

Marin Beroš*, Maja Mandić**

Overview of Animal Dehumanization in the Context of Changing Capitalism

SUMMARY

Animals have been our companions since the beginning of time. Unfortunately, with each new civilizational “leap”, the gap between humans and animals widens. From the initial position of equality, we began to see animals as slaves, then as machines, and finally just as numbers. This relationship between animals and humans is gradually deteriorating, and the trend is particularly pronounced with the rise of industrial capitalism, as it exacerbated the “dehumanization” of animals, as well as the simultaneous “animalization” of humans. In that sense, the goal of this paper is modest - it seeks to draw attention to recurrent themes in the evolution of the animal-human relationship across history and to warn how the development of capitalism affects the same relationship. Furthermore, since at the beginning of the 21st century capitalism seems to be going through new fundamental changes, we think it is the right time to pose some questions on the future of this relationship.

Keywords: animals, dehumanization, capitalism.

THE BEGINNING OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMANS AND ANIMALS

Humans and animals share a lengthy and complicated history on this planet we call home. In fact, if we take as a starting point in our discussion definition of a human that is usually accredited to Aristotle as “a rational animal” (Kietzmann, 2019), we can easily notice not only what that distinction highlights, but also what it does not - that we share with animals more features than just our habitat. Animals have historically served as both our predators and our prey, as well as our rivals for

* Institute of Social Sciences “Ivo Pilar”, Pula, Croatia. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3389-9919>.

** Institute of Social Sciences “Ivo Pilar”, Zagreb, Croatia.

Correspondence Address: Marin Beroš, Institute of Social Sciences “Ivo Pilar”, Leharova 1, 52100 Pula, Croatia.
E-mail: marin.beros@pilar.hr.

resources (primarily food) and, of course, as our friends. Since the beginning of time, we have feared them, revered them, worshipped them, despised them, and loved them. And we still do.

Our shared narrative reached its first “plot twist” around 12,000 years ago, at the beginning of the Holocene era, when the climate had stabilized, and humans had started to permanently settle up until then ice and snow-covered areas. After becoming sedentary, our ancestors discovered not only primitive farming methods, but also how to domesticate animals. Quite unsurprisingly, the dog was the first creature to keep us company. Sheep and goats followed our trusty protector, and about nine thousand years ago, cows and pigs became a permanent part of our households. Horses and fowl followed them, and then, fittingly given their “independent” attitude, cats. For the first time, domestication changed our mutual relationship with animals. It was no longer the relationship between the hunter and the hunted, in which animal’s behavior may be well observed and known, but the same animal was still an unknown prey. Domestication has made animals fully familiar to us, and of course, us to them.

Of course, humans continued to prioritize their own interests despite this familiarity. We have started slaughtering a set number of animals for food even though we thought of them as our companions. Due to our newfound dominance over animals caused by domestication, we began to view them as lower forms of life, as means to our ends, or, to put it bluntly, as our slaves. This point in time marks the beginning of a belief that will eventually be referred to as speciesism (Singer, 2015).

It should be noted that prehistoric hunter-gatherer cultures did not consider animals as inferior beings, but rather, they saw them as at least our equals and perhaps even our superiors. Through the myths, animals have been worshipped inside the clan or tribe as ancestors. This anthropomorphisation of animals provided the hunters a framework within which they understood their prey – they could identify with it and anticipate its behavior. Finally, when the purpose of the hunt was fulfilled, and the animals had been killed, several rituals were performed to “appease the spirits”. Religious food blessings, as well as celebrations and holidays centered on food, like Thanksgiving, still bear the imprint of these rituals. Naturally, this was done to alleviate the internal moral struggle that would develop if animals were thought of as being on par with humans, as in that case, killing an animal would constitute murder. As Matthieu Ricard (2016, p. 9) in his book “A Plea for Animals” astutely observes “*Sense of guilt at the killing of the animals and the need to expiate it are frequently present*”.

