

Solidarity between Beings

Marco Maurizi, *Beyond Nature: Animal Liberation, Marxism, and Critical Theory*.
Brill, 2021. 212 pp.

In *Dämmerung*, his book of aphorisms attacking the cultural distortions of monopoly capitalism (written in Germany between 1926–1931), the critical theorist Max Horkheimer wrote:

Below the spaces where the [most exploited people] of the earth perish by the millions, the indescribable, unimaginable suffering of the animals, the animal hell in society, would have to be depicted, the sweat, blood, despair of the animals....The basement of that house is a slaughterhouse, its roof is a cathedral, but from the windows of the upper floors, it affords a really beautiful view of the starry heavens. (as cited in Maurizi, 2021, p. 132)¹

This would not be the last time that Horkheimer would draw an explicit link between the domination of workers under capitalism and the domination of animals by humans, nor that he would ironically juxtapose civilizational dreams of transcendence against the ruthless mass exploitation and violence that secretly formed their material basis. As Marco Maurizi, a philosopher at the Lombardo Radice Institute in Rome, shows in his new book, *Beyond Nature: Animal Liberation, Marxism, and Critical Theory*, Horkheimer would later elaborate these themes with Theodor Adorno (his close collaborator and friend at the Institute for Social Research) in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947/2002). Maurizi now builds upon Horkheimer and Adorno's work to lay the conceptual ground for a new praxis of universal liberation, one that would encompass human and nonhuman animals alike.

Maurizi, a socialist as well as an animal rights activist, begins *Beyond Nature* on a personal note, lamenting the mutual suspicion with which Marxists and animal advocates have often viewed one another. Marx and Engels dismissed the animal welfare movements of their time as expressions of cheap bourgeois sentimentalism, and their dismissive view is still widely shared by socialists

¹ *Dämmerung* was published in English as *Dawn and Decline* (Horkheimer, 1978). The German Marxist animal liberation group Assoziation Daemmerung (2022) today takes its name and much of its philosophy from this early work by Horkheimer. See also Abromeit (2011).

and leftists today. Many contemporary vegans, meanwhile, have embraced the free market as a solution to the problems of the animal economy, hoping that consumers can be weaned off animal products through new plant-based and cellular meat alternatives – with the help of “enlightened” venture capitalists (e.g., Pacelle, 2017).² Notwithstanding these tensions between the two traditions, Maurizi sets out to reconcile them, arguing that neither animal liberation nor socialist praxis can succeed without the other.³

Maurizi begins with a wide-ranging critique of “Animal Liberation Ideology,” a term he uses to describe most forms of animal advocacy, including veganism, welfarism, animal rights, and abolitionism. On Maurizi’s view, animal advocates have made the mistake of representing the speciesist system as being at root a problem of the wrong ideas. On this view, popularized by philosopher Peter Singer, speciesism amounts to an ideological “prejudice” against animals, akin to racism and sexism. Maurizi points out, however, that relations of domination exist prior to the ideological systems used to justify them. By introducing “the extensive use of formal reasoning into a field that [in fact] needed a totally different approach” – namely, Maurizi contends, a *critical theory of society* – analytic moral philosophy ended up distorting animal activism. A misplaced emphasis on ethics led the movement to focus on changing individual consumption habits, rather than on transforming the fundamental economic and social relations of society. But vegans who naively embrace the free market forget that the same economic system that produces the Beyond Burger and other vegan goods also gives us factory farms, global warming, toxic waste, and mass species extinction. Simply, we cannot speak of speciesism “in itself,” as though it somehow floats above other institutions and social structures, including and above all capitalism. Maurizi is especially critical of Gary Francione’s abolitionist position that universal veganism can be achieved within the bounds of existing capitalist development. Francione cites animals’ status as private property or commodities as the greatest obstacle to their liberation, but he does not question the system of private property as such.

2 The Good Food Institute, a powerful lobbying group has closely partnered with venture capitalists and the meat industry to promote a range of plant-based and synthesized meat products and technologies. See Clean Meat Hoax (2020).

3 For prior works on Marxism and animal rights, see for example Stache and Bernhold (2021), Nibert (2013, 2017), and Sanbonmatsu (2011). The relationship between Marxism and animal rights has been the subject of a number of recent works, and controversies. Ted Benton’s (1993) earlier attempt to reconcile Marxism with animal agency and historicity, has formed the object of two recent attacks (Foster & Clark, 2018; Stache, 2018). The recent publication of *Half-Earth Socialism* (Vettese & Pendergrass, 2022), which makes the case for universal veganism and “eco-austerity” in response to the ecological emergency, has meanwhile engendered a fierce backlash from some socialists (e.g., Ajl & Wallace, 2021).

