

# Challenging Epistemic Violence in Class

## The Case of Animal Resistance

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### 1. Introduction

Even though one of the first metaphors for the critical and antidogmatic nature of philosophical pursuit is a stinging gadfly, to which Socrates compares himself in Plato's *Apology*, Western philosophy has mostly "forgotten" to exercise this same critical posture on the crucial issue of the distinction between humans and animals and its implications on the epistemological, ethical, and political levels, forgetting the same gadfly, so to speak. The mainstream of Western philosophy has long been responsible for providing rationally well-packaged legitimacy to anthropocentric prejudices of common sense and to existing forms of domination over animals.

Nevertheless, starting in the mid-1970s with the publication of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* and with a surge in the early 2000s, there has been a significant shift in philosophy and the humanities in this respect: the so-called "animal turn," i.e., an increase in publications, conferences, courses, etc., and a qualitatively new interest in animals and their relations with humans.<sup>1</sup> Some even envisioned an exponential and global spread and academization of Animal Studies (AS) and Critical Animal Studies (CAS).<sup>2</sup> This seems, however, not to be the case, or at least not everywhere.

In this contribution, I will start by adopting the method of feminist storytelling to elaborate a brief frame narrative of my experience as a scholar doing philosophical research in the field of CAS. Second, I will draw on different material that I created for first-year students as part of a teaching activity on the topic of "animal resistance." The overall aim is to provide a reasoned and accessible overview of this recent debate in the field of CAS which has a crucial epistemological dimension and importance, while adopting a format that assumes the value of an instructor-stu-

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1 See Ritvo, Harriet: On the Animal Turn, in: *Daedalus* 136 (2007) 4, 118–122, 119.

2 See Best, Steven: The Rise of Critical Animal Studies, in: *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* VII (2009) 1, 9–52.

dents practice of challenging the epistemic violence<sup>3</sup> of the construction of human superiority to which philosophy largely contributed.

## 2. Small personal note

I started working as a guest lecturer affiliated with the Institute of Philosophy and Art History (IPK) at Leuphana University of Lüneburg (Germany) in April 2022. It was the first time that my research and teaching in the field of Critical Animal Studies were officially accepted and recognized as addressing a topic worthy of philosophical dignity, consideration and economical remuneration by an academic institution. It was the first time that I could “come out” proudly as an animal, anti-speciesist philosopher, without having to hide behind a “more classical, philosophical and respectful” subject. “Don’t do something explicit on animal exploitation,” I was always advised – albeit in good faith and with the bitterness of those who suffered the same fate – by professors and colleagues when discussing possibilities of continuing after the PhD (which I had the luck and freedom to devote exclusively and extremely explicitly to animal oppression) with a scholarly career in Italy, my home country. The only option the Italian academia depicted for me was to follow a more traditional path, including, then, only surreptitiously, only sporadically, here and there, the animal question; for example, researching some specific philosopher’s perspective on animals, or – even broader – research on “philosophy and nature”. The animal question as subject matter per se and, consequently, I as a scholar, were ruled out from the very beginning, invisibilized and made absent, removed behind the scenes – just like the killing of around eighty billion of non-human animals per year – from the philosophical discourse of (Italian) academia.

## 3. Introducing animal resistance in class

In September 2022, I took part in the activities of Leuphana Opening Week for the academic year, devoted to the macro-subject “Turning Points.” During this week, first-semester students are welcomed to their academic studies by engaging with a socially relevant topic, producing, as result of the work, a visionary and critical video.<sup>4</sup> My role was as an academic advisor for three project groups within the “Activists and Researchers” section. It involved proposing a subtopic, providing a short

3 See Wadiwel, Dinesh: *The War Against Animals*, Leiden 2015, 33–36.

4 The videos produced were entitled: “The Year 2082”, “How Recognizing Animal Resistance Could Change the World” and “Multispecies Solidarity” and screened during the last day of the week.

kick-off video, sharing relevant sources, and serving as a consultant for the students' work in progress. My project topic title was: *Do animals resist? Conceptualizing multispecies solidarity*.

In what follows, I propose an adapted transcript of the 15 minutes kick-off video impulse, in turn based on a draft article of mine.

### 3.1 Starting Points

Hello, I'm Chiara and this is the video presentation for the project topic entitled: *Do animals resist? Conceptualizing multispecies solidarity*. With this short introduction I hope to give you impulses to raise open questions, hypotheses and ideas. Let's start.

