Introduction

If I broke down the wall of flesh
and hanging from the hook I smiled
what would he say who is paid to dismember
the stamper of tongues
what label would they put on me
how many organs would they discard
and would the vet think panta rei?[1]

The past few years have been frustrating for advocates of animal liberation. Alongside growing neglect and indifference toward the horrors of animal domination and exploitation across nearly all levels of society, a further insult has emerged, verging on "mockery". As socio-ecological crises related to climate change, environmental devastation and mass extinctions intensify, public and political debate on these issues grow, with animals and human-animal relationships at the center. These debates unfold both through institutional channels, such as the international agenda calling for a shift toward sustainable agriculture and consumption, and through grassroots movements like "Fridays for Future" and "Extinction Rebellion", but to little effect. Rhetoric regarding multispecies justice,[2] care and sustainability for all creatures, does not seem to stop animals' conditions from worsening.

The outbreak of COVID-19, a zoonotic disease resulting from interspecies infection, and its global spread in early 2020 seemed to have brought many critical flaws of our animal-based food production systems into the public spotlight, and with them the inherent dilemmas within contemporary human-animal relations

1 Ivano Ferrari, *Slaughterhouse* (Macello), trans. Matteo Gilebbi, Legas, New York-Ottawa, 2019, p. 82.

2 This notion, developed originally in academic circles, has recently entered the UN Signals Spotlight, "Signals Spotlight identifies some of the areas where our legacy to future generations is in doubt – and asks what that means for development". One of these areas is multispecies justice, "Sustainable development will need to consider environmental justice and the rights of non-human animals". https://www.undp.org/future-development/signals-spotlight-2024/multi-species-justice accessed 9th June 2025.

and capitalist industrial agriculture. This was evident in the impact of animal farming on the growing proximity between wild and domesticated animals,[3] to numerous outbreaks in slaughterhouses, the mass culling of millions of infected animals on mink farms and the widespread media narratives, like "animals are reclaiming cities", which dominated headlines during the early months of the pandemic.

Many called for a "challenge to change", but those appeals went unanswered. Everything returned to normal, and the aftermath of the pandemic, particularly regarding the domination of animals, is desperately lacking critical interpretation. Since 1975, animal advocates and theorists have traditionally explained the exploitation of non-human animals in terms of an irrational moral prejudice that indiscriminately privileges human interests at the expense of those of other species, what is commonly referred to as "speciesism".[4] According to this explanation, it is an entrenched moral error as old as (Western) humanity itself[5] that leads to the incessant production and killing of billions of animals and fish for human consumption, they say, with total indifference to the conditions experienced by animals. Therefore, it is the task of animal ethicists to expose these cultural and moral inconsistencies in order to underwrite an antispeciesist stance. By extension, it is up to each person of good will and reason to recognize these inconsistencies and change their lifestyles and consumption choices. There are significant flaws in this response, which render it both theoretically unconvincing and practically ineffective for activism and genuine social change.[6] Moreover, it may be said that precisely because of its misguided theoretical orientation, this response has dominated the mainstream of an-

3 See, for example, Wolfgang Brozek and Christof Falkenberg, "Industrial Animal Farming and Zoonotic Risk: COVID-19 as a Gateway to Sustainable Change? A Scoping Study", *Sustainability*, vol. 13, no. 16 (2021), p. 9251; United Nations Environment Programme and International Livestock Research Institute. *Preventing the Next Pandemic: Zoonotic Diseases and How to Break the Chain of Transmission*, Nairobi, Kenya, 2020. A useful resource with more than 200 works on the connections between zoonoses (not only COVID-19), capitalist animal agriculture and practices involving wild animals is compiled by the Centre for Animal Ethics at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona: https://www.upf.edu/web/cae-center-for-animal-ethics/zoonotic-pandemics accessed 9th June 2025.

4 Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, Ecco Press, New York, 2001; Oscar Horta, "What is Speciesism?", *Journal of Agriculture and Environmental Ethics*, vol. 23 (2010), pp. 243–266.