Unfortunately, being on a same level as animals is not the common moral position of humanity, which will result in the death of billions of animals just this year. When

contemplating domesticated animals, this is especially true. Apparently, all animals - cows, pigs, sheep, poultry, horses, etc. - have agreed to be fed and cared for up to the time when people decide that our need for food is more important than their need to live. This is a concept of “tacit agreement” that lies behind our moral justification for slaughtering domesticated animals, but it is at fault. Animals most certainly did not give their agreement, tacit or otherwise, for being killed. This appears to be yet one more strategy to allay our guilt.

Given that they have quite different relationships with the animals, the animal breeder faces a more serious ethical dilemma than the hunter. The hunter possesses extensive knowledge of his prey animal, but he never can interact with it in a different context than hunting. Because of this, the hunter has very little chance to grow attached to certain animals. On the other hand, the animal breeder lives in close proximity to his animals (or at least he did until recently) and is likely to develop a strong emotional attachment to them. They frequently experience guilt after killing the animal, as it represents the betrayal of trust the animal has invested in them.

THE ROOTS OF DEHUMANIZATION

It appears that the history of interactions between humans and animals has always been one of exploitation, first through hunting, then through domestication. However, the invention of factory farming at the beginning of the twentieth century gave animal exploitation a new, unimaginable magnitude. We will not get into the gruesome specifics of that practice as there are enough scientific, journalistic and literary works that already graphically illustrate it. Still, Jonathan Safran Foer’s “Eating Animals” (2009) deserves a special mention, as it combines journalistic writing with his trademark novelistic wit. Instead, we will focus on the fact that along with the rise of factory farming, the horrors of animal exploitation have also started to gradually disappear from our daily lives. The killings continue, and they are happening more frequently, but they are hidden from our inquisitive eyes.

How did we arrive at that point of willful disbelief? We are aware that the majority of food on our plates, our tables, and in our refrigerators mostly comes from somewhere. We are aware that some of that food was once a living, sentient being, which quite possibly feels the pain in the similar way we do, and quite possibly did not want to end its life abruptly, as someone’s nourishment. The roots of this treatment of animals lies in the foundations of Western civilization, as well as the guilt that so frequently follows it.

We return to Ricard (2016, p. 11), who makes another precise observation that it is “*uncomfortable to live with a constant feeling of bad conscience*”. As we decided to

utilize other living beings for our own needs, we had to morally justify this, which some religions have found in the manifestation of divine will. For instance, the Old Testament of the Bible explicitly proclaims that God made humans in his own image and *“let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing”*. It should also be noted that even the New Testament, which is known for its central teachings of love, charity, and compassion, is predicated on the love of Man – of all human beings, even those we could consider our enemies. On the other hand, the animals in the Gospels have not received the same attention. There is even famous passage in which Christ casts out evil spirits from the afflicted man, only for them to reenter the pigs, who then promptly take their own lives (Matthew 8.28-34; Mark 5.1-20; Luke 8.26-39).

This lack of concern for animals echoed further through Christianity. For instance, Saint Augustine believed that vegetarianism is absurd when undertaken for moral rather than ascetic reasons. He distinguished between “good vegetarians,” who abstained from eating animals out of penitence, and “bad vegetarians,” who showed compassion to animals and were unwilling to put them to death. Naturally, he found support for his opinions in the Bible, where he noted that Christ never caused harm to a human being, even when they were guilty of their crimes. On the other hand, he injured animals despite the fact that they were innocent. He concluded that, if Christ considered that humans and animals formed a single society, he never would have killed them. Therefore, it is absurd for humans to have any duty toward animals, so we should abstain from that line of thinking (Augustinus, 1995).

The growth of human chauvinism can also be attributed to Saint Thomas Aquinas, as he confirmed that animals are not included in Christ’s command to “love one’s neighbor” (i.e., to love one’s fellow human beings). According to his view, they are not “our neighbors”, as they lack the capacity for reason that humans do, but he also disputes their existence of a spiritual soul. Therefore, even when humans engage in what could otherwise be regarded as immoral behavior, animals are there to submit to our will. His only objection toward animal cruelty lies in the fact that it could also encourage cruelty towards humans, which is a telling fact how those two are easily connected (Aquinas, 1981). This eventually became the official position of the Roman Catholic Church – animals are inferior to humans and therefore, humans have no obligations or duties towards them.