It has been amply demonstrated that animal exploitation particularly in the context of capitalist industrial agriculture, is a relevant cause of contemporary (socio-)ecological crises, first the climate change and the related extreme environmental events (such as floods, fire, heat waves)<sup>5</sup> and, second, pandemics.<sup>6</sup> I don't want here to adopt the typical environmentalist rhetoric modality of an overwhelming "data dump" of the percentage of gas emissions to produce meat and so on<sup>7</sup>, I just want to highlight that one of the main causes of the Covid-19 pandemic was the high concentration of animals raised in industrial plants<sup>8</sup>, along with the gradual erosion of autonomous living spaces of wild species with devastating effects, especially in the Amazon forest.<sup>9</sup> So, we would expect animal husbandry to play a prominent role in the public debate on climate change. However, it's not so. Not only at the institutional and academic level, but also by those who fight for climate justice, who invisibilize precisely animal exploitation and its centrality in the ecological crisis.<sup>10</sup> It seems that talking explicitly about animal liberation often

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5 See de Boer, Joop et al.: Climate Change and Meat Eating. An Inconvenient Couple?, in: *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (2013) 33, 1–8; Rockström, Johan et al: Planet-proofing the global food system, in: *Nature Food* (2020) 1, 3–5.

6 See Quammen, David: *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*, New York 2012; Wallace, Rob: *Big Farms Make Big Flu. Dispatches on Influenza, Agribusiness, and the Nature of Science*, New York 2016.

7 See Twine, Richard: Emissions from Animal Agriculture – 16.5% Is the New Minimum Figure, in: *Sustainability* (2021) 13, 6276.

8 See, for example, Brozek, Wolfgang/Falkenberg, Christof: Industrial Animal Farming and Zoonotic Risk. COVID-19 as a Gateway to Sustainable Change? A Scoping Study, in: *Sustainability* 13 (2021) 16, 9251.

9 See Recanati, Francesca et al: Global Meat Consumption Trends and Local Deforestation in Madre de Dios. Assessing Land Use Changes and Other Environmental Impacts, in: *Procedia engineering* 118 (2015), 630–638.

10 See Kemmerer, Lisa (ed.): *Animals and the Environment. Advocacy, Activism, and the Quest for Common Ground*, London 2015.

generates embarrassment and rejection. How can we talk, then, about it to bring this issue and its urgency to the center?

The traditional way in which animal advocacy and animal rights theorists talk about it is in terms of “the voiceless.” Animal advocacy seems the most altruistic movement: a minority of kind-hearted humans reflecting, elaborating strategies and acting for the liberation of defenseless, weak, fragile, voiceless creatures, only for the sake of animals and to the detriment of their own interests. The origin of animal advocacy’s slogan: “We are the voice of the voiceless,” which draws from the first strophe of a (powerful and beautiful) poem by US writer Ella Wheeler Wilcox of 1910, is remarkable to grasp this perspective:

*I am the voice of the voiceless;  
Through me the dumb shall speak;  
Till the deaf world's ear be made to hear  
The cry of the wordless weak.<sup>11</sup>*

Animals cannot speak, they are “wordless weak.” According to Western philosophical and political tradition, rooted in the work of Aristotle, if they cannot speak, they are excluded from the political sphere and community. So, they are mute and, in the best of intentions, completely in need of someone to *speak for* them articulating their claims (for example, through the means of representative parties in parliament such as the Party for the Animals in the Netherlands<sup>12</sup>); or in the worst of intentions, easy to exploit and eliminate with impunity.

Such paternalistic and patronizing perspective can be labelled as a form of *human saviorism*.<sup>13</sup>

As you may guess, the idea of animal resistance deeply challenges this perspective. This concept has emerged in the last decades within the academic field of Critical Animal Studies (CAS) and the activism inspired by it. To put it briefly, CAS is an academic field devoted to the inquiry of human-animal relations with a direct focus on the circumstances and treatment of animals. It calls for conceptual renewal, methodological innovation and a further softening of disciplinary boundaries. The adjective “critical” – coming from a radical left-wing political tradition, in particular anarchism and Marxism – emphasizes the role of an engaging and engaged theory

<sup>11</sup> Wheeler Wilcox, Ella: The Voice of the Voiceless, in: Poems of Experience, London 1917, 43.

<sup>12</sup> See Meijer, Eva, Learning Hope in the Anthropocene. The Party for the Animals and Hope as a Political Practice, in: Animal Studies Journal 11 (2022) 1, 145–172.

