

Critical Theory and Animal Liberation

John Sanbonmatsu (Ed) (2011) *Critical Theory and Animal Liberation*. Rowan and Littlefield.

Reviewed by Steve Romanin¹

“Critical Theory and Animal Liberation”, edited by John Sanbonmatsu knits together a wide range of intersectional and interdisciplinary voices from across the spectrum of Critical Animal Studies. Nuanced and multifaceted, this text succeeds in applying critical perspectives in political and social thought to the problem of our relationship with other animals. In doing so, it articulates a way forward in both the “left” political tradition (which has hitherto failed to give animals much serious consideration) and the animal liberation movement (which has remained largely outside wider anti-capitalist political struggles).

Sanbonmatsu’s introduction is beautifully crafted, beginning with a brief, albeit vivid exploration of the problem of animal oppression. He takes special note of the intersections of oppression between both human and nonhuman animals and makes clear his view that tackling these interrelated problems requires a renewed socialist project – one that includes, within the sphere of political and hence moral consideration, the interests of other animals. His call is direct and uncompromising and sets up both the tone and goals of the chapters that follow.

Central to this purpose of this text is the reinterpretation and reconfiguring of both classical and contemporary Marxist theories around animal issues. To this end, Part 1 of the book includes three articles that reframe classical Marxist notions of commodity fetishism around our relationships with animals. While both Karen Davis and Carl Bogg’s contributions are excellent, Dennis Soron’s “Road Kill: Commodity Fetishism and Structural Violence” stands out. Soron presents a thoughtful application of the theoretical underpinnings of Marx’s commodity fetishism to the oft-ignored (or even, as the chapter demonstrates, ridiculed and commodified) matter of “road kill”. Soron entreats readers to consider the interrelated fetishism of both the automobile and the pulverized corpses of the animal victims of encroaching human sprawl.

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Part 2 brings into sharp relief the theoretical contributions of contemporary Marxist thinkers, best exemplified by the Frankfurt School and, notably, Horkheimer and Adorno – whose examination of animal oppression (explored principally through the desubjectification of the “animal” other) is both clearly laid out for the reader and further probed by such authors as Ted Benton, Renzo Llorente, Christina Gerhardt and Eduardo Mendieta. Although this section may be less accessible to non-academic readers, it nevertheless avoids lapsing into the trap of “baroque” theory-for-theory’s-sake scholarship. Each author takes occasion to demonstrate the real-world applications of their respective philosophical projects.

Having the distinction of being the only section to include a piece of creative writing – a poem entitled “Neuroscience” by Susan Benston which draws heavily upon the author’s correspondence with a vivisector – Part 3 examines the ideological and psychological roots of speciesism. Here, Zipporah Weisberg’s “Animal Repression: Speciesism as Pathology” offers a unique and refreshing approach to theorizing speciesism, adapting Freudian psychoanalytic theories of repression to the way in which empathy for animal others is systematically denied. The highlight of this collection, Part 4, offers an exploration of some key sites of anti-animal liberation resistance from both outside and inside the movement. The most thought-provoking of these, John Sorenson’s “Constructing Extremists, Rejecting Compassion: Ideological Attacks on Animal Advocacy from Right and Left” analyzes key discursive texts from both the political (and religious) “Right” and “Left”, demonstrating the tangible hostility toward animal interests on both sides. His analysis offers a unique picture of the dominant perceptions of the animal liberation movement from both political poles. It is at once inspiring – where the “Right”, motivated by a palpable fear, has vilified and constructed liberationists as “terrorists” and “enemies of humanity” – and, at the same time, discouraging – with the otherwise social justice-seeking “Left” continuing to ignore (and even devaluing) the oppression of other animals. Also in this section, an essay by Vasile Stănescu titled “‘Green’ Eggs and Ham?: The Myth of Sustainable Meat and the Fluidity of ‘Animal’ Domination”, examines and problematizes “locavorism” and the manufactured conflict between proponents of local, sustainable food and veganism (analyzing authors such as Michael Pollan and Barbara Kingsolver). This piece is a long-overdue critique of some troubling currents within the body of ecological food politics that seem to perpetuate sexism and racism as well as celebrating the domination of other animals. Finishing up this section are pieces by Carol J. Adams, who critiques PETA’s objectification of female bodies and warns of sexual inequality within the animal liberation movement and Josephine Donovan,

who promulgates the adoption of an empathetic ethics of care to guide in our treatment of other animals.

Because of the wide range of essays, all with their own unique critiques and theoretical starting points, each and every reader will be able to easily identify their own specific sites of interest in this text. While Part 1: “Commodity Fetishism and Structural Violence” and Part 4: “Problems in Praxis” will appeal most to social scientists, philosophers and more theoretically-minded scholars will undoubtedly be drawn to Parts 2: “Animals, Marxism and the Frankfurt School” and 3: “Speciesism and Ideologies of Domination”. While each section offers a variety of distinctive and differing perspectives, they nevertheless coalesce into a cohesive reconceptualization of the question of the animal within the critical or “left” tradition in political and social thought.

This text is not, however, beyond critique. Missing from its pages are any overt critical race or queer theory perspectives – palpable and glaring omissions, given the extent to which the book attempts to enmesh various ecofeminist, Marxist, poststructural and posthumanist theories. Indeed, the omissions are made all the more obvious specifically because of the wide breadth of other perspectives offered. A common critique of Marxist or explicitly class-based analyses, the voices of queer theorists and critical race theorists are often left out of these debates and it is especially troubling to see that same pattern emerging here – in this otherwise cutting-edge text.

Nevertheless, “Critical Theory and Animal Liberation” is an invaluable text for scholars and students of a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. In particular, this book is a must-have for anyone studying or writing within the burgeoning field of Critical Animal Studies. Perhaps the most compelling achievement of this text is its instrumental role in opening up new debates around critical, “left” classical and contemporary Marxist and posthumanist thought all while sidestepping the popular currents in apolitical, mainstream animal studies. In addition, this book offers a first ambitious step into an uncharted territory – moving away from the liberal ethics on which most animal “rights” theory has, since its inception, been built.