Church fathers and theologians are not the only ones who could be held accountable for the cruelty to animals in modern society. Even if Descartes’ discoveries in epistemology were groundbreaking, his theory of the “animal automata” was

completely incorrect. According to Descartes, animals not only exist for the benefit of human beings, but they also do not feel anything:

“Animals are no more than simple machines, automata. They feel neither pleasure nor pain, nor anything else at all. Although they are capable of crying out when they are cut by a knife or of going through contortions in their efforts to escape contact with a hot iron, this does not mean that they feel pain in these situations. They are governed by the same principles as a watch, and if their actions are more complex than those of a watch, that is because the latter is a machine fabricated by humans, whereas animals are infinitely more complex machines made by God.” (Descartes, 2006, p. 46)

Essentially, the Cartesian school of thought provided “clean conscience” not only regarding killing and eating animals but also regarding experiments on animals – since they are soulless machines that have been placed on this planet to be mastered, why not employ them for something beneficial, like advancement of science? It is easy to understand how the position of animals in relation to people will deteriorate, as human civilization continues to advance and nature is further subjugated. But this is merely setting the stage. The real suffering on a massive scale begins with the emergence of capitalism and the use of economic justification for crimes against nature.

Additionally, it should also be noted that the process of dehumanization–animalization works in both directions. As Ricard (2016, p. 73) quite cleverly warns us: *“The devaluation of human beings often leads to viewing them as animals and to treating them with brutality which animals are often treated. The exploitation of animals is accompanied by a further level of devaluation: they are reduced to the status of infinitely reproducible objects for consumption – meat producing machines, living toys whose suffering entertains or fascinates the crowds. Their quality of sentient beings is deliberately ignored so as to reduce them to the status of objects”*. This is a telling passage, as history has shown that bad conduct toward animals is eventually followed by the same treatment of humans, whose dignity is denied in a similar fashion.

THE MODERN AGE

Nevertheless, even as the school of thought which endorsed human dominion over not only animals, but of the entire nature developed, opposite viewpoints were also forming. The strong support for this other camp came through the findings of Charles Darwin, who effectively altered our perception of the world with his seminal work “On the Origin of Species”. In it, he explained his discovery of evolution - that species only gradually change from one form to the next over the duration of millions of years. In essence, the difference between humans and animals is smaller than it was

presumed, and that difference is far from fundamental (Darwin, 2009). However, the power of the other school is visible in the fact that despite the scientific evidence, there are still people today who find it hard to think of higher primates such as gorillas and chimpanzees as our “close cousins” on the evolutionary tree.

In Darwin’s work, we notice for the first time the formation of an idea that the difference between animals and humans is only one of degree and not one of profound significance. But where does that leave us on ethical grounds? Humans are the dominant species only because they have risen from the foundation made of other animals. Therefore, he (Darwin, 1874, p. 101) shows compassion and respect for animals and concludes *“Humanity toward inferior animals is one of the noblest virtues with which man is endowed, and it is part of the final stage of the development of moral sentiments. It is only when we become concerned for the totality of the sentient beings that our morality attains its highest level”*.

But what does it mean for us now? The sad truth of our existence lies in the fact that we need to consume to survive. We get our energy from food, and most of it comes from live, frequently intelligent, creatures. In that regard, death has always been intrinsically linked to our lives. As we have seen, there is plenty of historical evidence, including cave paintings and religious practices that revolve around food, that humans have been aware of this fact from the dawn of civilization. For a long time, humans had strong reverence for the animals and taking of their lives, as they were also painfully aware that their roles could easily be reversed – early humans were as much hunters as they were hunted. For that reason, they also had a different understanding of nature than the “modern man”. Although domestication changed our general outlook towards animals as beings that are somehow lower on “the great chain of being”, nothing has rendered animals more bereft of substance than the invention of industrial farming. This transformation occurred quite recently, as it appeared just over a century ago in the United States of America and is now spreading with deadly perfection all over the world. The invention is in its essence quite simple – it only required us to treat living beings as cogs in machines (something for which Descartes already laid the foundation) to maximize our profit.