5 Chapter five, *Animal Liberation*, "Man's Dominion…a Short History of Speciesism" (pp. 185–212). Singer traces speciesism from its roots in the *Book of Genesis* to the twentieth-century works of Aldous Huxley.

6 See, for example, Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen, "Ecofeminist Footings", Adams and Gruen (eds.), *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other animals and the Earth*, Bloomsbury Publishing, New York, 2014, pp. 1–43; Matthew Calarco, *Thinking Through Animals. Identity, Difference, Indistinction*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2015, pp. 6–27; Cary Wolfe, "Humanist and Posthumanist Anti-speciesism", Paola Cavaliere (ed.), *The Death of the Animal: A Dialogue*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2009, pp. 45–58.

tispeciesist thought – whether in academia or in practice (NGOs, associations, welfare committees) – precluding a response better suited to correcting the true ills of speciesism.

An attempt to develop a more credible and complex response can be found in certain marginalized approaches to the animal question, known as Critical Animal Studies (CAS) and related activism. Here, the animal question shifts from a moral footnote to a crucial social and political matter. The current problem of animal domination is not seen as rooted in a mistaken idea or bias – i.e. speciesism – but is instead rooted in the material processes of production and reproduction of capitalist society. Therefore, understanding current human-animal relations and act for real change requires examining the role of animals within capitalism and incorporating it within a critical theory of society. This is the meaning behind the "critical" in CAS, and it explains its appeal to the political left, even if this appeal goes largely unacknowledged.

The critique of capitalism is central to CAS, as it forms a key element in diagnosing and potentially solving the ongoing domination of animals, despite its increasingly evident unsustainability. As a left-wing movement, however, CAS also suffers from broader "divisions within the Left". Specifically, a certain tension has escalated since the late 1990s[7] between the two most prominent critical frameworks within contemporary leftist thought: Marxism and intersectionality. To put it simply, orthodox Marxism develops a critique of capitalism by focusing on economic class relations and labor, prioritizing class struggle. On the other hand, intersectionality concentrates upon the complex interconnections between various cultural axes of oppression and identity formation, such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, religion, education, etc. Intersectionality emerges from the tradition of the cultural left and social movements that arose in the second half of the 1970s, particularly feminism and Black rights movements. It identifies multiple, intersecting forms of oppression, challenging and complicating the identity politics often associated with these movements. Intersectionality rejects the notion of a single, primary source of domination, whether it be gender, class, race, or any other axis of oppression. The crossfire between these two perspectives revolves around accusations of reductionism. Marxists accuse intersectionality of *cultural reductionism* (culturalism) – focusing merely on cultural dynamics at the expense of economic structure – while intersectional theorists criticize Marxism for *economic reductionism* (economism), narrowly concentrating on economic relations and class struggle to the neglect of other axes of oppression, treating them as secondary and transient. This divide is particularly problematic and damaging for CAS, which aims to be *both* intersectional and

7 Representative of this debate is the repartee between Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler. See Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Post-Socialist" Condition*, Routledge, New York, 1997; and Judith Butler, "Merely Cultural", *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997), pp. 265–77.

Marxist, viewing animal domination as enmeshed with other axes of oppression while also being fundamentally woven into the material fabric of capitalist society.

This tension is extremely persistent on social media. For example, a prominent theorist within the intersectional animal advocacy movement accused a well-known Marxist antispeciesist of "economic reductionism" (and neoconservatism, especially sexual). The Marxist theorist responded with accusations of "cultural reductionism" (and liberalism). The dispute ended with a terse but revealing post in which both figures, despite their disagreements, converged, "You cannot call yourself antispeciesist if you are not, at the same time, anti-capitalist. That's how it is. End of the story".[8]

This brief yet illustrative online quarrel captures in a direct, and perhaps simplistic, way the core focus of this book and the relationships between the key elements of this debate: antispeciesism, intersectionality, and the critique of capitalism. Key assumptions of the quarrel are:

1. There is an inextricable link between capitalism and the domination and exploitation of animals.
2. Intersectionality frames species oppression as part of the broader Western system of dualistic thinking, which leads to the charge of culturalism.
3. Marxism understands this oppression primarily in terms of economic exploitation, leading to accusations of economism.

