Beyond Biopolitics: Animal Studies, Factory Farms, and the Advent of Deading Life

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I.

The issue of the relationship between biopolitics and animal studies is becoming one of the dominant themes in current animal studies research.\(^1\) The engagement between animal studies and biopolitics has been fruitful and diverse. However, my article seeks to challenge the major way in which animal studies has engaged the work of biopolitics. For the most part, as Agamben claims to do to Foucault, animal studies has sought to correct and complete biopolitics (\textit{Homo Sacer} 9). In other words, animal studies has incorporated the understanding of biopolitical thinking within the realm of animal studies, while challenging the anthropocentrism in the traditional philosophy on biopolitics. Animal studies has sought to show that the line drawn between the human animal and other animals is one of the, if not the most, important divisions in the biopolitical terrain. What the engagement of animal studies and biopolitics has failed to do is to point to an outside of biopolitical logic within the realities of nonhuman animals.

My article seeks to do two things: (1) articulate the function of biopolitics as a necessary correlate to human exceptionalism, and (2) argue for the factory farm as a supplementary inverse of biopolitical logic. Human exceptionalism is based fundamentally in a desire to create
protected lives, and lives that can be, or even need to be, exterminated. In other words, human exceptionalism is the very definition of biopolitics. However, biopolitical theory was mostly developed around thinking through issues of human genocides, particularly the Nazi Lager. If you look at such classical texts as Foucault’s “Society Must Be Defended”, Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* series, and Esposito’s immunity paradigm trilogy you see that the privileged site for understanding biopolitics is the Holocaust. Agamben goes so far as to claim that “the camp is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West” (*Homo Sacer* 181). Despite attempts to think the analogies between Auschwitz and a factory farm, such analogies ignore important historical and theoretical specificities. While the biopolitical is an important, even necessary, theoretical understanding of humans’ relations to other animals, it is not sufficient for thinking the realities of factory farming. We need a conceptual apparatus not rooted in the ability to think the horrors of human genocide, but one rooted in the ability to think the horrors of the factory farm. This conceptual apparatus is not meant to oppose the thought of the biopolitical, it is meant to supplement the biopolitical—to allow us to think with and partially outside of the biopolitical.

For Foucault, of course, the biopolitical and biopolitics was not always a negative thing, nor synonymous with biopower. Indeed, if we consider how the concept develops through Foucault’s lecture courses, we can see biopolitics connected to the questions of governmentality and neoliberalism, and those questions become connected to how the governmentality of the self can be realized as resisting subjectivities. As Foucault wrote in a late essay, “it is not power, but the subject, that is the general theme of my research” (“The Subject and Power” 327). And thinkers as diverse as Antonio Negri and Roberto Esposito have tried to posit an affirmative or liberating biopolitics (Negri, *Reflections on Empire* 60-78; Esposito, *Bios* 184-194). In regards to animals, I, along with others, have started to think Foucault’s resistant subjectivity with practices...
of veganism and vegetarianism (Stanescu, “Dark Animal Studies”; Tanke, “Care of the Self”; Taylor, “Foucault and the Ethics of Eating”). While more work needs to be done to think our resistance to the age of the factory farm, this article is principally concerned with the destructive elements of the biopolitical and the factory farm. When Foucault turns his analysis to the Nazi state, he discovers that “we have, then, in Nazi society something that is really quite extraordinary: this is a society which has generalized biopower in an absolute sense, but which has also generalized the sovereign right to kill” ("Society Must Be Defended" 260). This conjoining of the absolute generalized biopower and sovereign power results in a society that Agamben, Esposito, and Timothy Campbell have all called thanatopolitical (Agamben, Homo Sacer; Esposito, Bios; Campbell, Improper Life). In animal studies, so far, we have mostly understood the factory farm as another instance where the biopolitical becomes thanatopolitical. While we need an examination of biopolitical thought to explain how the thanatopolitical is built upon human exceptionalism, we also need a demonstration that the logic of the factory farm cannot simply be understood by the logic of the biopolitical, and that its unique horrors go beyond biopolitics.

II.

