Commodities, Workers, or Resisters? A Review of *Animals and Capital*

Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, *Animals and Capital.* Edinburgh University Press, 2023, 328 pp.

Applying a modern case study of factory farming, an industry that political scientist Dinesh Wadiwel describes as perfectly exemplifying capitalist ideology and its influence over "a global system of domination" (p. vii), *Animals and Capital* explores the continued relevance of Marxian theory when attention is expanded beyond human workers to encompass other animals. Factory farms, he explains, characterize the "hierarchical anthropocentrism" of European Enlightenment and capitalism as "an economic system founded upon an endless cycle of production and exchange" (p. ix). Capitalism creates demand for structural speciesism by way of intentional overproduction to maximize surplus and profit. This, he observes, becomes "embedded within the 'biopolitics' of human population survival" (p. ix), with animal protein viewed as essential to social thriving and reproduction. This makes for a formidable system of violence.

Although the basic mechanics of capitalism are relatively well understood in the field of Critical Animal Studies (Nibert, 2017; Nocella et al., 2014; Sanbonmatsu, 2011; Sorenson, 2016), Wadiwel encourages readers to explore the nuances of Marxist analysis that illuminate the true complexity of speciesism, including the identification of cost-cutting measures, efforts to reduce human labor time and increase automation, and the unending expansion of production. Wadiwel summarizes:

> In a technical sense, we could describe the factory farm as an apparatus of production where human labour time is minimised or eliminated; large quantities of fixed capital are deployed; the mass of animal labour time is expanded; and production becomes largely a process of interaction between animals and fixed capital to produce value. (p. ix)

Working to Death

Wadiwel begins with a discussion of value under capitalism, noting that nonhuman animals are, of course, transformed into commodities for consumption,

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but they also serve as "raw materials that circulate within economies" (p. 1) to be worked on. Nonhumans add even greater value by "working" on themselves through maturation and sustaining themselves (for the most part) until the point of slaughter. Wadiwel emphasizes that circulation is a major point at which nonhuman animals add "free" labor as they effectively walk themselves to processing points, keeping themselves alive and as free from injury as possible. "It is cheaper to transport live animals because of the low relative cost of the labour of animals" (p. 155), he clarifies. Indeed, circulation, under capitalism, triggers considerable attention to efficiencies given implications for turnover time. There has been a subsequent move toward the vertical integration of production in the Global North to control "diverse 'value added' product lines" (p. 135), including "local grown" or "organic" products.

Centralizing to maximize efficiencies, however, means that nonhuman animals must be transported very long distances to reach feedlots and slaughterhouses. This has been exacerbated by increased mechanization and globalization. One consequence of these shifts has been the rise in live exports. Sociologists have noted that the public response to the suffering this shift has entailed has been largely tempered by hegemonic capitalist norms, emphasizing the need to mind welfare in the food system rather than entertain criticisms of the structure itself (Pendergrast, 2015). Casualty, however, is accounted for as a predictable cost of business, Wadiwel counters, and "is not a problem for the value chain unless it threatens the ability of the cargo to realise value within the next phase of production" (p. 145). "Almost everywhere we find that 'welfare' must be balanced against profitability," he surmises, such that "the level of violence applied to animals becomes a measure of the surplus that is possible to extract" (p. 150).

Wadiwel's spotlight on the "fishing" industry also demonstrates the hollowness of welfare concerns in the factory farm system. Industry leaders and consumers alike often adopt the narrative that welfare is necessary to ensure nonhuman animals survive until slaughter and business remains profitable. However, fish are most often killed by asphyxiation which can take up to an hour. Many are also frozen or gutted alive, he adds, which are equally prolonged methods of execution. Scientific research now demonstrates that fish do in fact feel pain (Brown, 2014), but the persistent questioning of this fact detracts, Wadiwel notes, from the vast structural interests that human industries have in maintaining this violence. Acknowledging their suffering would call into question a hugely profitable global enterprise. As a result, consumers are left with the perverse interpretation that nonhuman animals actually want to die and that their suffering and violent death is excusable as it ensures that these animals are brought into existence in the first place. Indeed, these

narratives see nonhuman animals as passively handing themselves over to human oppression: "Epistemic violence renders fishes as uninterested in their own lives" (p. 207).