This book positions itself within the framework of CAS and its aspiration for a critique of animal domination that is both intersectional and Marxist. Thus, in the light of this debate, its central question is: How can modern animal domination be explained in relation to other forms of domination *and* in the overarching context of capitalist society, in order to identify its distinctive characteristics from a materialist and non-reductionist perspective, neither cultural nor economic? The intersectional perspective, which emphasizes the multiplicity, simultaneity, and connectedness of various forms of oppression and privilege, orients CAS research toward analyzing the interconnections between speciesism and other axes of oppression, fostering alliances and political solidarity across oppressed groups. This perspective avoids single-issue conceptions of struggle, in which animal domination alone is prioritized. Intersectionality often fails, however, to investigate or to explain *how* and *why* these different forms of domination intersect, leaving their foundations somewhat unclear. As a result, appeals to intersectionality in the context of anti-oppression struggles can risk being perceived as superficial or overly general. When such explanatory efforts are made, as in ecofeminism, a field that anticipated intersectional

8 Facebook conversation. The content was observed in November 2020 but is no longer accessible.

thinking, they often locate the common root of various forms of domination in epistemic frameworks or cultural logics. Thus, what intersectionality lacks in this regard is a consistent theory of society and power. This lack leads to those accusations of being "merely cultural" or, worse, of "cultural reductionism". While cultural analysis is not problematic in itself, it is not seen as sufficient for effective social criticism.

This evokes the first guiding question: How can socio-material depth be added to an intersectional perspective, capable of explaining the effective dynamics of the structural interlocking of dominations beyond a laundry list of oppressions?[9] Attention to the social dimension leads CAS to develop a critique of capitalism, because it is capitalism that enables animal domination and exploitation to take place on such a massive scale. David Nibert's framing of speciesism as an ideology legitimizing the economic exploitation of animals set a significant precedent.[10] This somewhat reductionist approach, however, clashes with CAS's intersectional commitments. To navigate the impasse, some scholars have turned to the notion that different systems of power and domination – such as speciesism, capitalism, patriarchy, and racism – intersect (albeit vaguely) with each other. Yet, this line of analysis tends to prioritize speciesism over other systems and views the relationship between speciesism and capitalism as merely quantitative. Capitalism is seen simply as amplifying speciesism and the scale and intensity of animal exploitation.

This approach risks falling into economic reductionism, providing an inadequate understanding of the social dynamics and failing to specifically define capitalist society, leading to the second and third guiding questions: How can we frame capitalism in a non-reductionist, non-economistic way (In other words, what is the most appropriate interpretation of Marxism for understanding capitalist society)? And, What is the precise nature of the link between capitalist societies and animal domination? These both suggest further structural questions such as, Is it possible to achieve animal liberation without moving beyond capitalism? Are there structural constraints inherent to capitalist societies that imply the reproduction of certain power relations, hierarchies, modes of subjectivation when it comes to human-animal relations? The challenge is to explain if, why, and how one can call themselves antispeciesist without also being anti-capitalist (as well as anti-heterosexist and anti-racist).[11] Thus, the goal – one that remains yet unachieved

9 "The theories of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and able-bodiedness invariably close with an embarrassed 'etc.' at the end of the list. Through this horizontal trajectory of adjectives, these positions strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete". Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble; Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York and London, 1999, p. 182.

10 David Nibert, *Animal Rights/Human Rights: Entanglements of Oppression and Liberation*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 2002.

11 In the book, I touch upon gender and capitalist societies (ch. 3) and only mention issues related to nation-form and "race". However, once the concept of "forms of the production of in-

in CAS – is to develop a logic for the socio-political analysis of animal domination and exploitation in capitalist societies that moves beyond the dichotomy between cultural and economic analysis and fulfills the dual requirement of being both materialist and intersectional.

