

HUMANITY AND INHUMANITY

Toward a Sociology of the Slaughterhouse

RICHARD YORK

University of Oregon

Charles Patterson. *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust*. New York: Lantern Books, 2002.

Steven M. Wise. *Drawing the Line: Science and the Case for Animal Rights*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 2002.

Cary Wolfe (Ed.). *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

In his plea for a land ethic, Aldo Leopold (1949/1970) retold the story of Odysseus, on his return from Troy, hanging a dozen slave girls of his household for suspected misbehavior. Leopold noted,

This hanging involved no question of propriety. The girls were property. The disposal of property was then, as now, a matter of expediency, not of right and wrong. (p. 237)

Leopold was, of course, concerned with the absence of consideration for wild nature in our ethical systems and our treatment of land as mere property. We no longer find it acceptable to treat humans as property, at least in such a flagrant manner as in Odysseus's time, but other living creatures remain governed by the dictates of expediency rather than right and wrong.

A thoughtful consideration of the relationship between animals and society raises important questions. How do humans interact with other animals? Understanding the role of nonhuman animals in societies is clearly important. Social scientists would do well to direct research at this topic. However, empirical evidence alone cannot answer a far more challenging question: How should humans interact with other animals? Science cannot adjudicate answers to this question. Nonetheless, social scientists can provide fruitful answers as to the forces that lead to various types of relationships between society and animals. This topic has been of rising interest in sociology, as evidenced by the recent formation of the Animals and Society section of the American Sociological Association, a special issue on animals and society in the *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* (Alger, 2003), and the "Symposium on Vivisection, Animal Equality, and Organizations" (2000) in *Organization & Environment*.¹ The books reviewed here have been selected because they address a diversity of issues about animals and society,

Author's Note: I thank Brett Clark for his generous and insightful comments.

Organization & Environment, Vol. 17 No. 2, June 2004 260-265

DOI: 10.1177/1086026604264878

© 2004 Sage Publications

260

and they provide a jumping off point for a discussion of how sociology can engage the animal question.

In *Drawing the Line*, Steven Wise, a legal scholar of animal rights, takes on the rather challenging issue of what is necessary to meet the standard of legal personhood and whether some species of animals other than humans may meet this standard. Wise argues that the law is far more flexible than one might expect in this regard. Wise's basic case is simple: Several species of animals clearly qualify for basic liberty rights (or "dignity rights")—in effect, the right to live as they please, free from human enslavement and mistreatment—under common law, and many other species may also qualify if more were known about them.

According to Wise, most common law judges consider "practical autonomy," even in the absence of sophisticated cognitive abilities, sufficient for basic liberty rights, and a being has practical autonomy if she

1. can desire;
2. can intentionally try to fulfill her desires; and
3. possesses a sense of self sufficiency to allow her to understand, even dimly, that it is she who wants something and it is she who is trying to get it. (p. 32)

Obviously, judges originally developed these standards without specifically considering their potential application to nonhuman animals. The legal issue of who gets liberty rights was traditionally concerned with humans of diminished (or even absent) cognitive abilities, for example, the severely mentally disabled, infants, and fetuses. Nonetheless, Wise argues that there is no fundamental legal reason why animals who meet these criteria cannot qualify for legal personhood because their mental capacities often exceed those of some humans (e.g., infants). For the bulk of Western history, women and non-Whites were denied basic liberty rights (even though they have the same intellectual capacities of White males), but the interpretation of the law was expanded to include them as legal persons. The case for nonhuman animals may not be as unambiguous as that for women and non-Whites (because animals have intellectual capacities that differ from humans), but many of them nonetheless meet the above criteria.

Wise clearly states that his approach is pragmatic: He is making a legal argument, not a moral one. He does not make the case that the capacity to suffer is the key for dignity rights (although he is clearly sympathetic to this view), as does Singer (1975), because this position has no grounding in the law. His argument is not so much that we should change laws so that animals qualify for legal rights but rather that some animals already may qualify for rights under existing laws. Some readers will likely find his approach a bit dry (a point he concedes), but it does have the merit of focusing on factual claims rather than intangible moral ones.

Although Wise is not the most engaging writer, he is surely addressing an interesting and important topic. The commonly accepted division of the world into two categories, humans and everything else, based on the assumed superiority of humans is clearly problematic. Human infants (not to mention fetuses) and those with severe mental disabilities clearly have more limited mental capacities than many nonhuman animals. The granting of legal rights to all humans and the denial of rights to all nonhumans is a clear example of speciesism, because it is not based on a criterion other than the category (species) to which each belongs.