Objects and Agents

Because nonhuman animals under capitalism are "raw material that is treated as a static object" but also "labourers who are asked to work on themselves in order to produce value" (p. 29), they become something more than objects, sometimes "agents within production which animate productive processes through their creative labour" (p. 12). Indeed, with nonhuman animals recognized as laborers, they stand as the "most significant labour force of capitalism" (p. 14). The architecture of factory farms, increased mechanization, and, of course, domestication itself aid in the full exploitation of this labor. In aquaculture, the resistance of free-living fishes is systematically undermined by encapsulating them so they cannot evade capture and manipulating their movements through suction and light. Conflict and resistance subsequently position fishes and other animals as co-creators of society and material relations. This is "sobering" and "empowering" (p. 190), Wadiwel reflects, as so much of what these beings are capable of has been "channelled into so much violence" (p. 190).

The legacy of anthropocentrism in Marxist thought has complicated potential solidarity. Although connections are often made between the treatment of human workers and other animals in such systems (Torres, 2008), Wadiwel draws attention to key distinctions that undermine this intersectional approach, noting that, unlike human workers, nonhuman animals "have no necessary distinction between formal and social labor" (p. 4), and, for that matter, "no distinction between work and home" (p. 4), such that "all time for these animals is production time" (p. 5). Time is a constant concern of capitalist enterprises, with operations regularly expanding or speeding up so that no second is squandered. While this has been problematic for human workers, it has been disastrous for other animals. The pressure to meet deadlines means welfare is routinely overlooked and accidents increase.

Intersectional Limits

Marx's assumption that this growing pressure would inevitably fuel revolution and social progress has not materialized with regard to other animals,

but Wadiwel grants that we are experiencing a "historical moment of current material conditions" with "contradictions and antagonisms" that create "unprecedented opportunities" for activists (p. 58). These opportunities, however, do not seem to align with growing preference for intersectionality in social justice efforts, which he argues "too easily assumes that diverse political subjectivities can be reconciled towards shared goals" (p. 48). Coalition, he warns, is not inevitable, and "the unique material position of animals" may tag them as "beyond redemption by anti-capitalism" (p. 53).

There are many contradictions raised by a multispecies analysis of capitalism, contradictions that must be reconciled to inform a more effective anti-capitalist movement. For one, veganism – a consumer boycott against animal products – focuses on consumption politics, trapping "resistance" to purchasing decisions within the capitalist sphere, rather than challenging the capitalist system itself. Second, the same industrial conditions that allowed for the rise of factory farming also allowed for the rise of mass production of vegetables and grains. That is, the same capitalist system that facilitated the growth of animal consumption also facilitated the growth of plant consumption. Third, nonhuman animal agriculture is deeply deleterious to global health and environmental wellbeing, yet it persists in spite of the rise of veganism and increased production of grains and vegetables.

Wadiwel concludes that putting faith in the consumption sphere of capitalism is shortsighted: "This misses the driving force for the overproduction in the first place, which is derived from the value that can be attained from the 'controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production'" (p. 90). To meaningfully challenge industrialized speciesism, there will need to be a shift of attention from consumption to production. "Large-scale changes cannot occur by waiting for consumers to adjust consumption habits," he summarizes (p. 199). To this end, an examination of colonialism and its influence over capitalist economic relations will be helpful, as will be alliances with Indigenous communities who have previously existed outside of these relations and may offer imaginative, sustainable alternatives bound in social justice frameworks that depart from prevailing Eurocentric, highly individualistic, and ultimately privileged "vote with your dollar" consumer choice approaches.

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