Factory farming operates on the similar concept of “perfection of functionality” as WW2 concentration camps – so many deaths in such small spaces in as little time as possible. This comparison seems distasteful, especially considering the crimes against humanity perpetrated there, but it is not new, as it was the one that was boldly, reverently, and masterfully explored by Charles Patterson (2002) in his book “Eternal Treblinka”. He was moved to writing this book by the remark from Jewish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer, who in his literary work exclaimed that regarding the cruelty they receive, to animals all humans are Nazis.

The basic premise of Patterson's book is simple – Nazis had justified the killings of Jews by reducing their human status comparing them to animals. This “dehumanization” was not a new tactic, as Patterson’s historical review shows – the similar argument was used to justify slavery, women subjugation, extermination of indigenous peoples, endorsement of eugenics and finally Holocaust. Therefore, the use of pejorative zoomorphisms is not “innocent”, as behind it lies ideological framework that describes the world in terms of higher and lower beings, which opens the door for myriad sorts of evil.

To illustrate his point, Patterson exposes the history of meat industry in America, with its systemic methods of slaughter, and how it influenced various people, from Henry Ford to engineers of “Final solution” in Nazi Germany. Apparently, Ford got his idea for the conveyor belt that transformed the automobile industry with the visit and observation of the working processes in Chicago’s slaughterhouses. Nazis just returned the idea to its original purpose. Furthermore, Patterson claims that inspiration for Nazi eugenic project came from American ideas connected to cattle-breeding. Finally, he compares the main properties of slaughterhouses to concentration camps – efficiency of operations, constant improvement of facilities that lead the subjects to their deaths, concern for the solving of the problems of old, sick, and injured... Patterson fortifies his arguments regarding our conduct towards the animals with the testimonies of Holocaust survivors, but also of Germans, who after experiencing the Nazi regime, have later become animal activists. As Patterson’s exposition quite vividly demonstrates, the dehumanization of human beings often leads to viewing them as animals and treating them with the brutality with which animals are often treated. Animals, however, experience a new level of devaluation under industrial capitalism, when they are relegated to the position of endlessly reproducing products for consumption—in other words, they are reduced to mere numbers.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM TO HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONS

As we have seen, further (industrial) development of capitalism did not improve animal condition in our mutual relation. It could be argued that more readily available and less expensive food was one positive result of this capitalist pursuit of profit, but it also had a negative psychological impact on our consciousness. The “modern man” because of the factorization of death has lost his reverence for food he consumes (it all comes from supermarket!), and with it, for the animals that are one of the key elements of such food. Meat is presented as a manufactured product – sausages, burgers, pâtés, etc. - totally devoid of any semblance with living creatures.

We are aware of animal suffering that lies behind the manufacturing process, but we choose not to know. We even try to fool our children regarding the origin of meat, as they have natural affinity towards living beings, and they are still not ready to participate in our collective amnesia. Finally, it all results with apathy, as animal flesh becomes just a commodity to be bought and sold. And with the help of factory farming, animal life, or more accurately animal death, is cheap.

Animals are, of course, the first victims of industrial breeding, but eventually, “bad things” return to us. When it comes to extensive breeding operations, the environmental effects of the meat industry are particularly severe. The first is air pollution - the greenhouse effect is happening mainly due to three gases: methane, carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide. Methane is a particularly significant factor as a molecule of this gas contributes twenty times more to the greenhouse effect than a molecule of carbon dioxide. And, according to the FAO document “Tackling Climate Change through Livestock” (Gerber et al., 2013), 15 to 20 percent of methane emissions on our planet relate to animal breeding, which makes it quantitatively the second greatest source of greenhouse gases. It may come as a surprise but breeding activities for the meat industry contribute more to global warming than the entire transportation sector, and they are only surpassed by the construction sector (Stehfest et al., 2009). Furthermore, according to the UN Food & Agriculture Organization (2022), livestock agriculture now occupies over three-quarters of all arable land. This number is rising, which also makes it one of the largest causes of deforestation worldwide. Cutting down trees and destroying forests is not only detrimental to the biodiversity of those habitats, but it also amplifies the greenhouse effect, as the trees are essential for removing carbon from the environment.

