

THE CAPITALIST COMMODIFICATION OF ANIMALS

Edited by Brett Clark
and Tamar Diana Wilson

RESEARCH IN POLITICAL
ECONOMY

VOLUME 35

THE CAPITALIST COMMODIFICATION OF ANIMALS

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THE CAPITALIST COMMODIFICATION OF ANIMALS: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Brett Clark and Tamar Diana Wilson

Human–nonhuman animal relationships are not set in stone. They have been dramatically transformed throughout history due to specific socioeconomic, ideological, and cultural conditions (Hurn, 2012). In “Why Look at Animals?,” John Berger (2009, p. 13) notes,

...animals are born, are sentient and are mortal. In these things they resemble man. In their superficial anatomy—less in their deep anatomy—in their habits, in their time, in their physical capacities, they differ from man. They are both like and unlike.

He highlights the corporeal continuity and distinction that exists between humans and nonhuman animals, the changing interactions and understandings of this relation. Early in human history,

...animals constituted the first circle of what surrounded man. Perhaps that already suggests too great a distance. They were with man at the centre of his world. Such centrality was of course economic and productive. (Berger, 2009, p. 12)

While animal suffering and abuse have taken place throughout history, the birth of capitalism and its revolutionary development created a “rupture” in these relationships, a deep alienation from nature, whereby the depredations accelerated and increased in scope and scale, given the logic of capital and its system of generalized commodity production (Berger, 2009, p. 12; Burkett, 1999; Foster, 1994, 2000; Moore, 2015; Wallerstein, 1974).

The capitalist system is predicated on the endless accumulation of wealth. It is a grow-or-die system that does not recognize any boundaries. Practical human activities, including human–nonhuman animal relations and interactions with the larger biophysical world, are progressively geared toward the production of commodities. In the first volume of *Capital*, Karl Marx (1976) explained that

studying commodities served as the basis for revealing the logic of capitalism and the transformations that had taken place in regard to human relations with nature. Under capitalism, a commodity is a product sold on the market that is produced for exchange rather than use, simply to expand the accumulation of capital, to increase value (Altvater, 1993). In his general formula for capital— $M-C-M'$ —Marx (1976) presented the underlining operation of this system. Money capital, M , is transformed into C , a commodity (via production), which then must be sold for more money, realizing the original value plus an added or surplus value, distinguishing M' (or $M + \Delta m$, which is surplus value). Capitalist accounting is purely a quantitative consideration, which involves the “continuous transformation of capital-as-money into capital-as-commodities, followed by a retransformation of capital-as-commodities into capital-as-more-money” (Heilbroner, 1985, p. 36). This endless cycle provides capitalist production with the formidable growth dynamic, its momentum, and its exponential increase. The ability of capital to extract surplus value through commodity production is made possible through both exploitation and expropriation of human labor, nonhuman animals, and nature. The veil of commodity production, in which money serves as the form of exchange, hides this robbery (Foster and Clark, 2020; Longo et al., 2015).

Marx highlighted how the system of generalized commodity production and the growth imperative of capital generated grave contradictions, which included concerns regarding nonhuman animals. He emphasized that humans are animals and incorporated evolutionary understandings regarding the continuity in species into his analysis. He offered a devastating critique of Cartesian metaphysics, in which René Descartes relegated animals to the status of machines, thereby excusing abuse, suffering, and violation of corporeal life (Foster and Clark, 2020). Marx (1976, pp. 285–288) analyzed the historical transformation of human–nonhuman animal relations that accompanied the ongoing development of capitalism, especially in the mid-nineteenth century, which evolved into capital treating nonhuman animals as machines and created an alienated mediation between human beings and other species. He detailed how capital turned animals into instruments and raw materials in capitalist production. In particular, in the second volume of *Capital*, Marx (1978, pp. 314–315) focused on how capital employed science and technology to maximize profits. Animals were confined in “prison cells” (i.e., stalls) to restrict movement, to enhance feeding, and to accelerate their rate of growth. This imprisonment helped reduce turnover time, which sped up the realization of profits. Furthermore, selective breeding was directed toward modifying the bone structure of sheep to create heavier bodies and weaker skeletal frames. Marx described this process as one of “aborting bones in order to transform them [i.e., sheep] to mere meat and a bulk of fat” (quoted in Saito, 2017, p. 209). Calves were weaned from their mothers early to increase the availability of milk that could be sold on the market. While these practices resulted in growth deformities and the “serious deterioration of life force,” they enhanced the accumulation of capital.