The human is not a pre-given subject position. It is not a category that exists outside of political contestations and ontological battles. Rather, the human is produced, and is the site of great struggles, violence, and hierarchy. The human comes to name the category of beings we seek to protect and foster, and as such the idea of human exceptionalism can only be understood as related to the concept of biopolitics.
When Foucault introduced our contemporary understanding of biopolitics in the 1970s, it was used to describe a new category of power, of the binding together of bio-power and anatamo-power. Biopolitics stitched together the disciplinary power over the individual body and a broader governmentality of the life and health of the population. If earlier versions of power rooted in sovereignty had the power to let live or make die, then biopower’s supplement had the power to make live and let die. As Foucault put it, “One might say that the ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (Foucault History of Sexuality 138, emphasis in the original). Foucault’s triad of power—sovereign, disciplinary, and bio—are all spatially and historically contingent. They also all overlap and interlace, supplementing and substituting, playing out this relationship in both historicity and ontology. To explain all the nuances of differences would require a book in itself, but I want to focus on one commonality among the triad of power: its abhorrence of contagion.

The power of the sovereign is based upon the model of societal relationships to leprosy. Lepers were cast out of society; they were excluded. In contrast, when a plague strikes, it must be regulated; it must be contained. A series of precise partitions must be created and scrupulously upheld in order to keep the plague from spreading. It is this plague society that disciplinary power is modeled after (Discipline and Punish 195-200; Abnormal 43-48). Moreover, biopower is modeled first of all on the fear of racial impurity (Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended” 254-263). With the rise of State racism, fears are produced about how races will mix. Therefore, a variety of controls are born in order to precisely regulate populations. What we have at all points are power’s reactions to fears of contamination. Biopolitics is, therefore, constituted through what Roberto Esposito has called an immunization paradigm (see his Communitas, Immunitas, and Bios). While Esposito believes that “the paradigm of
‘immunization’ … seems to have eluded Foucault”, we see that even in Foucault, it is clear that the issue of immunity is central to the apparatuses of power (*Bios* 45). Foucault understood this point well when he wrote: “Behind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of ‘contagions’, of the plague, of rebellions, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder” (*Discipline and Punish* 198). An opposition to contagion is, therefore, a principle linking together the triad of power, and serves as a fundamental drive of biopolitics.

Biopolitics proceeds not through connections and contagions, but rather produces subjectivity through separation and disavowal. From an etymological standpoint, immunity combines the *mūnus* that is the root of common and community, with the privative force of the prefix *im*- (Esposito, *Communitas* 3-8). Immunity functions, therefore, not through a positive construction, but rather through a negation, through a production of deciding what it is not. As Niklas Luhmann, a major influence on Esposito, powerfully put it: “The system does not immunize itself against the no but with the help of the no; … it protects through negation against annihilation” (*Social Systems* 371-372). This becomes clearest when we turn our attention to the work of Agamben, and how we define the human.

From its original taxonomical designation under Carolus Linnaeus, the human has not been given any *positive* definition, but rather is the being that knows itself human against all other creatures (Agamben, *The Open* 23-27). This is a common philosophical anthropological trick, defining the human as that being which is indefinable. However, as Adorno points out, "That we cannot tell what man is does not establish a peculiarly majestic anthropology; it vetoes any anthropology" (*Negative Dialectics* 124). The human stands at exactly this place of negation, a taxonomical creation that claims existence based entirely upon defining what it is not. As
Agamben explained: “Homo sapiens, then, is neither a clearly defined species nor a substance; it is, rather, a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human. ... It is an optical machine constructed of a series of mirrors in which man, looking at himself, sees his own features always already deformed in the features of an ape. Homo is a constitutively ‘anthropomorphous’ animal … who must recognize himself in a non-man in order to be human” (The Open 26-27). And Agamben goes further, pointing out that,

[the anthropological machine of humanism is an ironic apparatus that verifies the absence of a nature proper to Homo, holding him suspended between a celestial and a terrestrial nature, between animal and human—and thus, his being always less and more than himself. (29)

The “anthropological machine” is the name that Agamben gives for the specifically biopolitical task of producing the human. If the panopticon is the optical machine of disciplinary power, we can posit that the anthropological machine is the optical machine of biopolitics. Let us now turn to examine in more detail how this anthropological machine operates.

As I have argued elsewhere, the anthropological machine “begin[s] with nothingness”. I go on to explain:

This kenomatic emptiness is exactly what powers the machine; it is what gives the machine purpose and function. If the machines contained a specific content, if there were actual delineated differences that the machines were trying to separate out, they wouldn’t function at all. Rather, they work by drawing and redrawing lines, by producing caesura after caesura. It works upon a zone of indifference, deciding what counts as legal and illegal, human and animal, bios and zoë. These machines don’t just draw the line once, but rather constantly redraw the lines, so there is no way to ever know which side of the line one stands on. (Stanescu, “Species Trouble” 573).