<sup>13</sup> See “Stories of animal resistance – human saviorism and “voiceless” animals – Geertrui Cazaux [IARC2021]” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1P6CJD\\_pCg&t=489s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1P6CJD_pCg&t=489s) (12/05/23)

to understand and challenge the material and epistemic power relations and violence that affects human and animals and the environment.<sup>14</sup>

### 3.2 Questions: Politics, Agency, Epistemology

Do animals resist? It is possible to unravel the notion of animal resistance along three analytical axes, closely related to each other, which are indispensable to the very possibility of formulating the question of whether animals resist: politics, agency, and epistemology. The dimension of politics is the central one, the great stake that the notion of animal resistance introduces; the question is: do animals resist? And so, are they political subjects? Are human advocates the only activists or are animal activists for their own liberation? If so, how can we replace savior narratives with solidarity or complicity?

To answer these questions, we have to enter the field of agency, asking: how do they resist? Do they have a political agency? Do they have a voice?

The background to both dimensions is the epistemological question, in a Foucauldian, critical sense according to which knowledge is grounded in an epistemological field (the *episteme*)<sup>15</sup> – always intertwined with conflicting power relations and affecting subjectivation processes – which define the rules according to which the true and the false are separated.<sup>16</sup> Knowledge, thus, is not a progressive investigation toward “an objectivity,”<sup>17</sup> toward an “ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted.”<sup>18</sup>

What, then, counts as an act of resistance? What are the conditions of truth of this discourse? What counts as political agency? The problem here is epistemic, in so far as the act of resistance (and violence), its recognition by resister, recipient and witness is rendered visible by signification within the context of the dominant epistemological field. That is a problem of how we frame knowledge of animals and how this shapes what we can know and think is possible.<sup>19</sup> So, it becomes crucial to inves-

14 See Best, Steven et al.: Introducing Critical Animal Studies, in: Journal for Critical Animal Studies 5 (2007) 2, 4–5; Taylor, Nick/Twine, Richard (eds.): The Rise of Critical Animal Studies. From The Margins to The Centre, London/New York 2014; Nocella II, Anthony J. et al. (eds.): Defining Critical Animal Studies. An Intersectional Social Justice Approach for Liberation, New York 2014.

15 Foucault, Michel: The Order of Things. An Archeology of the Human Sciences, New York 1994, xxii.

16 Id: Truth and Power, in: Gordon Colin (ed.), Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977 by Michel Foucault, New York 1980, 131.

17 Id: The Order of Things, xxii.

18 Id: Truth and Power, 131.

19 See Wadiwel, Dinesh: The War Against Animals, Leiden 2015, 33–36; Id: Do Fish Resist?, in: Cultural Studies Review 22 (2016) 1, 196–242.

tigate this same epistemological field, not only showing that it is not neutral, rather that is affected by investment of various kinds (economic, institutional, political), but also highlighting its functioning and internal depth, so to speak.

Since the seventeenth century, this field is immediately a battlefield: animals have been in the balance between being considered objects of nature to be studied within the *Naturwissenschaften*, the natural sciences, and subjects to be included in the cultural sciences *Kulturwissenschaften*, in psychology, morality, politics, sociology.<sup>20</sup> Animals represent, to use Piazzesi's effective expression, the "sand between the two great gears of this dualistic system of knowledge"<sup>21</sup>, which saw for a long time, and in part still today, the victory of the first model, namely the anatomical and mechanistic model, at the expense of the ethological model, which arose from interaction with cultural sciences and came to a later recognition. Therefore, when formulating the question of whether and how animals are political agents or can resist, it is good to be aware of these issues.

How then, in a society where dominant modes of knowledge are anthropocentric, can allies of animals read their defiant acts against oppression? The idea and politics of "animal resistance" themselves, in the light of what has been said, can be seen as theoretical-political practices challenging the current configuration of the epistemological field, with a view to its redefinition. Animal resistance is an attempt to think the outside, the Other which the field of truth silences and invisibilizes, with its intrinsic epistemic violence.

### 3.3 Approaches: intentionality, borders, biochemistry

CAS' scholars have proposed different conceptualizations of animal resistance. Here I propose a systematization of them by assessing their strengths and weaknesses. I define three approaches: intentionality, borders, and biochemistry. Each approach is a moment in a movement that goes, so to say, from the macroscopic to the microscopic: from the resistance identified in the striking attacks of animals in zoos and circuses to the resistance identified in "subcutaneous" biochemical processes *in the bodies* of farmed animals, passing through the resistance identified in the escape *of the bodies* of "animals without borders."