To develop this, chapter one of this book analyzes the history and theory of Critical Animal Studies, examining its intersectional foundations and the role of ecofeminism. It assesses the existing literature on the connections between speciesism and capitalism that draws on various Marxist traditions, ranging from traditional Marxism and Western Marxism to operaismo and post-operaismo. Additionally, attempts outside the tradition of CAS and from within the animal rights theory to engage with Marxist thought and leftist politics are considered in order to demonstrate that these efforts often fall short, primarily due to the theoretical foundations of animal rights theory being deeply entrenched in liberal, moralistic and analytic philosophical frameworks.

Chapter two lays the groundwork for developing a logic that can both analyze capitalist societies and resist reductionism. This analysis begins with an interpretation of Marx's critique of political economy, drawing on the "Neue Marx-Lektüre" (New Marx Reading). A historical and conceptual overview of this approach shows how, contrary to more traditional views, Marx's critique is not an effort to propose an "alternative" economic system that redistributes wealth more fairly. Rather, it aims to provide an abstract-conceptual reconstruction of the structural conditions that make these social relations possible in the first place. The New Marx Reading convincingly reframes his critique of political economy as a critical analysis of how social complexity is formed under the specific conditions of capitalist production. Thus, it emphasizes the importance of *social forms*, which are particular ways of organizing social cohesion, such as economic forms like value, money, and capital, but also legal-political forms like law and the state. The concept of *dispositifs* (apparatuses) is crucial to this chapter, insofar as it accounts for the variable, contingent, and historical-empirical reality of social relations, including institutional configurations, fields of knowledge, power relations, and forms of subjectivation. The Foucauldian notion of *dispositif* is hybridized with Jacques Rancière's concepts of police and politics and the framework of Historical-Materialist Policy Analysis (HMPA). This combined framework allows for an examination of empirical trajectories of conflict and concrete social disputes, power relations, and actor constellations. Through this prism, politics acquire the crucial meaning of *practice*

dividuals" is introduced, a thorough materialist analysis of these forms of domination and of their dynamics of relation with capitalist forms of goods production becomes available. See Francesco Aloe and Chiara Stefanoni, "Anatomia della nazione. Dalla formula trinitaria alle forme della popolazione", *Consecutio Rerum. Rivista critica della postmodernità*, no. 10 (2021), pp. 362–5.

of conflictual relationality aimed at shaping social living conditions, both from the perspective of emancipation and domination.

The third chapter marks the beginning of the second part of the book, operationalizing, putting to use this multi-layered theoretical framework in a novel analysis of animal domination and exploitation in capitalist societies, aiming at understanding its qualitative change and specific organization. The chapter begins by identifying the existence of "forms of production of individuals" alongside capitalist forms of production of goods and services, building on the foundational insights of Marxist feminism from the 1970s. The organization of human-animal relations, characterized by a structural separation and coupling between the gendered production of human labor-power and the commodification of animals, is reconstructed as part of the "ideal average" of capitalist societies, leading to an understanding of "anthropological form". The chapter argues that this form is the reified and naturalized, thus invisible, matrix underlying the process of producing humans.

The fourth chapter shifts the focus to the *dispositifs*, engaging with historical reconstruction. The first historical power-knowledge "dietary *dispositif*" that materialized this anthropological form performed a fundamental change in meat production and consumption processes, encapsulated in the term "*hygienizing meat*". This *dispositif*, whose central element is the industrial slaughterhouse, brought about the so-called nutrition transition toward animal-source food, marking the rise of an animal-based food system within mid-nineteenth-century capitalist society. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the political conflictual relationality (its context, actors, processes) surrounding these changes, with particular emphasis on slaughterhouse reform and surrounding debates.

Given the historical scope of this chapter, some sections contain descriptions of institutional violence, such as slaughterhouse mechanisms and phases of animal slaughter drawn from primary sources. These accounts aim to provide a historically accurate perspective on the evolution of meat production. Additionally, due to the reliance on historical sources and non-critical animal studies sources, certain terminology used throughout this chapter may include objectifying terms such as "livestock", "cattle", which were – and still are – intrinsic to the discourse of industrialized meat production. While these descriptions and terms are essential to the historical analysis, readers may find some passages challenging. Proceeding with awareness of the material presented is advised.