeaning to women but it also undermines PETA’s own goals of attracting more support for animal advocacy.

The power of images is taken up by Angeles Espinaco-Virseda in the essay “One of Every Type.” This archival study of publications from the Hamburg Zoo suggests that while such institutions present themselves as educational institutions, their approach to classification and description of the animals they imprisoned undermined those objectives by presenting these individuals as “Types” representative of their species. Rather than conveying the complexity of nonhuman animals in their own natural environments, this approach reduced them not only to their physical bodies but to generic interchangeable objects and commodities. Espinaco-Virseda goes on to suggest that this reductive approach also weakens the conservationist claims of such institutions and, indeed, that the entire zoological mission is undermined by its own practices.

Images are also at the core of Victoria Haynes’ examination of “BC’s Representational Silviculture and the Negative Affect of the Pine Beetle Animal Story.” Anyone who has traveled in recent years through the interior of British Columbia will have noted the devastation of the province’s forests attributed to the Mountain Pine Beetle. Yet Haynes argues that these beetles play an important role in the normal ecological functioning of these forests by removing dying trees and...
allowing new growth to flourish. However, both human-caused climate change and inappropriate forest management policies have contributed to a situation where normal ecological controls no longer operate. Analysis of provincial government advertising on television and signage along the Coquihalla Highway as well as of the Mountain Pine Beetle exhibit in the Royal BC Museum reveals that the beetle is presented as the demonic villain while human agency is obscured.

While scholars in various disciplines have taken up these and other questions about our relationships with nonhuman animals, those involved with Critical Animal Studies at Brock University have emphasized the importance of seeing these relationships in terms of social justice and maintaining links between academic research and grassroots animal advocacy groups. The animal rights movement has a long and noble history, typically associated with other progressive movements for the improvement of life for humans, such as the anti-slavery movement, child protection, and women’s emancipation. With the inclusion of four interviews, this issue of the Brock Review also gives a nod to the great diversity of groups and individuals who are working outside academia to achieve improvements for animals.

Ronnie Lee is well-known in the animal rights movement as one of the founders of the Animal Liberation Front in England in the 1970s. Imprisoned repeatedly for his actions to rescue animals from abuse and exploitation, Ronnie Lee remains a hero in the movement and continues his animal advocacy work, vegan education and support for jailed activists.

Dr. Martin Balluch is one of Europe’s most prominent campaigners for animal rights. Abandoning his academic career, he became a fulltime activist and has achieved significant results in Austria, including constitutional protection for animals and legislation against battery cages, fur farms and circuses. In 2008, Dr. Balluch was at the centre of one of the most controversial legal cases in Europe when he was charged with involvement in criminal conspiracy for his advocacy work. Despite the obvious flaws in the case against him and other activists and the clear intention by the state and industries to manipulate the law to crack down on dissent, the case dragged on. In May 2011, a verdict of not guilty was recognized for all 13 defendants in the case. The court also added that the police had lied under oath, carried out illegal operations, and concealed evidence. The case is a key example of a dangerous trend in which civil rights are suppressed under the guise of combating “terrorism.”
Siew Te Wong is the founder of the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre in Malaysia. Like other wildlife in Malaysia, sun bears are under extreme threat from the destruction of their forest habitat as Malaysia intensifies palm oil production in vast plantations that now dominate that country. A biologist by profession, Wong has worked tirelessly to advocate for the bears and to create a sanctuary and rehabilitation centre that can offer them some hope of survival.

Dr. Jack Hallam has been a proponent for animals throughout his life and has financially supported many Canadian and international organizations. Now a retired octogenarian living on Salt Spring Island, he recently gave a large endowment to Brock University’s Department of Sociology. This endowment funds the Jack Hallam Animal Rights Award, which each year gives scholarships to two students registered in the Department’s Concentration in Critical Animal Studies. Dr. Hallam also contributed towards the “Thinking About Animals” conference held at Brock University on March 31 and April 1, 2011. Through his example and through his generosity, students at Brock will indeed be encouraged to think about animals in a more critical and compassionate way.

In different ways, each of these individuals has worked tirelessly to improve conditions for animals. Their activism provides an inspiration for us all.