The expansion of capitalist production has led to “the commodification of everything” in order to increase profits (Moore, 2010, p. 189; Wallerstein, 1983, p. 16). Bob Torres (2007, p. 11) explains that

...the structure and nature of contemporary capital has deepened, extended, and worsened our domination over animals and the natural world.... Animals become nothing more than living machines, transformed from beings who live for themselves into beings that live for capital.

The capitalist commodification of animals is extensive. It includes, but is not limited to, livestock production in concentrated animal feeding operations; the slaughter of “surplus” male calves at a few months of age to provide veal; leather and fur production; the ivory trade in which tusks are used for “traditional medicines” or carved into decorative objects; entertainment such as in zoos, marine parks, and circuses; laboratory experimentation to test medicines, beauty products, pesticides, and other chemicals; the pursuit of trophy hunting, sometimes on canned farms and sometimes in the wild; and bioengineering of livestock and of animals used in laboratories, just to name a few. The animal kingdom—whether it is cows, pigs, chickens, turkeys, ostriches, elephants, rhinoceros, pangolins, bison, fish, horses, dogs, rabbits, mice, rats, primates, etc.—is exploited and often slaughtered in the commodification process. Large-scale industrialized production of meat is directly linked to the commodification process and the pursuit of capital accumulation, creating a situation where “more animals are killed every year than are present on earth at any one time” (Fre-shour, 2019; Gunderson, 2011; Pellow, 2014; Stuart and Gunderson, 2020; Weis, 2013, p. 140). This is a direct product of the capitalist system. As Ruth Harrison (2013, p. 37) indicated, “cruelty is acknowledged only where profitability ceases.”

Bradley J. Macdonald (2011, pp. 41–42) argues that the alienation of nature that accompanies capitalist social relations also generates an “alienated speciesism.” While nonhuman animals are everywhere, “the more their dismembered bodies intersect ours” in the form of commodities circulating throughout the economic system, “the more they ultimately disappear from human life” (Macdonald, 2011, p. 41). The capitalist commodification of animals has been accompanied by and reinforced through various forms of rationality and ideological justifications, depicting nonhuman animals as dumb, inferior, and not worthy of concerns regarding suffering and abuse. Comparative ethology, the study of animal behavior, directly contradicts such claims (Weis, 2013; York and Longo, 2017). All of this indicates the importance of political–economic analyses that account for the historical transformations in the material conditions of nonhuman animals, alienated speciesism, the larger ecological crisis that is undermining the conditions of life for all species, and the capitalist commodification of animals that results in widespread suffering, death, and profits.

The contributors to this special issue of *Research in Political Economy* address questions regarding the capitalist commodification of animals from a variety of critical perspectives. Christian Stache puts forward a reworked conception of animal capital, rooted in a sociorelational and value understanding of capitalism, explaining how animals are integrated into capitalist society via a relation of superexploitation to capital. Drawing on Herbert Marcuse’s conception of

instrumental rationality, Paul Brügger explores the roots of objectification and commodification of nature, as a means to confront the epistemological bedrock of speciesist education. Charles Thorpe and Brynna Jacobson argue that capitalism produces a “culture of abstraction” in labor, mind, and life, which imposes market rationality onto nature, nonhuman animals, and the living world. Wolfgang Leyk considers the logic that facilitates the objectification and instrumentalization of animals, offering an assessment for how to shift to an animal-oriented economy. Tamar Diana Wilson addresses the role that “cheap labor” and “cheap living beings” played in the commodification of fur-bearing animals in the eighteen and nineteenth centuries in Canada and the United States with a view first to trapping and second to fur-farming operations that continue until today. Alexander Simon investigates the changing relationship between wolves and humans in North America, from indigenous settlement through the various phases of capitalist development. Cade Jameson provides a study of how Aldo Leopold’s personal commitment to the institution of private property and promotion of voluntary mechanisms undermine efforts to protect wildlife and land from capitalist predations. The final chapter, which is not focussed on the capitalist commodification of animals, but was a submission to *Research in Political Economy*, is by Agustín Santella, who offers an analysis of the interconnections between working-class struggles, armed insurgent actions, and political violence in Villa Constitución, Argentina, from 1973 to 1975.

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PART I

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE COMMODIFICATION OF ANIMALS

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