“Postmodernism,” Politics, and Pigs

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I should start this response by noting that I, like many who engage in critical scholarship rooted in the work of thinkers like Foucault, have trouble identifying myself with a “form” or “field” of scholarship that might be labeled “postmodernism.” This statement, however, is not a “postmodern maneuver.”

Rather, the term itself is baffling. The genealogical approach used by scholars like Foucault (after Nietzsche) is a specifically modern project, one aimed at analyzing contemporary society, its politics and economics, and the power relations they engender and which constitute them. For Foucault, this meant studying, among myriad other things, institutions and the logics engendered by the market system. For scholars who have followed him, this has meant applying and expanding his methods and now-ubiquitous notions like governmentality and biopower to issues such as the Israeli security regime (Mbembe), financial markets and credit rating agencies (Deuchars), human genetic mapping (Rose), and, directly pertinent to this topic, dietary regimes (Taylor, “Ethics of Eating”), the genetic engineering of animals (Clark; Holloway, et al.), the interspecies relations and discursive practices engendered by different forms of food animal production (Youatt), and the modern slaughterhouse as apparatus of power (Thierman) and site of complex spatial and population control (Pachirat).

My point here is not merely semantic or taxonomic. I do not want to go so far as to suggest that Gary Steiner is setting up a straw person argument in *Animals and the Limits of Postmodernism*—this would be both unfair and untrue. However, I think the fight he is picking is one he cannot, a priori, lose.

There are, in my reading, two distinct parts of Steiner's project in *Animals and the Limits of Postmodernism*. The first is to critique, seemingly, both the "postmodern" but also classical theoretical approaches to the development of normative systems of ethics, especially as they pertain to the treatment of animals. In their responses (also published in this issue), Patrick Llored and Chloë Taylor engage with these philosophical claims.

Second, Steiner argues that "we confront ... an environment populated in important part by concrete beings who are like us in their capacity to suffer" (Steiner 69) which should make us rethink how we treat them. On this, I am in complete agreement. He then suggests that this knowledge should lead us to reasonably arrive at a "traditional conception of justice as a sense of responsibility that can be articulated in terms of clear principles" (Steiner 44). Drawing on the seminal thinkers of animal rights theory—especially Gary Francione—Steiner argues that, for instance, recognition of animal sentience should lead us to acknowledge their worth and extend notions of justice to them. While he does not naïvely subscribe to a morality-as-mathematics thesis, he is critical of what he sees as "postmodernism"'s call for responsibility and justice "being taken up anew with each concrete, irreducible situation that confronts us" (Steiner 44). Here he advances and defends his system of ethical principles rooted in "veganism as a strict moral imperative" and its corollary, a "nonanthropocentric cosmopolitanism." It is here that I disagree. Not so much with Steiner's suggestion of a move toward veganism, however, as with

his insistence on it as an imperative; and, by extension, with his rationale for arriving at this imperative and with his attendant dismissal of a school of thought that would suggest otherwise.

Steiner is looking for the basis for a universal set of “regulative ideals for our conduct” (Steiner 70) in a body (however loosely defined) of work which itself a priori eschews such an approach. The “postmodern” school of thought seeks to, if anything, provide a polyvalent analytical framework specifically for exploring the plurality of aspects of the political, economic, social, biological, human and non-human, contemporary, tangible, physical world. In rejecting it outright and denying its analytic capacities simply because it does not allow for universal ethics, is to throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater.

I want to make two interventions here: first, I will argue that Steiner’s project is not necessarily incompatible with the “postmodern” sensibility in that it suggests a political project aimed at creating a specific vegan-cosmopolitan subject and subjectivity and a specific vision of interspecies relations. Second, I will attempt to paint a picture of how a primarily biopolitical analytic can help us understand our relationship not only with nonhuman animals but with human subjects as well, and how such an understanding problematizes Steiner’s project.