These zones of indifference are thoughts of the immune. The logic of inoculation is in obvious display here, as we try to protect ourselves by excluding exactly what we include. The problem is not with inoculation; the problem emerges because, as Derrida warns, “nothing immune, safe and sound, heilig and holy, nothing unscathed in the most autonomous living present without a risk
of auto-immunity” (“Faith and Knowledge” 82). The problem is not with immunity; it is rather that immunity carries with it the risk of auto-immunity. In medicine, when an otherwise healthy immune system becomes confused and starts attacking healthy cells, it is referred to as an auto-immune disorder. What concerns us here is the ways in which when the machinery of power protects itself through immunization logic and slips into an auto-immune logic. Indeed, from a political standpoint, the auto-immune is the fullest understanding of the immune. The biopolitical is the auto-immune of the social.

On the one hand, we have the biopolitics of bare life, the move towards denaturalization, towards the removal of citizenship (as Agamben always states, the Nazis made sure all citizenship had been removed before one went into the death camp), and in general, a fusion of the human into the animal (Homo Sacer 132). On the other hand, we cannot forget the biopolitical project of colonialism, that is to say, a project dedicated to producing the human, understood here in its full European terms. There exists an “anthropocentrism in alliance with Europocentrism” (Said, Orientalism 98). This sort of move led Aimé Césaire to talk about a “pseudo-humanism” and also to claim that “the human” is always a “sordidly racist” concept (Discourse on Colonialism 37). There seem to be two co-supplementary movements of the biopolitical, both inherently violent and imperialist: one is a move of rendering someone as inhuman and therefore disposable, and the other is a move of rendering someone as human and, therefore, in need of training and eradicating all traces of the inhuman. These moves are not oppositional discourses; instead the two notions of the biopolitical merge (or are better understood as connected through a linchpin) into that of the thanatopolitical. The immunization discourses of humanism, as expressed through the movements of the two biopolitics, are fulfilled
in the moment of auto-immunity. And the camps are an important site to understand this linchpin. As Arendt argued in her article, “Mankind and Terror”:

[T]he camps serve, among other purposes, as laboratories in which human beings of the most and varied kinds are reduced to an always constant collection of reactions and reflexes. ... The concentration camps not only eradicate people; they also further the monstrous experiment, under scientifically exacting conditions, of destroying spontaneity as an element of human behavior and of transforming people into something that is even less than animal, namely, a bundle of reactions that, given the same set of conditions, will always react in the same way. (304)

She concludes that the “purity of the experiment would be compromised if one admitted even as a remote possibility that those specimens of the species homo sapiens had ever existed as real human beings” (305). The purpose of the death camps was not just an elimination of peoples, but also a production of the human as such.

III.

Humanism is eugenicism. Or as Césaire puts it, “[a]t the end of formal humanism and philosophical renunciation, there is Hitler” (37). That the biopolitics of humanism means that human society immunes itself against the animal requires a way of determining the human versus the animal. As Haraway explains, “the immune system is a map drawn to guide recognition and misrecognition of self and other in the dialectics of Western biopolitics” (Simians, Cyborgs, and Women 204). In order for the social body to ‘protect’ itself against ‘intrusion’, it has to identify what is its self and what is not really part of the self. It needs to be able to distinguish friends from enemies, assets to be secured versus threats to be eliminated. This is hard enough for an individual, corporeal body, hence the dangers of auto-immunity. But what if what is trying to be defended is something as indefinable as the dignity of the human? If such is the case, it is important to note that recognition in the biopolitical order is never passive, but seeks to defend a
body that it itself produces actively. The process by which this occurs is what Esposito has called “immunitary anthropology” (*Immunitas* 80-111). Esposito agrees with Agamben that it is the very conceptual emptiness at the heart of the machinery of power that allows it to function. However, immunitary anthropology emerges in opposition to humanism for Esposito. As he argues:

In this case the negative is not only equalized, but also exploited—made productive—for the purpose of its own neutralization. This is why, contra to what Adorno and Heidegger thought in their opposition to it, twentieth-century anthropology is by no means the continuation (or attenuation) of humanism, but its reverse. What philosophical anthropology identifies with is not man duplicated on top of himself. Rather it is the fold that relates him to his otherness, to his absent center. This is what Michel Foucault grasped when he located the ‘place of the king’ bestowed on man by modernity precisely in the open space of his unthinkability, ‘somewhat like the shadow cast by man as he emerges into knowledge; somewhat like the blind spot from which it becomes possible to know him’: it is that shadow, and that spot—the sharp profile of the negative—which no humanism was able to conceive, thus precluding the possibility of conceiving of the human at all. (83-84)

For Esposito, immunitary anthropology proceeds by defining what the human is not, rather than defining what the human is. However, contra Esposito, humanism agrees with this insight from immunitary anthropology. Modern humanism is able to function because the “negative” can be “made productive”. It is because the human does not exist that it must be made. This is what is meant by humanism being eugenicism: those beings that are identified as human are fostered, while those beings that are not identified as human are allowed to die.

The human animal is, as the name implies, just one animal among others. As cognitive ethology, zoology, primatology, and biology have been showing us, our cherished notions of what makes us uniquely human can be found in some other animal species. This makes perfect evolutionary sense, because adaptive traits tend to be repeated throughout nature. Why would humans be somehow uniquely different from the rest of animals? To believe in human
exceptionalism requires a certain level of transcendental faith; it requires one to believe that we were set apart from the rest of the world rather than being subjected to the same evolutionary force as all other living beings. As Derrida argues:

Although I cannot demonstrate this here, I believe—and the stakes are becoming more and more urgent—that none of the conventionally accepted limits between the so-called human living being and the so-called animal one, none of the oppositions, none of the supposedly linear and indivisible boundaries, resist a rational deconstruction—whether we are talking about language, culture, social symbolic networks, technicity or work, even the relationship to death and to mourning, and even the prohibition against or avoidance of incest—so many ‘capacities’ of which the ‘animal’ (a general singular noun!) is said so dogmatically to be bereft, impoverished. (Rogues 151)

The human is an animal—one that can be set off by a cluster of differences that allows me to know that the being trying to crawl over my keyboard is a cat and not a zebra or a dog or a human. However, a cluster of differences that allows for a heuristic distinction between animals is not the same thing as the difference, which would put all beings we want to count as humans on one side and all other sentient beings on the other. What does not exist is “a unilinear and indivisible line having two edges, Man and Animal in general” (Derrida, The Animal 31). The biopolitical production of the human, therefore, does not seek to just make the human exceptional in relationship to all other animals—which is itself a problematic position—but seeks a humanity that cannot be reducible to the human animal. It desires a human that is more than human.

This phrase, more human than human, comes from the dystopian sci-fi movie Blade Runner. The phrase is the slogan from the nearly all-powerful Tyrell Corporation, which produces replicants, or androids that can pass for human but contain superhuman abilities. These androids are completely interchangeable with humans, except for one test. This test measures a person's empathy, particularly their empathy toward other animals. These replicants have
managed the feat of cutting the human away from the animal. And this is the promise that the Tyrell Corporation is making with their slogan, “More Human Than Human”: to produce a humanity that is disconnected from the finitude of humanity's very real animality.

More human than human is the biopolitical dream, always meant to replace our finitude as animal, all too animal. The biopolitical protection of the human entails the production of the human, and the production of the human entails the passive and active destruction of any beings—including putative human ones—that are deemed to threaten this human that will exist without the taint of the animal. This is what is meant when explained earlier that, in the political, auto-immunity is the truest expression of immunity. It is impossible for the social body to recognize itself; it must always kill healthy parts of itself in its dream of immortality. It is here where the dream of eugenicism runs into its own internal contradiction.

For example, even though eugenicism supports the separation of the human from the animal, modern eugenicism has its direct roots in animal science work. Charles B. Davenport, the leading advocate of eugenics in the United States at the turn of the last century, was an instructor at Harvard in zoology before founding the Eugenics Record Office at the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. Thus it should come as no surprise that Davenport would announce the creation of the Committee on Eugenics in the second issue of *The American Breeder’s Magazine*, where he declared their mission as:

> This 3 or 4 per cent of our population is a fearful drag on our civilization. Shall we as an intelligent people, proud of our control of nature in other respects, do nothing but vote more taxes or be satisfied with the great gifts and bequests that philanthropists have made for the support of the delinquent, defective and dependent classes? Shall we not rather take the steps that scientific study dictates as necessary to dry up the springs that feed the torrent of defective and degenerate protoplasm? (121)
Moreover, *The Journal of Heredity* billed itself as “a monthly publication devoted to plant breeding, animal breeding and eugenic”, and as Esposito notes, “the periodicals born in that context … ordinarily published works in which one moved from the selection of chickens and pigs to the selection of humans without posing the question of continuity between them” (*Bios* 131). This is the correlate to the disavowal of the animal; the techniques and technologies for violence and domination against humans have their roots in the techniques and technologies for violence and domination against other animals. The legacies of whips and brands, of cattle cars and barbed wire do not come to be used against humans out of nowhere. This is not to claim that there is any sort of analogous nature between slavery and genocide and the treatment of animals; it is to claim that the material organization of systematic exploitation does not end at some sort of arbitrary species boundary line.

**IV.**

This, then, is how biopolitics functions: human exceptionalism is stapled to eugenicism which is stapled to the active production of the human against the human as animal. It becomes clear how the factory farm becomes part and parcel of the biopolitical system. As Cary Wolfe has contended:

> Rather, such practices [of the factory farm] must be seen not just as political but as in fact constitutively political for biopolitics in its modern form. Indeed, the practices of maximizing control over life and death, of “making live”, in Foucault’s words, through eugenics, artificial insemination and selective breeding, pharmaceutical enhancement, inoculation, and the like are on display in the modern factory farm as perhaps nowhere else in biopolitical history. (*Before the Law* 46)

All of this that Wolfe contends is true. However, is all that is going on with the factory farm the same biopolitical argument we have been exploring so far? The same argument of autoimmunity
and the logic of making live and letting die? Foucault always insisted that the historicity of the present must be at the center of producing our philosophical concepts. In the same late essay as cited earlier, Foucault argued, “we have to know the historical conditions that motivate our conceptualization. We need a historical awareness of our present circumstance” (“The Subject and Power” 327). While thinkers who have taken up the biopolitical as thanatopolitical, such as Agamben and Esposito, have greatly added to our understanding of many violences, they risk making disappear the theoretical specificity for which Foucault has called. In Agamben and Esposito we get what Peter Gratton, speaking of Agamben, refers to as his hyperbole (State of Sovereignty 161-200). In other words, we risk having our historical awareness obviated by metaphysical absoluteness. If we do not produce new concepts in the face of new apparatuses and dispositifs of power, there is a real danger of turning the camp into a platonic truth of atrocity for which all other violence is merely a reflection. The realities of the factory farm challenge this metaphysical absoluteness, and therefore provokes a need for thinking beyond the biopolitical.

Max Horkheimer, in a fairly famous metaphor of the global system, compares it to a skyscraper. The ceiling of the skyscraper is a cathedral, and the people living on the top, executives and other capitalist magnates, are able to look out their windows and see starry nights. Underneath them are the political henchmen, the military, the professors, and on and on. In the bottom floors live those in the colonized world. “And below the rooms, live the coolies of the earth, who die in the millions”. And below them? Who lives in the very foundations and basement of this skyscraper? The animals, who live in “unspeakable, unthinkable, suffering” and all that remains are their “sweat, blood, and despair” (Dämmerung 379-380). While I have no doubt about the suffering of animals in our global system, I want to push this image from
Horkheimer in a different direction. What if the suffering of the animals is not just the basement, but also the base of the skyscraper? What if, in other words, the suffering of animals is one of the bases for the suffering and exploitation of the world? What would be the present ontologies that exist? In other words, if we understand our disavowal of animals as the basis for a certain biopolitics, what is the current ontological production that our treatment of animals herald? What does the factory farm, as opposed to human genocide, allow us to understand?

If we take seriously Foucault’s claim that biopolitics is about politics taking life itself as its object, then the obvious question arises: what is life? In the strange tension between biopolitics and thanatopolitics, we seem to be presented with a theoretical buffet with which to explore and understand what politicized life means. We have Agamben’s bare life, Judith Butler’s precarious life, Walter Benjamin’s mere life, Balibar’s disposable life, Eugene Thacker’s after life, Timothy Campbell’s improper life, and Deleuze’s a life. I want us to turn our attention to another conception of life: deading life. This is to say, life whose production is fundamentally about its death, its consumption. Within the realm of the factory farm, what we have discovered is life completely denaturalized, life as completely produced and constructed. Indeed, compared to the other conceptions of forms of life we have mentioned, what makes deading life different is that it isn’t left alone, let to die in the language of Foucault, rather it is thoroughly fabricated and artificial.