These options are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. When discussing animal resistance, we should avoid the universalizing tendency that seeks a definition that homogenizes the numerous nonhuman species who inhabit this earth. While some other animals may indeed be capable of resistance in the more

<sup>20</sup> See Piazzesi, Bendetta: *La conoscenza degli animali*, in: Mormino, Gianfranco et al., *Dalla predazione al dominio: la guerra contro gli animali*, Milano 2017, 159–229.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

traditional sense of showing reflective intentionality – as we will see – there is variation in the cognitive capacities and intention possessed, for instance, by a cow, chicken, dolphin, fish, or chimpanzee: thus it is necessary to pay attention to the multifarious features of the various kind of resistance that animals from different species and in different contexts of oppression put in place, as well as to the individual variables dependent on the singularity of each animal.

The first approach I briefly introduce is also chronologically the first one: Jason Hribal's work on animal rebellions, escapes and aggressions in the context of "entertainment" and vivisection.<sup>22</sup>

Hribal distinguishes between resistance and instinctive reaction, particularly in the case of circus elephants. According to him, although elephants, and like them all animals in captivity, have learnt through direct experience and through trial-and-error attempts which behavior will be rewarded and which will be punished, they often disobey orders or attack the trainer, thus demonstrating that they are acting against their own immediate interests and therefore intentionally and consciously.<sup>23</sup>

To those accusing such claims of anthropomorphism, with Hribal<sup>24</sup>, we can return the charge to the sender as a mere human's egocentric defense with the sole objective of reasserting human exceptionalism and privilege. Moreover, with cognitive ethologists Bekoff and Pierce, we can adopt a "careful anthropomorphism" when making knowledgeable attempts to recognize other animals' standpoints, this must be done "carefully, consciously, empathetically, and from the point of view of the animal, always asking, 'What is it like to be that individual?'"<sup>25</sup>

However, we can try to be more radical and visionary, asking whether the human(ist) principles of political action are able to operate within the politic of differences between humans and non-humans or if the same political principles should be completely rediscussed.<sup>26</sup> Asking this last question is promising to answer the need of making agency and resistance visible precisely where they are subtler, as in

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22 See Hribal, Jason: *Animals, Agency, and Class. Writing the History of Animals from Below*, in: *Human Ecology Review*, 2007, 101–112; Id.: *Fear of the Animal Planet. The Hidden History of Animal Resistance*, Stirling 2010.

23 See Id. *Fear of the animal planet: The hidden history of animal resistance [Interview]*. Animal Voices Radio. CIUT. (18/1/2011), <http://animalvoices.ca/2011/01/18/fear-of-the-animal-planet/> (12/05/23)

24 See Id.: *Animals Are Part of the Working Class Reviewed*, in: *Borderlands*, 11 (2012) 2, 1–37, 24.

25 Bekoff, Marc/Pierce, Jessica: *Wild Justice. The Moral Lives of Animals*, Chicago 2009, 42.

26 Hribal's critique runs the risk of adjusting unilaterally the reading of animal resistance, which is, as we said, multifarious and context-sensitive, to a human canon, thus inhibiting the exploration and recognition of what could be the animals' own political potential, i.e., the "other kinds of politics", that animals could unlock in their own way. It is a question, to use the words of Michael Hardt, interviewed on animal resistance, of "assessing whether the principles of political action developed on the basis of differences between humans are able to operate within the politic of differences between humans and non-humans. Or perhaps [...] we should

farms and slaughterhouses, where intense forms of domination and discipline seem overwhelmingly one-sided and oriented to nullify escape or response. To answer this question, scholars have made efforts to read agency by untying it from intentionality and anchoring it to the *body*, exploring the “possibilities for deriving agency and resistance from the corporeal realm rather than (only?) conscious subjectivity.”<sup>27</sup>

The most frequent episodes of resistance are *escapes* from slaughterhouses, farms, trucks, etc. These are all episodes of transgression of those narrow borders that circumscribe the place which is allocated to animals within highly urbanized human societies. For example, a cow dashing through the street in New York City – this is the story of Queenie – is “out of place.”<sup>28</sup> Her embodied agency is an interruption of what we can call the established order of species with its allocated roles of species; her presence leads us to ask: what kind of material and symbolic boundaries the body of a fleeing animal is violating? First of all, a fleeing cow is violating the boundary of her property status, of being a commodity in the industry of meat production and, yes, precisely for this reason she is perceived as a dangerous threat by those upholding the status quo. She is violating the voiceless, the fragile construction. Is she voiceless in zigzagging through the traffic, hiding for days, eluding her capture?