On the first point, my intention is not at all to subvert Steiner’s argument, but rather to suggest that what he is forwarding in his book is a truth claim that aims at *creating a desirable* rather than *unearthing a true* form of engagement with nonhuman animals. In this, it is in no way incompatible with “postmodern” frameworks which show life to be comprised of a plurality of truth claims seeking to shape behavior.

Steiner is of course cognizant that “principles, by their very nature, cannot prescribe their own definitive application” (Steiner 69). He also much to his credit notes that accepting his principle and choosing to “eschew animal products and animal exploitation altogether is not the

end of the problem but only the beginning” (Steiner 69). And yet he charges his postmodern windmills for their failure to “get to the point of making definitive claims about the moral status of animals” due to what he perceives as their rejection of “abstract principles” and with them “a larger ensemble of notions such as selfhood, agency, right, norms, responsibility, and rational argument, notions that are absolutely essential to the humanism that is a prime target of much contemporary postmodern thought” (Steiner 2).

It bears noting that Steiner’s reading of “postmodernism” differs from some of its other critics, especially those in the field of environmental studies, who while critiquing its epistemology still suggest that it contains the seeds of a universal ethic. Paul Wapner, for instance, critiques “postmodernism” for attacking reified categories like “nature” and the political and epistemological narratives within which these are situated (Wapner 168-169). Yet he sees in “postmodernism” a prevailing concern with the subaltern and relations with the other, leading him to argue that “[a]s the most radical ‘other,’ then, the nonhuman realm deserves protection” (Wapner 183) and therefore to dubiously impute to “postmodernism” something he dubs the “ethic of otherness” (Wapner 177) that would somehow force concern for nonhumans.

Steiner astutely avoids this sort of dubious epistemologically reconciliatory approach, making his suggestion that “postmodernists” reject universal principles internally coherent within his broader argument. But there is a fundamental difference between critique and rejection. To critique an abstract principle is precisely to draw attention to its abstraction and the human agency explicit in its creation. It is also to critique its application and its effects, be they immediately material or more broadly discursive. But it is not necessarily to dismiss the application of principles or rights, or, more importantly, the contextual desirability of same. One

can argue against the idea of universal, a priori existing “animal rights” and yet support the promulgation of some “rights”-based principles to suit specific political projects and contexts.

“The postmodern denial of truth is itself a truth claim,” writes Steiner (Steiner 9). But it is undeniable that so too is Steiner’s own “vegan imperative.” It is a compellingly argued one—although perhaps less so here than in Steiner’s other work—but that does not make it an absolute truth or even necessarily a regulative principle at which most “rational” actors would arrive. Moreover, acceptance and implementation of something like the vegan imperative entails not simply changing people’s minds and allowing a critical mass of individuals to make a number of independent, rational decisions about their lifestyle and consumption choices. Instead, taken as seriously as it should be, and “as only the beginning,” Steiner’s imperative suggests a large-scale political and economic project that would create a critical mass of new, vegan subjects with—and I do not believe this to be an overstatement—concomitant changes in the very socio-economic fiber of our modern world. In furthering a notion of a nonanthropocentric community whose ethics of interaction are rooted in a sense of what he terms “cosmic justice,” Steiner is proposing a political project, one rooted in a specific vision of a sort of interspecies “good life.”

I tend to agree, however, with Chloë Taylor (Taylor, “Postmodern” 259) that our culture of animal mistreatment goes far beyond a series of individual failures of ethics. Rather, our culture of anthropocentrism stems from a complex series of social norms, habit (or, after Bourdieu, very much embodied habitus), institutions, and political-economic arrangements. And this is a series of arrangements which an analytic framework rooted in Foucault’s work on discipline and biopower can best tackle due to its capacity to engage with a reality in flux and beyond fixed moral categories.

Of course, our interaction with animals also goes far beyond our diet¹, but given Steiner's focus, especially in his conclusion, on meat-eating, let us consider the issue of meat. And, more specifically, the structure and *modus operandi* of the modern meat industry. Notions of moral imperatives give us little analytical purchase when it comes to actually studying different and changing contexts, structures, and forms of relations.

