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La gran burrada

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Celebrations of patron saints cover the whole of Spain throughout the year, but they are always more frequent in the summer, and especially celebrations that never lack animals that are treated ‘as what they are – animals’.

This ‘non-reasoning’, a statement declared in the tone of absolute truth, is the response you get if you ask your neighbours or local authorities why animals are subjected to acts that produce stress at the minimum; they are treated as they are – animals. With this apparent logic, loaded with ignorance and insensitivity, acts are celebrated on our land that, with the announced title speaking for itself. I am specifically referring to “la gran burrada” celebrated in a town in Huesca, which entails the freeing of donkeys in an enclosed area for locals to ride them, and not necessarily just one on each. In recent years of crisis, this imaginative festival seems to have come to substitute the running of heifers that ended up being very expensive, so these festivals with cows, including those that don’t meet popular expectation, are indeed regulated with greater precision and demand, regarding the transport of the animals, the presence of medics, and the time in which they can allow crazed races through the town streets.

About this particular celebration, which raises increasingly insistent protest from animalist collectives, local sources shrug their shoulders or respond with the witless remark that donkeys are beasts of burden that are used to supporting weight, meaning that for them, mounting it bareback three or four at once is also civilised. Through the enclosure megaphone, in an attempt to exercise caution, it is announced that they will not get hurt. It is clear that the commotion alone produced when mounting the animal, holding on to what they can and ending up on the floor, if the poor animal manages to offload the weight, is the centre of an amusement in which the only one not enjoying itself is the animal. A donkey is not born to carry weight, nor to humiliatingly serve as an amusement for unoccupied people, even just once a year. Using them for such nonsense reveals a severe lack of knowledge on the nature of donkeys. One must find out whether there is a copy of ‘Plato and I’, by Nobel Award winner Juan Ramón Jiménez, in the municipal library, and if so, see how many times it has been taken out in recent years.

Aside from this, Aragon has, just like the rest of the Autonomous Communities, active animal protection legislation[2] that stipulates the prohibition of cruel, inappropriate or unnatural treatment of animals in shows in order to protect animal welfare. What is more, the articles expressly state that, not addressing bullfighting (sic), they don’t allow practices or shows used as an excuse for causing harm to animals. It is clear that the lack of clarity in the wording enables a loose interpretation, by which it can be argued that the show in question does not seek to directly harm animals, nor treat them unnaturally. In the case of donkeys, and that which seems to soften the conscience of organisers and supporters of its current legality, the ‘natural’ purpose of their species would be to carry

weight and tolerate tugs and the noise of the crowd in an area from which they cannot leave.

The EU is promoting great legislative debate to improve equid protection, among which are included donkeys and mules, as well as horses. There are many deficiencies in current Member State legislation that must be amended, and it is essential that a broad consensus is reached on how they can best be protected, according to scientific knowledge attained on their nature and needs and, as a minimum, encompassing them within a category of “sentient beings”, based on Art. 13 TFEU.[3] In many countries including our own, this opens the way for donkeys to be no longer treated with contempt, abuse and mistreatment.[4] It depends not only on the law, indeed, but also on social awareness, but I am persuaded that society increasingly rejects the abuse of animals in shows and this rejection is a great force, albeit silent, making way with no turning back.

One of the books that I read most as a child is “Memoires d’un âne” (memories of a donkey), written by the Countess of Ségur.[5] It is a little jewel of literature that has become difficult to find, including when rummaging in the old libraries that surround the Sorbonne. It tells the story of a donkey called Cadichon that suffers a thousand unexpected events, hunger, mistreatment and abandonment, until the children of a farmhouse take him to use him to pull a small wagon. This is a turn in his life and the start of a sensitisation process, not only of the children whose knowledge of the animal causes them not to hitch him as a beast of burden, but also of the neighbours that had indifferently watched the cruelty that, previously and in sight of the whole town, this animal had been subjected to.

This is clearly an example of literature with moral background, typical of the 19th century, reflecting customs and the vision of a part of French society that had already motivated writers like Voltaire towards the defence of animals in the 18th century, but also shows that consideration and respect for animals is not only a question of laws, but of attitudes and social habits, which in French society have always been a distinctive sign in favour of animals. I ask myself whether here in Spain in the 21st century we must continue to amuse ourselves at the cost of animals.

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[1] The Spanish Word *burrada* can be translated both to mean a *herd of donkeys*, and *nonsense*, or *drivel*, meaning that the name of this festival can be understood, when literally translated, both as *the great herd of donkeys*, and *the great nonsense* [translator’s edit]

[2] [Ley 11/2003 de 19 de marzo, de Protección Animal en la Comunidad Autónoma de Aragón](#), que dispone en el apartado VIII: "La Ley establece igualmente las limitaciones y prohibiciones necesarias para evitar en un espectáculo con animales el trato cruel, inadecuado o antinatural para con los animales, protegiéndose así tanto el bienestar de los animales como a los propios espectadores.... se establecen reglas y limitaciones que tratan de proteger al animal cuando las prácticas que pueden producirse no tengan conexión con la tradicionales 'fiesta de los toros', sino que más bien ello

pueda emplearse como excusa para causar daños a los animales."

[3] Art. 13 of the TFUE, called the Treaty of Lisbon (<http://www.boe.es/doue/2010/083/Z00047-00199.pdf>), which imposes on Member States the obligation to treat animals as 'sentient beings' in domestic legislation, especially in relation to agriculture, farming, experimentation and shows. Vid. Giménez-Candela, T., [Seres sintientes](#); [Los cocodrilos también lloran](#).

[4] Vid. [the news that we published in the monthly legislative Bulletin](#), referring to the beating inflicted on the donkey "Capitán", presumably by children from a school in Almería, from which the little donkey slowly recovered.

[5] Comtesse de Ségur, *Les Mémoires d'un âne* (Paris 1965. Ed. Jean-Jacques Pauvert. édition illustrée de 75 vignettes). The book was edited for the first time in 1860, in a collection from the editorial Hachette called "Bibliothèque rose illustrée". Since then, private editions have been made (such as the one I've cited) and certain additions that come with works by the writer, like "Oeuvres de la Comtesse de Ségur" which appeared in Paris in 1990.