In order to understand factory farms, it is important to start not from the production of life, but from its telos, from the consumption of life. In other words, factory farms are simply a manifestation of a classical question, one which even Cicero takes up. When reading Cicero on animals, we see that he replicates the common Stoic belief that all other animals exist for the purpose of being used by humans. Cicero would say of pigs: “What is the swine good for but to
eat? whose life, Chrysippus says, was given it but as salt to keep it from putrefying; and as it is proper food for man, nature hath made no animal more fruitful” (On the Nature of the Gods 61).

In other words, not only is salt good for keeping animals from purification, life is another pretty good way. In such a view, though, life is not living. Life is salt, life is refrigeration, life is merely a process and precursor to death. Life is but an adjunctment to the end product, death. When we turn our attention to factory farms, what we are turning our attention to is a different sense of life from living, one in which life is pure resource for death. In Achille Mbembe’s famous argument in “Necropolitics”, the colonized live in death worlds. As Mbembe explains:

Moreover I have put forward the notion of necropolitics and necro-power to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead. (40, emphasis in the original)

Cicero’s pig may live in a death-world, but it does not live as the living dead. The death-world that Cicero’s pig, and the factory-farmed pig, live in is uniquely different from Mbembe’s death-world.

V.

There is a tendency in certain activist and philosophical discussions of our killing of other animals, particularly at the industrial level, to compare that violence to the worst sorts of human atrocities. In other words, there is a tendency to see the killing of animals either as murder (such as in The Smiths’ song, “Meat is Murder”), or to see the killing of animals as genocide (perhaps best summed up by PETA’s former campaign called a “Holocaust on your plate”). And one can understand the tendency to theorize in such ways. After all, various survivors of the Nazi Lagers compared the treatment of animals to the treatment of those killed in the camps. The most
famous being, of course, Isaac Bashevis Singer’s comment from his story, “The Letter Writer”: Singer wrote, “[i]n relation to [animals], all people are Nazis; for the animals, it is an eternal Treblinka” (Collected Stories 271). But one could also look to the writings of people like Vassily Grossman and Primo Levi for various other comparisons between the violence of humans to other animals, and the violence conducted against victims of the Shoah. But it isn’t just the quotations of survivors, but the very practices and realities behind the camps. Primo Levi wrote that for certain victims of the camp, “one hesitates to call their death death” (Survival in Auschwitz 90). Indeed, Hannah Arendt, while writing about the horrors of what happened, made a rather interesting remark. She said that what shocked the conscience was not just the death, not just the amount of dead, but how it was done. She referred to it as “a fabrication of corpses” (Essays in Understanding 13-14). And following up on those insights, Giorgio Agamben said of the camps that it was a place “[w]here death cannot be death, corpses cannot be called corpses” (Remnants of Auschwitz 70). Does this not sound at least a little familiar? Where else do we have corpses we cannot call corpses? Death that we hesitate to call death? Where else is there an engagement with the production and fabrication of corpses? This is as true in the death camp as it is in the factory farm. As Reviel Netz argues, the death camp can only make sense from a certain perspective, as a solution to corpse disposal:

In practical terms, what the Nazis wanted was that the victims walk, on their own feet, as near as possible to the area where the corpses could be disposed of. I mention this not for the cheap irony but for the important lesson we learn about the Nazi practice: it all fits together, as soon as we consider it from the corpse backward. The fundamental feature of the death camps is that humans were perceived as future corpses, and so planning was dictated by the problem of disposing of such corpses. (Barbed Wire 221)

The death camp and the factory farm are both answers to a question that only makes sense in the mass death: What do we do with the future corpses?
However, despite these pushes, meat is neither murder nor genocide. This is not a position that the factory farm is somehow better than murder and genocide, but rather that murder and genocide do not capture the factory farm. Fundamentally, the ontology of violence that inheres in the factory farm just cannot be fully expressed by these categories.