In addition to necessitating extensive deforestation, meat production is putting a burden on the world’s water supply. When compared to cultivating fruits and vegetables for human use, growing crops for cattle feed takes a large amount of water. Nearly one-third of the world’s total agricultural water footprint is related to the production of animal products, and not only that, but the water footprint of any animal product is also larger than the water footprint of crop products with equivalent nutritional value (Mekonnen & Hoekstra, 2012). For example, the average water footprint per calorie for beef is 20 times larger than for cereals and starchy roots. With increased population growth and changes in dietary patterns in the world toward meat-based diets, intensification of animal production systems will put further pressure on the global freshwater resources in the future.

In addition to using most of the world’s freshwater resources, animal industry also contaminates the freshwater resources that are still accessible. In practically every country, the output of livestock is expanding and intensifying more quickly

than crop production. Consequently, more water contamination is caused by animal waste than by all other industrial sources combined. Massive amounts of ammonia are produced by animal waste, which pollutes rivers and oceans. These agricultural nitrogen and phosphorus surpluses slowly seep into the soil, damaging groundwater and aquatic ecosystems (Steinfeld et al., 2006). Veterinary medications, such as antibiotics, vaccinations, and growth hormones, which travel from farms through water to ecosystems and drinking water sources, have become a new class of agricultural pollutants in the last couple of decades. Another significant problem that needs attention are zoonotic waterborne diseases (Dufour, 2012). Nevertheless, industrial animal breeding is on the rise, especially in the rapidly developing countries of the world, such as China and India (FAO, 2022).

Still, at the beginning of the 21st century, we may be at the forefront of change. It seems that capitalism is taking on a new form, as it turns its exploitative gaze from the natural world to something less substantive, but apparently even more valuable, our personal data. This decisive turn toward new logic of accumulation, with its own original operational mechanisms, economic imperatives, and markets was spurred by technological giants such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon (Zuboff, 2019). Physical resources (such as animals) lose their previous importance for the accumulation of capital. Does this mean that the condition of animals will improve? It is a possibility, but it will certainly not happen overnight. Animal suffering, in the sole service of making capital, will unfortunately continue.

HOPE FOR A WAY FORWARD?

With this paper we tried to trace the historical progress of the human-animal relationship and show how the changes in that relationship have resulted in the increased animal suffering. Our main premise is that this relationship between humans and animals gradually deteriorates, and that this trend is particularly pronounced with the rise of capitalism. It exacerbated animal “dehumanisation”, as well as human “animalisation” which appear to occur concurrently. Animals are turned from our companions, to resources, and finally to just numbers. It would appear from past examples that humanity could experience a similar fate.

In the beginning, our prehistoric ancestors were hunters, they considered themselves a part of nature and believed that animals were at the very least our equals and, at the very best, our superiors. Through the myths, they anthropomorphised the animals, making them worshiped ancestors. Therefore, the killing of an animal was akin to the killing of a person, which in turn created appeasement rituals, that eventually transformed into religious practices concerning food.

With the domestication of animals, the second phase of our relationship began. First came dogs, then came sheep, goats, cows, and horses. The domestication created new power dynamics. Humans had obligations towards the animals, they fed and cared for them, but in turn they decided on their life and death. That second phase of relationship, this start of animal dehumanization / human animalization, can also be described as the first master – slave relation (Patterson, 2002). From this point on, the seeds of speciesism have been sown – humans are superior to animals, as they are put on this Earth to serve.

The advent of the Modern Age and the abuses that resulted from Descartes' theories on the nature of animals are linked to the third phase of this deteriorating relationship. His misguided views on animals as “automatons who feel no pain” only gave credence to more cruelty, especially in the form of animal testing. This line of thinking led us into the 20th century which saw the invention of factory farming of mindless, unfeeling (but tasty) automatons. This fourth, and so far, the lowest, phase of our relationship with animals is based on our “collective amnesia” regarding what happens behind the walls of slaughterhouses. Thousands of animals are confined in immense hangars, in horrible conditions, never to see the light of day, at least not until the day they are slaughtered. Additionally, the methodical manner in which the slaughter is carried out dilutes the typical human emotion of repugnance toward the killing of an animal through de-individuation and the speed at which such factory-scale slaughter takes place. After a while, the evil that constantly keeps happening becomes another number.

