

The social network

Last week I went to see, with great interest, the film *The Social Network*. Facebook is a global phenomenon with millions of users all over the world. It touches people of all ages, companies, cultural and social initiatives, artists, academics, politicians. Facebook is the equivalent –and by this I don't mean to undervalue it–, of the town promenade where people used to go to see and be seen. At the same time it is a business with a turnover that has made its creator the youngest multimillionaire in history –born in 1984, he is now 26. The film –based on the book by Ben Mezrich: *The Accidental Billionaires: the Founding of Facebook. A tale of Sex, Money, Genius and Betrayal* (2009)– tells the personal story of Mark Zuckerberg and how the idea of Facebook was born.

The film is set in February 2004 in the Harvard University campus; no doubt one of the places every academic peregrination should go through, to strengthen one's education, open up to new ideas and breath the climate of freedom, discipline and work: honest work. I am not idealizing what the film shows: it also reveals excesses, hazing and disorder. I'm referring to a climate of intellectual demand, where striving for excellence is the maxim that is passed from generation to generation.

The film shows us the buildings, traditions, and codes of conduct naturally required by the university community, and equally naturally transgressed. We witness the beginning of the search for a virtual network that satisfies the demand to know about the lives of others, the fellow students you come across in class, in bars and in libraries. In this environment the scriptwriter inserts a revealing scene regarding the social climate and the social forces dominant in Harvard six years ago. I'm referring to the scenes in which Eduardo Saverin, friend of Mark Zuckerberg and cofounder of Facebook –pompously named CFO in the modest beginnings of the network–, is accused of cruelty with animals. Without wishing to reveal the plot (which, in any case, is well known by the public), I would like to take a closer look at this episode that by no means is merely tangential to the story: on the contrary, it appears as an accusation that threatens to shatter further progress with the innovative idea very early on in the development of Facebook.

Eduardo Saverin had suffered various trials to earn his admission into one of the most prestigious fraternities in the campus. One of these initiation trials required that Eduardo carry a chicken in a cage everywhere he went, and in a tense moment he even fed her the chicken he himself was eating, thus forcing her to be a cannibal. The student Animal Welfare associations then formally accuse him before the academic authorities of cruel treatment of the chicken. The scandal that follows on campus is so serious, the reaction against animal cruelty so strong, that Eduardo, weighed down with responsibility, says (according to the script), that in Harvard it is better to be accused of robbery than of being cruel to an animal.

Surprising, is it not? Could we imagine a similar reaction in February-March 2004 in the hazing period on any Spanish campus? I'm afraid the answer is no. Where is the difference then? Are there in our universities student associations that defend animals, and with such clout in university life? I'm afraid the answer is no. Does cruelty toward animals generate such a strong negative reaction in people in Spain that they should prefer to be accused of robbery before being accused of cruelty toward a chicken? I'm afraid, again, the answer is no.

In order to provide a correct explanation for the chicken episode –which doesn't appear in the film by

chance—, we have to take one important thing into account. Harvard was the first University in the United States in which an Animal Law course was taught, in 1999. The professor who introduced the course in the prestigious Law School was Steven Wise [1], who’s academic work has gained worldwide recognition. Shortly after the creation of this course the [Harvard Law School Animal Legal Defense Fund](#) was established, which has been very influential not only within Harvard but also in Law Schools throughout the country, where one can now find similar associations that work “to develop state and federal strategic impact litigation and legislation to better the lives and legal status of animals”. In American Universities, therefore, a commitment –not only at the personal level but also at the institutional level– to animal protection and to strive to “better the lives and legal status of animals” with the instruments of the law.

Education is the key. It is important to sensitize society in favour of animals, but academic training is crucial to establish solid foundations, critical thought and the capacity to carry out effective action to improve animal protection. For this reason, this year we have launched a Postgraduate Degree in “Animals-Law-Society”, a pioneering effort in the Spanish university system that will provide the opportunity to improve the training of those who already work with, or in favour of, Animals, and it will also open career options to those who take an interest in Animals.

Incidentally, as an endnote I would like to point out that our website also has its place in Facebook ([derechoanimal.info](#)). We encourage our readers to be in touch with our activities through “The Social Network”.

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[1] A. Kolber, [Standing upright: the moral and legal standing of Humans and other Apes](#)