Contemporary theory is filled with tropes of the living dead; ghosts and spectres, vampires and zombies, Muselmänner and commodity fetishism; beings that should be dead but for some reason are also alive. I am not here interested in another sociology of thought, meant to analyze why we are haunted by the haunting, why we fill our work with the undead. Rather, instead, I wish to put forth another thought, another ontology. The mode of production of the contemporary factory farm is a different ontology, one of deading life instead of the living dead. That is, things that should be alive but for some reason are already dead. It is from this point that we will be able to understand the distinction between the factory farm and murder or genocide.

While the thought of the ghost, for example, might be the return of the repressed (we might, for example, be haunted by the very animals we disavow), deading life is something else entirely. It is a thought of life that is not life, life that is not living. It is a sense of life meant as pure production, pure use-value. It is in this sense that the factory farm resists the parallels with human atrocities it is so often compared to (genocides, colonialism, slavery, pogroms, murder, etc.). Let us think with Hannah Arendt here for a jumping off point.

In Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, we are given the distinction between, on the one hand, murder, and on the other hand, genocide.

The murderer who kills a man—a man who has to die anyway—still moves within the realm of life and death familiar to us; both have indeed a necessary connection on which the dialectic is founded, even if it is not always conscious of it. The murderer leaves a corpse behind and does not pretend that his victim has never existed; if he wipes out any traces, they are those of his own identity, and not the memory and grief of the persons
who loved his victim; he destroys a life, but he does not destroy the fact of existence itself. (442)

In murder, the perpetuator tries as much as possible to make herself disappear. She wears gloves, gets rid of evidence, sneaks around, and hides her identity. The purpose, if done correctly, is to never know who committed the murder. The victim is known, but the murderer isn’t. However, genocide flips this distinction. In genocide, the perpetuators don’t try to make themselves disappear, but rather the victims. While a murder might make the body of the victim disappear, in genocide the entire lives of the victims are made to disappear. In genocide the perpetuators do not hide themselves, rather they hide the crime. Indeed, the dream of genocide, at its perfection, would be to make it as if their victims had never existed. Not just that the lives of their victims had been ended, but to make it as if the very being of those victims—their culture and language and remnants—could be destroyed without a trace. At the end of a genocide, the perpetuators dream of a world in which the genocide itself could not be known of, because the victims themselves would not be known about. As Arendt contended in a letter to Karl Jaspers, “there is a difference between a man who sets out to murder his old aunt and people who … built factories to produce corpses” (Correspondence 69). And that is most certainly true. However, following up from this distinction, another truth becomes unavoidable, the factory farm is not the Holocaust, nor the everyday murder.

No one hides themselves in the slaughter of animals. But at the same time, the animals themselves are not hidden. Rather, the productions of their remnants are the very point of the practices. In contrast to murder or genocide, the killing of animals in the factory farm and modern abattoir are beside the point. This isn’t an issue of killing as a targeted reason, but rather killing as a simple extension of economic rationality. If animals are killed, it isn’t because there
is a hatred for the animal, or a sacrificial moment, or anything of the sort. Rather, animals are killed as beings who are being produced for their death. It is perhaps of importance to note that French slaughterhouse workers refer to their work as “faire une bête”, to do/fabricate an animal. This represents an indistinguishability between slaughtering animals, and the production of the animal for her flesh. Noelia Vialles makes the point that “Faire une bête … invariably denotes all the operations of slaughtering from killing to the final trimming; it means in fact to produce a carcass” (From Animal to Edible 57). The slaughter of animals is never simply the killing of animals, but rather the production of corpses for consumption. In this sense, we must, following Netz’s comments on the death camps, say that the slaughterhouse is not primarily concerned with the disposal of corpses, but rather the production of corpses. And we must, following Arendt, say that the unique horror of the factory farm is not just the fabrication and production of corpses, but also the fabrication and production of lives to be part of the fabrication and production of corpses. And lastly, following Levi, we must say that within the factory farms it isn’t just that we experience death that can’t be called death, but also life that cannot be called life. Has there ever been a more complete and thorough realization of Marx’s surplus population than the factory farm? Let us now turn to examine the implications of the ontology instituted by the factory farm.

VI.

If you read animal industry journals, newsletters, and textbooks you will see a reoccurring frame that animals are machines or blackboxes that convert feed into flesh, eggs, and dairy. As machines, this astounding output of scientific work is not dedicated to either the health or happiness of animals, but their proper functioning for maximum output and minimum input.
In order to achieve this, every part of the animal’s environment is controlled: lights, water, and feed. Even the animal’s body parts are given and removed as necessary. Moreover, there exists an increasing intervention at the genetic level to make the animal submit to the machine.

