



**Sunaora Taylor**, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*, New York: The New Press, 2017. ISBN: 9781620971284 (cloth)

Marxists of all disciplines, including critical geographers, have done far too little to engage with the problem of animal rights. That tens of billions of animals are killed a year to be eaten by humans is a vast tragedy in itself, let alone all of the impacts that this massive industry has on the global environment. Animal husbandry is the leading cause of desertification, is the largest single use of land, the source for a quarter of all greenhouse gas emissions, the main cause of deforestation, which itself is one of the main drivers of extinction (FAO 2006). While some good works have been written on animals, including the indispensable *Critical Animal Geographies* edited by Kathryn Gillespie and Rosemary-Claire Collard (2015), overall it is embarrassing that Marxists have been outclassed in this field by liberal and utilitarian scholars. The lacuna is striking. In this journal, for example, Kate Cairns and colleagues (2015) recently published an article on rearing hogs in Manitoba without once discussing the conditions of the animals themselves. Of the two issues *Jacobin* has dedicated to environmental issues, neither contained a single article on animals rights. One of the contributors, Christian Parenti (2017), even sees factory-meat production as a *solution* to crises engendered by global warming. It seems that Marxists either dismiss animal rights as an example of maudlin petit bourgeois sentimentality or fear being accused of harbouring such an effete emotion. This is not a new attitude. George Orwell (1937: 11) once dismissed vegetarians as people “out of touch with common humanity”.

Yet, the best studies of animal rights tend to be done by scholars willing to examine how the suffering of animals is interlinked with the plight of subaltern human groups—subjects who have long been subject to critical analysis. For example, Karen Morin’s (2016) recent *Antipode* article looks at how both animals and American black men are held fast in a vast institutional archipelago dedicated to controlling their bodies for labour, scientific experimentation, and death. Frank Wilderson III similarly argues that the position of the black body in capitalist

geography is not incidental but rather constitutive of the white worker. The racist gulag shores up whiteness in faltering rural towns, reinforcing a white working class through “our bodies... [being] desired, accumulated, and warehoused—like the cows” (2003: 238). It is in this fashion that Sunaura Taylor extends animal rights studies minute but rich tradition of syncretism to disability studies. Her recent book, *Beasts of Burden*, is a sincere and eloquent attempt to rethink humanity’s relationship to animals through the prism of disability studies. Although not a Marxist, Taylor’s framework is easily adapted to critical geography. Disability studies, after all, is a similarly *engagé* discipline guided by a strong ethos of solidarity. These are the values and methods of the Left’s scholars.

Taylor is so adroit in tying together disability studies with the literature on animal rights that the reader doesn’t notice how brave and rare this intellectual contribution is. Partisans from the animal rights and disability rights movements have long shared a mutual rancour that has hindered any fruitful exchange. For an oppressed group that that has been dehumanised by the trope of animality, openly making comparisons with animals just seems too risky. Taylor was born with arthrogryposis, a condition that left her with foreshortened and weak limbs. She makes the autobiographical elements of her scholarship explicit by interspersing chapters on the pollution from industrial farming and recent developments in animal behaviour science with personal vignettes. In so doing, she explains how incidents of anti-disability discrimination led her to rethink the relationship between the oppression of animals and disabled people. She recounts that when she began publicly speaking about the arguments that later filled the pages of *Beasts of Burden*, fellow activists tried to dissuade her from making such associations. She demonstrates how the Left could rethink its stance on animals by seeing how the oppression of animals is bound with the oppression of other groups who have been reduced to their bodies and denied their personhood. Her thorough and creative interpretations transform her core subjects of disability and animal rights, showing that “categories of race, disability, and animality have been entangled in and co-constitutive of one another” (p.51).

