

A Rational Approach to Animal Rights: Extensions in Abolitionist Theory, by **Corey Lee Wrenn**. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 239 pp. \$100.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781137434647.

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Leaders in the various nonhuman animal rights movements argue over whether it is more efficient and productive to advance an animal welfare or animal rights/liberation agenda. Members of these same movements debate whether they should endorse veganism or vegetarianism or just encourage people to reduce their consumption of meat and dairy products. They also disagree over whether veganism should be promoted for animal rights, diet and health, or environmental reasons. In *A Rational Approach to Animal Rights: Extensions in Abolitionist Theory*, Corey Lee Wrenn challenges the conventional thought of the nonhuman animal rights movements that promotes a neoliberal, capitalist agenda that reinforces rather than ends speciesism—an ideology that values human animals over nonhuman animals and justifies the exploitation and abuse of nonhuman animals.

Specifically, Wrenn's groundbreaking book provides a critical analysis of the two major perspectives within nonhuman animal rights organizations: animal welfarism and abolitionism. Her main thesis is that various nonhuman animal protection movements have become irrational and unproductive by actively employing sexist and racist tactics that defeat the goals of ending animal exploitation. By focusing on efficiency and single-issue advocacy, nonhuman animal welfare organizations end up upholding speciesism and other forms of inequality.

On the other hand, animal rights abolitionists endorse an anti-speciesist platform that rejects animal welfare reform and promotes veganism as the basic requirement for ending all animal use and exploitation. Although Wrenn aligns herself with the abolitionist philosophy, she is critical of the lack of an evidence-based approach to making social change. Currently, the narrative surrounding animal rights activism relies on personal

spirituality, beliefs, and experiences rather than being grounded in rational thought consisting of "reason, critical thinking, reflexivity, and skepticism" (p. 16). She is also critical of how both animal welfare organizations and animal abolitionist groups promote post-feminist and post-racial activism. Thus, Wrenn calls for a new abolitionist approach that uses a rigorous scientific approach based in social science methodology and theory that promotes social justice over individual action.

Wrenn uses Weber's analysis of bureaucracies and George Ritzer's concept of McDonaldization to explain how nonhuman animal protection agencies have become less effective since adopting a more professionalized and bureaucratic stance. Non-profit organizations, like the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) or People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), work with animal-based industries through legislation and company boycotts to modify industry practices and "make life better for animals." In fact, in order to avoid alienating potential donors, they promote veganism as one of many options to "reduce" animal suffering. This makes consumers feel good about the "humane treatment" of animals and encourages people to continue eating and using animals. Wrenn argues that in order to build networks, raise capital, and reform animal-based industries, animal welfare nonprofits end up profiting from the animal industries. Therefore, they compromise the anti-speciesist message and lose credibility among many nonhuman animal rights activists, including animal abolitionists.

One of the most thought-provoking sections of the book extends Wrenn's previous research that critiques single-issue campaign strategies that de-emphasize speciesism and veganism. Wrenn explains how single-issue campaigning promotes reform rather than radical, structural, and systematic change. She uses an analogy of a tree, as formulated by Flinn and Cudahy (2011) to explain how speciesism and human use of animals are organized and interconnected. Single-issue campaigns may strike down a branch of the tree or a single problem that exploits animals; but they do not destroy speciesism, which is the trunk of tree. While it

may not be possible to rip out the roots of our neoliberal capitalist structure, we can attack the foundation of speciesism only by promoting veganism (pp. 74–75).

Additionally, many of the nonhuman animal rights campaign tactics rely on a false narrative of a post-feminist, post-racial society that objectifies and alienates women and people of color. Wrenn examines research that highlights PETA campaigns' use of sex to "sell" animal rights. Campaigns and advertisements that objectify women's bodies are justified by appropriating feminism with the neoliberal feminist mantra of "personal choice." Women are now encouraged to objectify themselves for the cause of animal rights. Although women are the main activists and are more likely to be vegetarian or vegan, they are often excluded from leadership by the androcentric movement and silenced as members.

Furthermore, nonhuman animal rights movements assume a post-racial ideology. People of color are mostly ignored and attacked for addressing white privilege and class privilege within the movements. They reveal that veganism is not an affordable or attainable choice for all, particularly those who have few resources to make food choices. In addition, single-issue campaigns are xenophobic and foster racism and speciesism by valuing cats and dogs over farmed animals. Since most westerners value cats and dogs over farmed animals, people feign righteous outrage over the abuse of companion animals in Asia, for example, but ignore their own complicity in using and abusing animals.

According to Wrenn, many movement leaders rely on religious and spiritual mantras to justify and promote animal rights. If these movements are going to be anti-oppression, then they must also be critical of religion, which is based on hierarchy, oppression, and obedience to authority. While Wrenn does not claim that people should reject religion in their personal lives, she calls for nonhuman animal rights activism based on secular values. Although there tends to be a correlation between veganism and atheism, she warns us from thinking that atheists are more rational and more likely to be critical thinkers.

So what should animal activism look like? Wrenn examines social psychological

theories on social change including grassroots tactics of leafleting, food tasting, documentary screenings, and internet activism. Since she promotes structural changes, she is critical of strategies that rely on individual actions such as "voting with your dollar." Individual consumer practices, in particular, rely on an illusion of change in a neoliberal capitalist society.

Although Wrenn provides an important cultural critique of the major thinkers and philosophies of the larger nonhuman animal rights movements, some of the claims about race, gender, and religious bias in the movements rely on theoretical and anecdotal claims rather than on research data. In addition, I agree that the nonhuman animal rights movements must advocate for veganism based on anti-speciesism. However, I believe a major component is missing from Wrenn's analysis.

It may be problematic that corporate conglomerates profit when they buy out small vegan companies, but it confirms the demand for alternative products and the fact that "voting with your dollar" makes an impact. The convenience of vegan food is a critical component to promoting veganism. Wrenn seems to underestimate the importance of food as a source of pleasure and comfort and as a symbolic representation of family and culture (Guptil et al. 2012). Thus nonhuman animal rights movements must push for mass-produced, culturally sensitive, affordable food and other products.

This book is an important contribution to the vegan, intersectional, feminist nonhuman animal rights movement. It reinforces the need for more social science research on animal rights organizations. I highly recommend this book for academic courses on social movements or animals and society and to individuals involved in social movements and activism.

References

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