As a corrective to an ideological and “metaphysical” anti-speciesism that has depicted humans as having always-already dominated other beings, Maurizi urges a turn to the historical materialism of Karl Marx. In a powerful demonstration of Marx’s own dialectical method, Maurizi historicizes our dominion over other animals, showing how dominion evolved out of social institutions. Even prior to domestication, he argues, humans had begun to differentiate themselves from nature, pitting transcendence (spiritual consciousness, freedom) against immanence (embodiment, the realm of necessity). Later, during the Neolithic period, a much more far-reaching estrangement from nature and animals occurred, as agriculture and the rise of sedentary civilization effected a transition from “horizontal,” relatively egalitarian social and natural relations, to more “vertical” or hierarchical ones. A new division of labor produced a “societal, spiritual, and intellectual cleavage” which in turn accelerated the exploitation of nature. With the later advent of capitalism, “the animal” *qua* animal emerged as an ideological construct within a definable speciesist order, viz., the foundation of a dualistic ontology that set the stage for the total domination of nature.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno described history not as a story of progress, but of doomed circularity: “the perpetual repetition – under different phenomenal forms – of those domination relationships upon which the entire structure of human society is built.” Marx’s proposed solution to this endless repetition of the same was the overthrow of capitalism, the “highest” (because most all-encompassing) phenomenal form of this basic division in human society. Marx conceived of communism not as utopia, but as a rupture with circularity, the moment when human beings might finally begin to realize their capacities *as* human beings. Communism is nature coming to know itself through human consciousness, and human consciousness transcending its alienation from nature.

Though Maurizi is notably more critical of animal rights proponents than he is of Marxists, he nonetheless also faults Marx and Engels for having failed “to conceive a limit in our appropriation of nature” and, consequently, for viewing other animals as mere instruments for human use and production. Reminding us that capitalism was itself “the perfect heir of an ancient history of sufferance and exploitation” rooted in human supremacy over animals, Maurizi concludes that the abolition of capitalism is presupposed by the abolition of speciesism itself. Hence the continuing relevance of the theories of Horkheimer and Adorno: to point us beyond the limits of a classical Marxism which itself has remained trapped in the cycle of domination. By centering the subjectivity and suffering of animals, Horkheimer and Adorno achieved the *aufhebung* (that is, the overcoming but also preservation, at a higher level)

of historical materialism. Only “via a different relationship with the animal – based on compassion and solidarity with ‘damaged life,’” Maurizi writes, might we begin “to see and denounce the hidden idealistic sides of Marxist materialism.”

At times, there is a teleological element to Maurizi’s account of history, as in his insistence that Marx and Engels in a sense “had to” theorize animals in the ways that they did, i.e., instrumentally, owing to the state of material development at the time. In keeping with his Hegelian approach, Maurizi posits that human domination of nature and animals was in some sense a necessary stage for us to pass through on our path to species freedom. However, though Maurizi may well be right that only recently has our species achieved the level of material development required for us to move beyond dominion, I am not convinced that animal liberation was impossible in Marx’s time, or even earlier.

Maurizi is also too quick to accept Marx and Engels’ dismissal of moral philosophy as an epiphenomenon of the economic substructure – for instance when he concludes that ethics should “be the goal of a liberated society [rather] than one of its premises.” Alas, however, we know only too well what happens when we put off articulating our moral values to some distant point “after the revolution,” sacrificing moral clarity – and justice – for political expediency. Furthermore, ideas are not mere epiphenomena of a material base, but are themselves a dialectical part of reality (and therefore *shape* reality), even if their broad conditions of possibility are in some sense constrained by the prevailing form of economic life. It is doubtful that Maurizi could have written his book, nor that I would be writing these words, if the philosophical idea of a post-speciesist mode of life had not persisted in germinal form for thousands of years in human culture. The extraordinary Islamic epistle, *The Case of the Animals Versus Man Before the King of the Jinn* (2014) shows that it was possible even in the 10th century for intellectuals to depict the human species as a unitary subject oppressing all the other animals, centuries before capitalism first appeared. Ethical and religious thought, too, not just economic contradiction, has played a pivotal role in bringing us to the possible threshold of a post-speciesist order.

Putting aside the complex question of the mediation of base and superstructure, however, Maurizi’s broad conclusion remains sound, viz., that humanity now has the opportunity to envision and effect a new form of civilization, one that would not only be post-capitalist, but post-Neolithic too. In liberating animals from human control and violence, we would liberate ourselves as well, widening the scope of our own animal compassion to encompass the well-being of all sentient beings. Nature – for we are part of nature – would thus

liberate nature. Meanwhile, Reason would exchange its “dream of totalitarian control over the rest of the living world” for a praxis of “universal peace.” In dissolving our dominion, we would then retroactively transform the meaning of history and of human being itself: the very species that has left the world in ruins would have engendered a civilization based on “a global and interspecies solidarity.” This would be a human “exceptionalism” whose *raison d’être* would be precisely the overcoming of human exceptionalism. We would be both fully animal and fully human.

Beyond Nature is an important achievement in critical animal studies, a significant advance in efforts to arrive at a theoretical synthesis of Marxism and animal liberation. Maurizi’s stirring call for a “materialistic ethic” grounded in “a solidarity between beings who share suffering, pain, and death” is a call to be heeded, by all of us.

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