In 2006, Taylor noticed the trucks stuffed with chickens that traversed the streets in her hometown of Athens, Georgia. She asked an acquaintance who worked at the nearby poultry abattoir to take photographs. He did, but was caught and fired that very day (an experience illustrating the secrecy of the industry and its crass exploitation of workers). She used these photographs for a series of paintings, an exercise that brought to her attention that most of the chickens were disabled. “The more I looked, the more I found that the disabled body is everywhere in animal industries”, she recalls (p.xiv). “A thought struck me. If animal and disability oppression are entangled, might not that mean their paths of liberation are entangled as well?” As she delved into researching industrialised animal husbandry she found that not only are animals disabled by the conditions of industrial livestock rearing and slaughter, such as debeaking, beatings causing broken bones, poor diets, and dehydration, but that many farm animals are *bred* to be disabled. New breeds of cattle produce 50 per cent more milk than the norm during in the 1980s, a profitable invention achieved through breeding bloated, agonising udders. Belgian Blue cattle are so muscular they can barely walk and must undergo caesareans because their vaginal canal is constricted by muscle. “What does it mean to speak of a ‘healthy’ or ‘normal’ chicken, pig, or cow”, Taylor asks (p.38), “when they all live in environments that are profoundly disabling?”

Humans too live in disabling environments. Taylor’s condition stems not from a genetic fluke, but rather from exposure to toxic waste dumped by a nearby army base. “Pollution is a disability issue”, Taylor stresses (p.188), one which afflicts the poor and people of color disproportionately. They are also the most likely to work in the most dangerous industry in the US: agriculture. 10,000-20,000 farm workers a year suffer pesticide poisoning. Workers in abattoirs are six times more likely to be hurt than a coal miner. Gruesome accidents abound—limbs caught in meat grinders, workers burnt after falling into vats of animal fat—while less attention-grabbing repetitive stress injuries are almost guaranteed. The “disassembly lines” pass so quickly that a single worker can make 40,000 cuts with the same motion; and as the knife

dulls, she must apply ever greater force and risk straining herself. Then there is the psychological toll of so much killing. It is on this basis that Taylor proclaims that “industrialized agriculture, factory farms, and meatpacking plans are disability issues” (p.188).

The antagonism between animal rights and disability rights dates back four decades when Peter Singer penned *Animal Liberation* (1975), the foundational text of contemporary animal ethics. As a utilitarian he makes moral arguments on the basis of any being’s capacity for pleasure or pain—whether they are human or not. Not considering animals’ capacity to suffer, he charges, is “speciesist”, unjustifiably prioritising the human species above others. In the next step of his argument, he goes beyond the realm of physical suffering. He claims that abled humans can imagine a future without suffering that would be lost if they were killed, but infants, intellectually-disabled people, and some animals are less than persons because they are unable to imagine a future. With this claim, Singer devalues the lives of many disabled people, as well as newborns or those in a vegetative state. He stresses that because many disabled lives are marred by suffering, their lower quality of life undermines the assumption that all human lives are equal.

So while *Animal Liberation* had been one of Taylor’s favourite books when she was a child, she later recognised that “for intellectually disabled people, it offers little except risk” (p.68). Taylor laments that “if Singer had left his argument in its simpler form, with the principle of equal consideration based on sentience, *Animal Liberation* would have been a remarkably anti-ableist book” (p.128), but the second half of Singer’s argument has had devastating political consequences. Disability activists have often been hostile not only to Singer’s work, but to animal rights more broadly, which they see as a threat to their own personhood. During her debate with Singer, for example, the disability activist Harriet McBryde Johnson (2003) pointedly draped a sheepskin on her wheelchair and defended her “blissful ignorance” about the exploitation of farm animals. Johnson, who calls Singer a “man who wants me dead”, refuses to elevate animals to personhood on the basis of a logic that could imperil her own right to life.