Should our self-appointed (and dubious) superiority be used to justify any and all horrors humans inflict on other creatures? Whereas Wise deals with the legal

criteria necessary for liberty rights, Charles Patterson, in *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust*, addresses the far more emotionally gripping topic of the atrocities humans commit against nonhumans as well as other humans. Patterson makes the link between the methods Nazis used in the Holocaust—the mechanically efficient application of industrial procedures to mass murder—and the industrialized slaughter of several billion animals a year in our time. The book opens with a powerful quote from Yiddish writer and Nobel Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer's "The Letter Writer" that aptly sets the tone for what follows:

[Scholars, philosophers, and world leaders] have convinced themselves that man, the worst transgressor of all species, is the crown of creation. All other creatures were created merely to provide him with food, pelts, to be tormented, exterminated. In relation to them, all people are Nazis; for the animals it is an eternal Treblinka. (p. vii)

Patterson's central argument is that the exploitation of both humans and nonhumans goes hand in hand, and that the "justification" for the atrocities of the Nazi death camps is little different from the justification for slaughterhouses. Patterson's argument is similar to Carol Adams's (1990) position regarding the connection between the oppression of women and of animals, in that both identify the division of living creatures into dichotomous categories with the assumed superiority of one (e.g., man/woman, human/nonhuman, White/non-White) as the fundamental basis of cruelty, violence, and general "inhumanity." Furthermore, Patterson argues that the callous mistreatment of nonhumans serves as a model frequently used throughout history for cruelty to other humans.

The collection of essays in Cary Wolfe's edited volume *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* goes straight to the matter of what it is to be human and what it is to be animal. Unlike the two other books reviewed here, this is an academic work with contributions from several prominent scholars, including Jacques Derrida. The volume as a whole has a taste of postmodernism and the general approach is from the humanities, focused on language, texts, and interpretation rather than factual claims. The general themes of the essays are concerned with the issues of the subjective nature of experience, the degree to which such experience is unique to humans (and how we could even know such a thing), and how we come to divide the world into those who are like us and those who are the Other. Thus, although coming from perspectives different from Wise and Patterson, the authors of these essays are also grappling with the legitimacy of predominant anthropocentric value systems in human societies and human interaction with and exploitation of other animals.

The most engaging essay in the collection is that of Charlie LeDuff, a journalist and the only nonacademic contributor. LeDuff's chapter, "At a Slaughterhouse, Some Things Never Die," is a fascinating investigation of the racially segregated nature of a slaughterhouse in North Carolina and how the exploitation of humans and other animals is intermingled (a reoccurring theme in all of the work reviewed here). Mexican Americans get the worst jobs (e.g., working on the kill floor) and African Americans get the other dirty and grueling jobs. Native Americans generally get the cleaner but still menial jobs, whereas the managers and supervisors are mostly White. The repetitive, exhausting, and dehumanizing work tends to eliminate chances for human interaction, and consequently, racism is rampant among the workers and there is a lack of solidarity. LeDuff's stark portrait of the slaughter-

house exemplifies Patterson's contention in *Eternal Treblinka*: The denigration and oppression of nonhumans reinforces the denigration and oppression of humans.

Although Patterson's argument and the arguments made by many of the contributors to Wolfe's collection are grounded too much in the philosophical idealism tradition for my taste, the cases they make are nevertheless powerful (at least ethically and emotionally). Careful reflection on the topic could help lead us to a sociology of the slaughterhouse, a deeper understanding of how exploitation and oppression (not to mention horrific acts of cruelty) are perpetuated and justified. Nibert (2003) has already provided a sociological basis for such inquiries that challenges the moral and intellectual blinders most social scientists have when it comes to the topic of animals (see also Garner, 2003). Like Patterson, Nibert argued that human interactions with animals are of central importance to society and individual people, and that the exploitation of nonhumans can be understood in the same manner as that of humans. Along the same lines, Myers (2003) argued that animals could be included in the core subject matter of sociology and advocated further research on human-animal interactions that examines how animals help shape self and society.

Why is it that sociology has neglected ethnozoology²—the study of human-animal interactions? Arluke (2003) noted that resistance to studying animals and society, particularly exploitation of animals, frequently comes from researchers who study various oppressed human groups. There is, perhaps, a concern on the Left that including nonhuman animals as an oppressed and exploited group will detract from efforts aimed at bringing about social equality and justice for people. There is no necessary reason, however, that Leftist politics cannot incorporate concern for nonhumans while maintaining a strong commitment to social justice. For example, Henry S. Salt was a prominent socialist and animal rights supporter who saw the close connection between many forms of injustice (Clark & Foster, 2000; Salt, 2000). He fought to prevent cruelty to animals, the killing of animals for sport, the exploitation of peoples in colonies, the use of torture in prisons, and the despoliation of nature by capital. As Patterson suggests, far from detracting from efforts to end oppression of humans, a concern for the treatment of animals could work synergistically with social justice causes.