Even just a cursory glance at the trade journals and animal science periodicals will reveal that when people within the animal agriculture world talk to each other, they talk about animals explicitly at machines. Here are just two of many examples. From the journal of *Hog Farm Management*: “Forget the pig is an animal. Treat him just like a machine in a factory. Schedule treatments like you would lubrication. Breeding season like the first step in an assembly line. And marketing like the delivery of finished goods” (qtd. in Mason and Singer, *Animal Factories* 1). This next quotation is from *Farmer and Stockbreeder*:

The modern layer [that’s a chicken used just for her ability to produce eggs. Broilers are the chickens we kill to eat] is, after all, only a very efficient converting machine, changing the raw material—feedstuffs—into the finished product—the egg—less, of course, maintenance requirements”. (qtd. *Animal Factories* 1)

I could give you countless more quotations, all of which explicitly attest to the idea that animals in animal agriculture are not viewed as animals, but rather as machines. And as with all machines, the question is never the appropriate use for that machine, but rather how we can utilize the machine to get what we want. To give another example, broilers are given roughly the amount of floor space as a sheet of computer paper, like this page you are reading from, to live in (Foer, *Eating Animals* 48). This results in many chickens dying before the slaughter. But that is, the industry assures us, okay. As is explained in the *Commercial Chicken Production Manual, 4th* edition: “Limiting the floor space gives poorer results on a per bird basis, yet the question has always been and continues to be: What is the least amount of floor space necessary per bird to produce the greatest return on investment” (qtd. in Singer and Mason, *The Ethics of What We Eat*
Animals are conceived here as machines that convert certain inputs (like feedstuffs) into certain outputs (like eggs, milk, flesh). In order to minimize inputs while maximizing outputs, every element of the animal-machine is controlled. This includes genetic manipulations, for example the average broiler is now over 65% bigger than the average chicken from 1935 (Foer 106). The size is in no way sustainable or natural.

There are plenty of texts that can take you into the exact realities of the administered lives of the factory farmed animal—from Jim Mason and Peter Singer’s Animal Factories to Richard Twine’s Animals as Biotechnology. But what is being described in these texts is not the biopolitical, or not simply the biopolitical. Perhaps it is time to start talking, following Chloë Taylor, of agricultural power (Taylor, “Foucault and Critical Animal Studies”). Or to start talking of biofarming or thanatonomy, following nomos’ well-known etymological connection with the shepherd. Regardless of the terms, we need more theorizing from the specific horror of the lives of other animals. For a long time now we have analogized violence to animals to intrahuman violence. We have talked of murder, genocide, and slavery, and surely these terms have great rhetorical value. At the same time, philosophically, it is not enough to say that concepts produced to understand intrahuman violence can simply have the anthropocentrism removed and deployed for animal studies. The agricultural power and thanatonomy of the factory farm fabricates a new mode of being, a new production of death and life. Nonhuman animals in the factory farm exist as deading life, as beings who should be alive, but are already somehow dead. Animal studies—critical, continental, and otherwise—gives us the ability to understand deading life, and hopefully to combat it.
Notes

1 While a complete list is functionally impossible, there is a remarkable amount of work being generated around animals and biopolitics. See, for instance: Agamben, The Open; Boggs, Animalia Americana; Calarco, Zoographies; Chen, Animacies; Chrulew, “Animals in Biopolitical Theory”; Clark, “Ecological Biopower”; LaCapra, History and its Limits; Lemm, Nietzsche’s Animal Philosophy; Pandian, “Pastoral Power in the Postcolony”; Shukin, Animal Capital; Smith, Against Ecological Sovereignty; Srinivasan, “The Biopolitics of Animal Welfare and Being”; Taylor, “Foucault and Critical Animal Studies”; Twine, Animals as Biotechnology; Wadiwel “Cows and Sovereignty”; Wolfe, Before the Law.

2 See Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended”; Security, Territory, Population; The Birth of Biopolitics; The Hermeneutics of the Subject; and The Government of Self and Others.

3 See Agamben, Homo Sacer; Butler, Precarious Life; Benjamin, “Critique of Violence”; Balibar, “Three Concepts of Politics”; Thacker, After Life; Campbell, Improper Life; Deleuze, “Immanence”.

Works Cited