Here I will turn to my recent work on the pork industry, a \$35 billion business in the U.S. (National Pork Producers Council) that provides the approximately 50 pounds of pork North Americans eat annually per capita (Pew Commission). That this industry is based on the killing and exploitation of nonhuman animals is beyond doubt. But what kind of animal is being killed and exploited here? It's not exactly a simple question. The pig in its current iteration is the product of millennia of interaction with humans and is one of the earliest exemplars of what Nikolas Rose terms the extraction of "biovalue," or the "capturing, domesticating, disciplining, instrumentalizing the vital capacities of living creatures" for human benefit (Rose 33). The very nature of the pig has been altered, as has its relation with humans, both of which were accelerated by the transition from smallholder pig farming and slaughter to industrial animal agriculture (See Mizelle; Horowitz). Today, 1.4 billion pigs are killed annually around the world by private and publicly traded companies within an entire industry devoted to genetic, spatial, and technological intervention in animal lives to maximize their yield and minimize their costs.²

In this system, the pig has a double existence as a commodity: on one hand, the pig is produced for consumption; on the other, the pig is an asset underlying financial instruments and the value of publicly traded companies. There are a number of overlapping logics at play in this system. The product (the pig) must be preconceived as having certain biological characteristics (growth rate, ability to efficiently convert feed of a certain kind into mass, high fertility for

females, and a specific yield of meat desired by consumers, among others); the pig must then be raised in such a way as to maximize its biological capacity for meat creation while controlling for the risk posed by its animality (preventing disease, certain behaviors, escape); the pig must then be killed and its carcass efficiently mined for saleable goods, which in turn need to be sold to consumers.³

The relationship to animals here certainly denies them the full moral consideration Steiner advocates, but it is not overtly one of simply exploitation. Indeed, the relationship is literally biopolitical in the sense of maximizing the vital capacities of the pig subject in the interests of maximizing its productivity. The live pig, then, generates value throughout its life, both as a commodity itself and as a site of investment. This is the construct that is the industrial pig. It would not biologically exist if not for this system and it generally cannot exist outside the system.

Within the productive process death is naturalized. Roberto Esposito notes that under certain regimes of power, there exists a notion that for some (human) populations there is an “obligation to die.” He argues that “death must not appear as the negation but rather as the natural outcome of certain conditions of life” (Esposito 133). Esposito’s rendering of the naturalization of killing map very closely onto the relationship of the meat industry with animals, with one important caveat, again rooted in animals’ commodity status. It is not that livestock are deemed unworthy of life in an absolute sense. It is, rather, that they are structurally and biologically not allowed to live outside the productive process. Their death is written into futures contracts, company ledgers, and into their very bodies. Productive death is literally instilled into animal bodies before their birth.

In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault refers to the notion of the verediction of the market, whereby the market is “the site of truth,” meaning its effects can be viewed within specific forms of governance as just or natural (Foucault 30-32). He posits that, by extension, modern life has become subject to the dynamics of competition and to some extent governed by market logic. He is of course referring to the biopolitical and disciplinary mechanisms that affect human subjects. A more literal reading, in light of the above extension of Esposito’s work to nonhumans, would suggest that the pig-as-commodity can be considered literally a market subject.

Livestock are bred and killed specifically to create value. The sovereign act of killing an animal is not a random one or one based in individual rational choice, but rather a value-creating one rooted in ongoing market processes. In the closed circuit of livestock life, the death function of biopower is not, as Mbembe suggests, about human populations, “the very principle of excess—an *anti-economy*” (Mbembe 15). Rather, the death function is both a calculated and standard aspect of the productive process where biovalue is paired with what I term necrovalue. The “living death” of animal subjects is not a state akin to a concentration camp or colony, but one of constant biopolitical intervention aimed at the achievement of a specific type of body.