There are a lot of distancing strategies to not see the political disruptive potential in these acts. For example, as Colling points out: “the media describe escaped animals as ‘special’ and ‘unique’ or having ‘earned’ their freedom. These attributions fail to challenge the property status of nonhuman animals, instead focusing on the specialness of the individual who broke free. Framing animal resisters as uniquely special endorses the idea that only these individuals deserve freedom, and that it’s acceptable for other animals to remain captive due to a supposed lack of intelligence or ingenuity.”<sup>29</sup> This framing works as a sort of “granting clemency”: an exceptional and individual measure, based on an act of generosity of power that does not put into discussion this same power.<sup>30</sup>

What happens, then, when these bodies are unable to cross borders, to escape from their domination? What happens when animals are turned into totally docile

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ask ourselves whether the same political principles should be reconsidered”. Filippi, Massimo et al.: *Altre specie di politica*, Milano-Udine 2016, 45.

27 Kowalczyk, Agnieszka: *Mapping Non-human Resistance in the Age of Biocapital*, in: Taylor, Nik/Twine, Richard (eds.): *The Rise of Critical Animal Studies*, cit., 183–200, 192.

28 On this approach and the story of Queenie see Colling, *Animal Resistance in the Global Capitalist Era*.

29 *Ibid.*, 86.

30 Reggio, Marco: *Do Nonhuman Animals Resist? Critical Geographies, Decolonial Theories, and the Case for Veganism as Multispecies Solidarity*, in: Springer, Simon et al. (eds.): *Vegan Geographies. Spaces beyond Violence, Ethics beyond Speciesism*”, Woodstock 2022.

and defenseless creatures – not even able to move any more – by hyper-antibioticized feedstuffs, debecking, overcrowding, as in the case of chickens? Is there here full cohesion of the animal with the production apparatus, the zeroing of any possibility of resistance? At first glance, it would seem so. The disproportion of forces at place has now reached such a point that, as mentioned above, the animal is generated, managed and disposed of in such a way as to coincide almost perfectly with its usefulness for human activities. Yet, such a reading not only leaves no way out, but also prevents us from seeing what can happen “under the feathers” of a hen: that is what could happen at the microscopic level, precisely. Attempts to frame animal resistance in these terms begin, as a fertile source of mobilization of thought and not its exact application, from the Foucauldian perspective on power and resistance, which actually runs longitudinally through the whole discourse on animal resistance, in particular from the idea that where there is power there is resistance.<sup>31</sup>

The zootechnical power has acted since its beginnings on animal bodies, immediately configuring itself as biopower. Today it has assumed an increasingly molecular, biochemical connotation due to genetic engineering and the massive use of drugs. In such “subcutaneous” framework we can read as expressions of involuntary agency and resistance even basic biological processes, such as strictly physical diseases that interfere with production. An example could be that of mastitis, an infection of the mammary gland which leads to tissue damage and a decrease in milk quality, including the possibility of pathogenic bacteria and contamination by medication. This is a very common disorder among the so-called “dairy” cows, due to forced separation from their offspring and continuous milking. Mastitis forces to negotiate limits to a productivity that it would instead like to be unlimited, reducing reproductive cycles and milking and, in general, improving confinement conditions.

A crucial element in both the approaches just sketched, which is a direct consequence of the material and corporeal conception of resistance, beyond (exclusively) intentionality, is the focus on the *effects* that these actions (trespasses and biochemical processes) trigger at the system level. In the case of the fleeing cow Queenie in New York streets, for example, her race, whatever her intentions, disrupted the differential power distribution of a given system: she triggered national media attention; public outcry; activation of a solidarity network; freeing of the surviving chickens and the release to Farm Sanctuary. To sum up, “given the political and social context, the important question is not whether Queenie intended to inspire social change (or free the chickens), but rather what her actions demonstrated about the environmental and social structures around her, and her own will to live, as well as the implications of this knowledge for social change.”<sup>32</sup>

31 See Foucault, Michel: *The History of Sexuality: 1: The Will to Knowledge*, London 2019.

32 Colling: *Animal Resistance in the Global Capitalist Era*, 98.

### 3.4 Conclusion and Impulses

To conclude, the questions and approaches on animal resistance here addressed are a fertile starting point, certainly to be further developed, to recognize animals as resistant political subjects and antagonists fighting for their freedom: as activists for animal liberation with whom, we humans, can become allies and accomplices. With that being said, I leave you with some impulse questions,

- Be attentive: can you acknowledge acts of animal resistance in your surrounding?
- Narrate: what could be innovative, non-patronizing ways to tell these stories?
- Act: what could be actions of solidarity with animal resisters?