Rather than decrying animal rights as a threat, Taylor takes a different tack. She attacks Singer on his home turf, charging that his own logic is speciesist and that arguments comparing animals to intellectually disabled humans “miss the more important point that a focus on specific human and neurotypical ‘morally relevant abilities’ harms both populations”. A truly non-speciesist position would acknowledge that “animal minds are complex in their own right” and that “the kind of moral consideration that sentience demands should not negate that other forms of life and nonlife also deserve an ethical response, even if of a very different nature”. Even the ability to imagine the future—an essential trait in Singer’s framework—is not a discrete category, as one might assume. Taylor reflects on how her disabled body forces her to experience time more slowly than the abled, with different benchmarks to look forward to. It is an experience of time, she ventures, possibly not so different than of some animals: “It is easy to jump from crip time to what we might call animal time—species whose life spans are only a few hours, days, or weeks” (p.132). Both are out-of-step with the norm: “whereas Singer’s conception of time is rooted in Western notions of progress and future-oriented goals, crip time asks us to think about time as variable and changing with our embodiments”.

In place of Singer’s central concept of “speciesism”, Taylor employs “ableism”—the belief that some bodies are more highly valued than others because they appear healthy, natural, and whole—to understand how animal oppression is justified, and how this oppression is linked to the plight of the disabled. This is one of the most important theoretical contributions Taylor makes in *Beasts of Burden*. She sketches a history beginning in ancient Greece to show how ableism and the oppression of disabled people and animals have long been connected. Aristotle’s contention that language is what separates animals from humans is well known, and even still finds adherents, such as Noam Chomsky, who recently wrote a book in this vein with Robert Berwick, *Why Only Us* (2015). What’s less often noted is Aristotle’s corollary: that hearing, too, is necessary for communication and thus thought, meaning that for Aristotle, deaf people were less than human. Even after sign language was developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century many held this

view; until recently, linguists condescendingly considered sign language to be an uncivilised form of communication, thus dismissing the achievement of teaching ASL to primates. Ableism, Taylor's history shows, is culturally produced rather than "natural"—in fact, one can find many counter-examples amongst animals. She recounts anecdotes of elephants, chickens, primates, ducks, whales, pigs, and dogs who help their disabled kin or demonstrate patience with their slower pace—indeed, humans seem to be unique in ostracizing disability. One of the animals she describes is a fox who shared her condition of arthrogryposis. A farmer shot him upon discovering his disability, but the fox had in fact been an adept hunter. Disability provokes two responses from the abled, Taylor argues: "destruction and pity" (p.23), which meld in the act of a mercy killing. Taylor names these animals fellow "crips", a comradely term that forces "us to question our ideas about how bodies move, think, and feel and what makes a body valuable, exploitable, useful, or disposable" (p.43).

If one follows this line of thought perhaps the Left could construct a new, more expansive Gramscian "good sense" that would include space for animals within its liberatory project. What form this good sense will finally take is an open question. Taylor's is not the last word in this new debate and, indeed, her book is not even Marxist. One cannot say exactly what form this new good sense will take because the result of cross-theorisation between subaltern thinkers is as unpredictable as it is fruitful. Taylor makes manifest that the subject of animal rights does not get in the way of radical thought or action, but rather catalyses it. By articulating what had been ineffable—the threat of "animalisation" that had encroached their own and their communities' personhood—Taylor uses the spectre of animal rights to instead broaden possible political coalitions and deepen radical critique.

A new good sense will not emerge Athena-like fully formed from the head of a philosopher, even one as clever as Taylor, but must exist in daily bodily practice and the experience of space as well. There are innumerable ways a Left anti-ableist ethic can be practised, but the most elementary biological act, eating, is perhaps the strongest expression. The

Left must endeavour to make visible the political valence of meat, let alone other industrial uses of animals. This act of acute empathy reveals the extent of one's political imagination. Taylor argues this forcefully: "When animal commodification and slaughter is justified through ableist positions, veganism becomes a radical anti-ableist position that takes seriously the ableism embedded in the way we sustain our corporeality—socially, politically, environmentally, and in what we consume" (p.201). "Humane meat" won't cut it. The good sense that the Left needs is not found in its incarnations of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Taylor's achievement is that such a limitation need not be permanent and a new good sense might eventually be formed through the application of empathy, action, and intellectual daring.

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*September 2017*