

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review
of
Our Children and Other Animals

Matthew Cole and Kate Stewart
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Cole and Stewart's 2014 release, *Our Children and Other Animals: The Cultural Construction of Human-Animal Relations in Childhood*, offers an important sociological contribution to liberatory vegan research. The book's primary value is its critical examination of childhood socialization processes that habituate humans to speciesism through the institutions of family, education, and mass media.

Cole and Stewart's theory is grounded in the social construction of other animals, that is, how humans "name," relate to, and understand other animals. How a nonhuman species is understood to be instrumentally useful (or un-useful) will shape their experience; cultural knowledge about them will ultimately determine their fate. Certainly, Nonhuman Animals have resisted human projects of categorization, but they often lack the agency necessary to escape the consequences within an oppressive anthroparchal social system.

This categorization process identified by the authors is placed within a conceptual map of "sensitivity" and "non-sensitivity" (an expansion of the conventional animal studies framework of "visibility" or "invisibility," which they argue does not fully encapsulate human-nonhuman relations). Those Nonhuman Animals who are placed into areas of non-sensitivity and objectification tend to be those who experience greater levels of institutionalized violence in processes that are largely hidden from human sensitivity. These ideas are explored through very thoughtful discussion of sociological theory, primarily that of Weber and Foucault in regard to the impact that rationalization has had on our social world and the aggravation of oppression.

The book also delves into the historical developments of human-nonhuman relationships following major social struc-

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tural changes in Western urbanization and industrialization in the 18th and 19th centuries. These disruptions challenged traditional relationships and necessitated some reorganization. Scripts of “proper” interaction, namely in relation to moral development, would be required for many animals now living in greater proximity to humans (such as horses, “pets,” and “zoo” animals). Those animals whose experiences may have posed a moral challenge to vulnerable viewers were removed from sensibility (those killed in slaughtering or vivisection facilities, for example). Indeed, the Nonhuman Animal rights movement as it is known today manifested in this era of restructuring. The movement could be said to have mobilized in response to the gaps in speciesism’s ideological stronghold on the human imagination that materialized during the transition to a modern society.

In this examination of ideology, Cole and Stewart’s work also extends David Nibert’s thesis of entangled oppression. Children and other animals have historically existed as vulnerable groups; their fates have depended heavily upon categorizations determined by adult humans. Human-like, but not quite human, the systemic oppression that impacts them stems from their failure to achieve full humanness. Interestingly, their low status is also evidenced in scientific literature: both have been excluded from serious academic study until only very recently. Despite the major role Nonhuman Animals play in childhood, the *intersections* of these two topics continue to be ignored as well. The authors emphasize that this is an egregious shortcoming given the deadly implications childhood socialization holds for other animals.

In subsequent chapters, these consequences are unpacked as readers learn the myriad of ways that children are gradually so-

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cialized to objectify other animals. This is accomplished with toys, play, and food products that normalize animal consumption, but also through speciesist school programs (like vivisection or classroom chick hatching). From these relationships, children not only learn human supremacy, but gender differentiation as well. This is particularly evidenced by the positioning of affection for other animals as childish, immature, and effeminate. These trends are exemplified in the authors' sociological analysis of a large London toy store, a critical review of the animated film *Puss in Boots*, and a content analysis of pre-teen "cute animal" magazines. Children's spaces teem with species codes.

"Farming" video games made popular since the late 2000s are also deconstructed. The authors point to the worrying misinformation presented to children with the intention of normalizing speciesism within the context of capitalism. It is a maneuver that obscures the violence inherent to the Nonhuman Animal agriculture. As just one example, virtual pigs, cows, and other animals appear to *gift* their products: milk, eggs, hair, and even their flesh. With just a mouse-click, "meat" will magically appear for collection beside a still living animal in one game that was analyzed. The authors report that another game even allows players to painlessly (and non-lethally) harvest bacon from pigs when given a bath in a hot tub. In all cases, Nonhuman Animals never die: they exist as interminable machines that are happy to serve and produce unending profit for players.

Again, the educational system is another major site of socialization. Mirroring American exposés on industry ties to school lunch programs and nutritional educational materials like that of T. Campbell (*The China Study*), David Nibert (*Animal Rights/Human Rights*), John Robbins (*Diet for a New America*),

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and Eric Schlosser (*Fast Food Nation*), Cole and Stewart find evidence for this same political relationship within the British system as well. Childhood socialization seeks to reinforce the instrumental value of other animals, sometimes with a distracting veneer of affection or caring, and always with the goal of maintaining the human supremacist system.

Fortunately, the book ends on a happier note with a literary analysis of existing vegan children books. These books exemplify the ways in which anthroparchal socialization processes can be disrupted. Children's inherent empathy can be nurtured instead of stifled. They can be encouraged to value other animals as persons, rather than as instruments. Violence against other animals is no longer hidden in vegan children's literature. It is instead confronted head on (in a child-appropriate manner). Preliminary pathways to compassionate citizenship are thus mapped for readers.

Our Children and Other Animals fills an important gap in the literature regarding childhood development, speciesism, and structural oppression. Because prejudice must be learned and oppression must be maintained through replication of ideology in emerging generations, it is vital to understand the processes in their early stages. Although its writing style reflects its academic purpose, this book would also be helpful to vegan parents, vegan-curious parents, and activists hoping to disrupt the complex mechanisms of speciesism. *Our Children and Other Animals* offers a groundbreaking exploration into the sociology of intersecting human-nonhuman relationships that will be foundational to future research and advocacy endeavors.