This, in turn, is linked to a network of human governance and capital throughout the value chain that goes far beyond the end consumer of meat. This stretches from workers and regulators in financial markets, all operating within their own disciplinary and regulative regimes, to corporate executives and slaughterhouse workers (the disciplinary and biopolitical regimes to which the latter are subject have been explored in depth by Timothy Pachirat in his ethnographic work *Every Twelve Seconds*). Where, then, is the failure in ethics here? Is the migrant laborer seeking employment to feed his family failing ethically in seeking employment

on the kill floor of an industrial slaughterhouse? Is the teacher whose pension fund invests in Smithfield Foods failing ethically? Is the marketing exec doing exactly what he has been trained to do—making an attractive message that will maximize sales for their client—when she designs a more attractive package for low-fat, low-sodium bacon failing ethically?

Of course there are forms of resistance and choice—such as nonparticipation or veganism—available to all these actors. But what I have tried to demonstrate here are two things. First, to show the applicability of a “postmodern” analytic for delving into the nature of human-animal political-economic imbrications and relations and understanding their complexity. Second, in doing so, I hope to have shown just how problematic these relations are and how they escape easy answers. And here, problematic does not mean throwing up our hands in a moment of nihilistic relativism, as Steiner suggests we “postmodernists” do, but rather I mean it in the literal sense. These relations present problems. Most importantly, what does being nonanthropocentric entail here?

Doing away with mistreatment of animals or the conditions that engender it might include accepting that doing away with the pig-as-commodity also does away with the majority of the world’s pigs. Or, that caring for animals might mean fighting battles on their behalf in boardrooms and capital markets by becoming complicit in market systems that cause broader social ills. It may require choosing between animal welfare and human welfare, at least in the short term. It might also mean realizing that animal life and death sometimes have less to do with direct human choice and agency than with financial markets and the vagaries of drought and investor opinion.

Moreover, any sort of vegan prerogative will not come into effect in a void, with static individuals making the rational choice not to eat “animals” writ large. Veganism, by virtue of

being a moral project that strives to remake society is not simply about individual choices but about concerted political actions. In other words, if the purpose of the vegan imperative is to change society and not simply to lead to individual decisions to refuse to consume animal products or be complicit in animal exploitation, it requires action rather than simply abstention. This has to entail economic, institutional, legal, and above all pedagogical intervention and discipline to create the setting in which new vegan subjectivities might be created. And this, certainly, involves a reconfiguration—but certainly not a liberation from—a broad range of power relations.

None of this is to say, however, that a Foucauldian analysis leaves us without a basis for making judgments or addressing ills. It is merely that such judgments go beyond abstract principles or some facile championing of all “others” as per Wapner’s suggestion. Rather, it means, as has been argued by Stephen Thierman,

that a Foucauldian analysis is buttressed by certain normative considerations, for instance, a recognition that ontological reduction is an affront to subjectivity and, thus, is something to be highlighted, and combated, when found in particular locations. An analysis directed in this way allows us to critically explore ... the apparatuses within which humans and other animals exist and subsist, and it helps us to begin to envision better forms of coexistence. (Thierman 110)

So, in answer to the question Steiner asks at the end of his book, “What would need to happen for people to establish critical distance from an [anthropocentric] ideology and to begin to appreciate the fact that animals are our kin and should not be husbanded or consumed?” it bears suggesting that the answer may lie as much in his vegan imperative as in Chloë Taylor’s argument that a “Foucault-inspired approach to studying speciesism should convince us of the possibility of creating a different world, a world without speciesism” (Taylor, ““Postmodern”” 266). If anything, it should make us think of real possibilities rather than abstract ideals.

Veganism—whether considered an imperative or otherwise—can be one way to create a more humane and inclusive interspecies society of nonanthropocentric subjects.

Notes

¹ See Dutkiewicz for an examination of the biopolitics of introduced species in New Zealand that goes beyond food animals to consider the broader political economy and cultural politics of interspecies interaction. This includes protecting some species while exploiting others across a variety of public and private spaces via what Thom van Dooren describes as the “production” of specific ecologies.

² See Wadiwel; Coppin; and Holloway, et al. for Foucauldian analyses of these trends and their effects on nonhumans

³ It bears underscoring that even the “pork industry” produces much more than just meat, as Meindersma has shown.

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