

Introducing Critical Animal Studies

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The aim of the Institute for Critical Animal Studies (ICAS) is to provide a space for the development of a “critical” approach to animal studies, one which perceives that relations between human and nonhuman animals are now at a point of crisis which implicates the planet as a whole. This dire situation is evident most dramatically in the intensified slaughter and exploitation of animals (who die by the tens of billions each year in the United States alone); the unfolding of the sixth great extinction crisis in the history of the planet (the last one being 65 million years ago); and the monumental environmental ecological threats of global warming, rainforest destruction, desertification, air and water pollution, and resource scarcity, to which animal agriculture is a prime contributor.

Since the last decade, animal studies has emerged as a new and rapidly growing interdisciplinary paradigm, leading to a prolific development of centers, university positions, conferences, journals, books, e-lists, radio shows, and podcasts dedicated to studying how humans have conceived of and related to nonhuman animals. Although scholars working in animal studies have made significant contributions to our understanding of the historical, sociological, and philosophical aspects of human/nonhuman animal relations, the discipline is strangely detached from the dire plight of nonhuman animals, human beings, and the Earth.

Animal studies has already entrenched itself as an abstract, esoteric, jargon-laden, insular, non-normative, and apolitical discipline, one where scholars can achieve recognition while nevertheless remaining wedded to speciesist values, carnivorous lifestyles, and at least tacit – sometime overt — support of numerous forms of animal exploitation such as vivisection. In recent years Critical Animal Studies has emerged as a necessary and vital alternative to the insularity, detachment, hypocrisy, and profound limitations of mainstream animal studies that vaporizes their flesh and blood realities to reduce them to reified signs, symbols, images, words on a page, or protagonists in a historical drama, and thereby utterly fail to confront them not as “texts” but rather as sentient beings who live and die in the most sadistic, barbaric, and wretched cages of technohell that humanity has been able to devise, the better to exploit them for all they are worth.

In contrast to the dominant orientations of animal studies, as well as to tendencies prominent throughout the animal welfare and animal rights movements, we seek to develop a Critical Animal Studies that:

1. Pursues interdisciplinary collaborative writing and research in a rich and comprehensive manner that includes perspectives typically ignored by animal studies such as political economy.
2. Rejects pseudo-objective academic analysis by explicitly clarifying its normative values and political commitments, such that there are no positivist illusions whatsoever that theory is disinterested or writing and research is nonpolitical. To support experiential understanding and subjectivity.

3. Eschews narrow academic viewpoints and the debilitating theory-for-theory's sake position in order to link theory to practice, analysis to politics, and the academy to the community.
4. Advances a holistic understanding of the commonality of oppressions, such that speciesism, sexism, racism, ableism, statism, classism, militarism and other hierarchical ideologies and institutions are viewed as parts of a larger, interlocking, global system of domination.
5. Rejects apolitical, conservative, and liberal positions in order to advance an anti-capitalist, and, more generally, a radical anti-hierarchical politics. This orientation seeks to dismantle all structures of exploitation, domination, oppression, torture, killing, and power in favor of decentralizing and democratizing society at all levels and on a global basis.
6. Rejects reformist, single-issue, nation-based, legislative, strictly animal interest politics in favor of alliance politics and solidarity with other struggles against oppression and hierarchy.
7. Champions a politics of total liberation which grasps the need for, and the inseparability of, human, nonhuman animal, and Earth liberation and freedom for all in one comprehensive, though diverse, struggle; to quote Martin Luther King Jr.: *"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."*
8. Deconstructs and reconstructs the socially constructed binary oppositions between human and nonhuman animals, a move basic to mainstream animal studies, but also looks to illuminate related dichotomies between culture and nature, civilization and wilderness and other dominator hierarchies to emphasize the historical limits placed upon humanity, nonhuman animals, cultural/political norms, and the liberation of nature as part of a transformative project that seeks to transcend these limits towards greater freedom, peace, and ecological harmony.
9. Openly supports and examines controversial radical politics and strategies used in all kinds of social justice movements, such as those that involve economic sabotage from boycotts to direct action toward the goal of peace.
10. Seeks to create openings for constructive critical dialogue on issues relevant to Critical Animal Studies across a wide-range of academic groups; citizens and grassroots activists; the staffs of policy and social service organizations; and people in private, public, and non-profit sectors. Through – and only through — new paradigms of ecopedagogy, bridge-building with other social movements, and a solidarity-based alliance politics, is it possible to build the new forms of consciousness, knowledge, social institutions that are necessary to dissolve the hierarchical society that has enslaved this planet for the last ten thousand years.