In defence of our eating habits, it is frequently asserted that the terrible reality of our existence is that we must take lives to sustain our lives. While the necessity of eating meat is debatable, current production rates are nonsensical. Although more food should in turn mean less hungry people in the world, today's increased (and less expensive) meat production is still an ineffective means of ending world hunger. We would be closer to fulfilling that millennial goal if we did not raise so many animals, as the food that those animals consume could be more easily used to directly feed today's hungry people. Factory farming is not only inefficient in that regard, but it also poisons the environment, destroys biodiversity, and quite possibly, the use of modern farming techniques (such as frequent use of antibiotics) makes the same “product” unhealthier for our consummation in the long run. Moreover, increasing meat production will not be a solution to the global problem of hunger. Therefore, it seems that support for consuming less meat products must come from people who view it as a status symbol, as an indication of their good fortune as they can afford this exclusive food. And to change that we need a change in global mindset – a sort of wake-up call. Can the newest transformation of capitalism be the one?

Main interest of capitalism is always to make a profit, even if that profit comes from (animal) death. As industrial capitalism has brought so much destruction to our environment, compared to it the new form of capitalism seems almost benign, it only harvests “some” personal data and aggregates it to help us make more informed decisions. But we should not be fooled with its good intentions, as the information harvested by search engines gets sold to the highest bidder, who is always unknown to us. With targeted marketing (which borders on behavioural conditioning) our space for personal freedom disappears. With the help of “Internet of Things” even our personal items become the spies who betray us. In that way boundary between the private and public sphere breaks down – everything is illuminated, everything becomes the public sphere, and we are imprisoned under the gaze of unknown Big Brother, in the invisible cages of our own making.

The new economic revolution is increasingly using humans just as numbers, as aggregated data to make a profit. This situation may look familiar, as it has already happened to the animals in a not-quite-dissimilar way. Therefore, we maybe need to take a moment and seriously reflect on where the new form of capitalism is taking us. Will this new economic change worsen the relation of humans towards animals, as it was always the case so far, or is there hope for reversal, of closing the gap between Man and Nature?

It is said that we are treating the animals “inhumanely” because we forced ourselves into collective amnesia. As we live in an information age, where the distinction between private and public sphere is seriously disrupted, if not disappearing altogether, today’s slaughterhouses could have “glass walls” installed, if we seriously wanted them to. If that sort of revealing is possible, then we could not hide our repugnance or our shame with regard to animal suffering. Will those sentiments put out in the open be enough to abolish our practices or at least to modify them? Could we propose a breeding operation that could be nonviolent towards the animals – to keep cows for milk, hens for eggs, and sheep for wool without the need for killing them? At the minimum - if we could not abolish the animal suffering produced by factory farming, could we at least try improving the conditions of animals?

No matter how we approach the issue, something must be done in practice, as the current system of animal husbandry is unsustainable in the long run and needs to be reformed. Not only does it cause suffering to billions of animals, but it also destroys our own planet due to the immense pollution it creates. Moreover, the solution appears straightforward: it could be done through global reorientation in food production, from meat to vegetable products, regardless of how our own taste buds feel about that change.

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Pregled dehumanizacije životinja u kontekstu kapitalističkih promjena

SAŽETAK

Životinje su naši suputnici od početka vremena. Nažalost, sa svakim novim civilizacijskim „skokom” jaz između ljudi i životinja se produbljuje. Od početne pozicije jednakosti, na životinje smo počeli gledati kao na robove, zatim kao na strojeve i na kraju samo kao na brojeve. Ovaj se odnos između životinja i ljudi postupno pogoršava, a trend je posebno izražen usponom industrijskog kapitalizma, koji je pojačao „dehumanizaciju” životinja, kao i istovremenu „animalizaciju” ljudi. U tom smislu cilj rada je skroman – nastoji skrenuti pozornost na teme koje se ponavljaju u povijesti odnosa životinja i ljudi te upozoriti kako razvoj kapitalizma utječe na taj isti odnos. Nadalje, budući da se čini kako početkom 21. stoljeća kapitalizam prolazi kroz nove fundamentalne promjene, smatramo da je pravo vrijeme za postavljanje pitanja o budućnosti ovog odnosa.

Ključne riječi: životinje, dehumanizacija, kapitalizam.