There already exists an empirical literature in sociology that examines the social factors that influence individual decisions to be vegetarian, which has a substantial focus on value systems and social structural factors such as race, class, and gender (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Dietz, Frisch, Kalof, Stern, & Guagnano, 1995; Dietz, Kalof, & Frisch, 1996; Gossard & York, 2003; Kalof, Dietz, Stern, & Guagnano, 1999). This literature provides a basis for further inquiry into the social forces that influence human-animal interactions. There is also substantial room for investigation, in the same line as Patterson's work, of how the industrialization of slaughter developed. For example, both Cronon (1991) and Steinberg (2002) presented histories of the development of the slaughterhouse and its connection to the larger forces of industrialization and the separation of local production from local consumption.

Social theory also provides clear foundations for ethnozoological research. In addition to idealist theories of identity and subjectivity, represented by most of the essays in *Zoontologies*, the materialist tradition provides a refined perspective for examining the position of humans in nature and our relationship to other animals. In particular, materialist Marxism provides a critique that makes clear the antieco-logical and antihuman nature of capitalism (Foster, 2000, 2002). LeDuff's essay

illustrates well how capitalists, in their effort to commodify everything, make little distinction between humans, animals, and inanimate objects. All are merely things that can be exploited to generate profits. From the materialist Marxist position, there is clearly a connection between the struggle for human, animal, and ecological liberation from the dictates of capitalist expediency. Salt, who was also a materialist, rejected the dichotomization between humans and nonhuman animals. He exposed the hypocrisy where scientists would reject notions that the universe was created for human beings yet adhere to a moral position that separated humans from nonhuman animals to justify the exploitation and cruelty directed at other animals (Clark & Foster, 2000). By grappling with these perspectives, social theory can better our understanding of the social and historical forces that contribute to the current relations between human society and the larger world and it is hoped, thereby improving our ability to navigate from inhumanity toward a new humanity.

NOTES

1. For the introduction to the *Organization & Environment* symposium on organizations and animal equality, see Gaines and Jermier (2000).
2. *Anthrozoology* and *sociozoology* are also commonly used terms for this subject.

REFERENCES

- Adams, C. (1990). *The sexual politics of meat*. New York: Continuum.
- Alger, J. (Ed.). (2003). Animals in the future of sociology [Special issue]. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 23(3).
- Arluke, A. (2003). Ethnozoology and the future of sociology. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 23(3), 26-45.
- Beardsworth, A., & Keil, T. (1992). The vegetarian option: Varieties, conversions, motives and careers. *Sociological Review*, 40, 253-293.
- Clark, B., & Foster, J. B. (2000). Henry S. Salt, socialist animal rights activist: An introduction to Salt's "A Lover of Animals." *Organization & Environment*, 13(4), 468-473.
- Cronon, W. (1991). *Nature's metropolis: Chicago and the great West*. New York: Norton.
- Dietz, T., Frisch, A. S., Kalof, L., Stern, P. C., & Guagnano, G. A. (1995). Values and vegetarianism: An exploratory analysis. *Rural Sociology*, 60(3), 533-542.
- Dietz, T., Kalof, L., & Frisch, A. S. (1996). The human ecology of the vegetarian diet: A bibliography. *Human Ecology Review*, 2(2), 181-186.
- Foster, J. B. (2000). *Marx's ecology: Materialism and nature*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Foster, J. B. (2002). *Ecology against capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Gaines, J., & Jermier, J. M. (2000). Animal inequality and organizations: Introduction. *Organization & Environment*, 13(4), 426-428.
- Garner, R. (2003). Animals, politics and justice: Rawlsian liberalism and the plight of nonhumans. *Environmental Politics*, 12(2), 3-22.
- Gossard, M. H., & York, R. (2003). Social structural influences on meat consumption. *Human Ecology Review*, 10(1), 1-9.
- Kalof, L. E., Dietz, T., Stern, P. C., & Guagnano, G. A. (1999). Social psychological and structural influences on vegetarian beliefs. *Rural Sociology*, 64(3), 500-511.
- Leopold, A. (1970). *A Sand County almanac*. New York: Ballantine. (Original work published 1949)
- Myers, O. E., Jr. (2003). No longer the lonely species: A Post-Mead perspective on animals and sociology. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 23(3), 46-68.
- Nibert, D. (2003). Humans and other animals: Sociology's moral and intellectual challenge. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 23(3), 5-25.

- Salt, H. S. (2000). A lover of animals: An original play in one act [Original work published 1895]. *Organization & Environment*, 13(4), 474-485.
- Singer, P. (1975). *Animal liberation: A new ethics for our treatment of animals*. New York: Avon.
- Steinberg, T. (2002). *Down to earth: Nature's role in American history*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Symposium on Vivisection, Animal Equality, and Organizations. (2000). *Organization & Environment*, 13(4), 426-467.

Richard York is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Oregon. His primary research focus is on the relationship between population, development, capitalism, and the environment. He is also interested in the connection between theory and research methodology. His research has been published in American Sociological Review, Human Ecology Review, Organization & Environment, and other scholarly journals. Direct correspondence to Sociology Department, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-1291; e-mail: rfyork@darkwinguoregon.edu