

Chapter 6

It's the Speciesism, Stupid!

Animal Abolitionism, Environmentalism, and the Mass Media

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ABSTRACT

In a time of intense instrumentalization of life, nature becomes a mere factory from which natural resources are withdrawn. This system is causing immense social, ethical and environmental impacts, and livestock raising is at the core of these problems. The concept of speciesism – a prejudice concerning nonhuman animals, analogous to racism and sexism – is paramount in this realm. This chapter analyses the role of the mass media in perpetuating speciesist values and the urgent need for a paradigm shift. A genuine concern about the future of the planet and nonhuman animals involves questioning our speciesism and our narrow instrumental and economic paradigms.

INTRODUCTION

We live in a time of intense instrumentalization of life. The paradigm still dominant in the Western culture has helped to weave a concept of nature as a set of instruments for the human species. A consequence is that out of the three pillars underlying sustainability the economic one becomes prevalent in its “green” version. Markets for environmental commodities and payment for environmental services are mechanisms born in this context. The quest to tackle the climate change problem via a carbon market is probably the most emblematic example.

Although the climatic issue is a real question to be faced, other problems associated with the so-called “Anthropocene” (Lewis & Maslin, 2015; Zalasiewicz, 2015) are equally or even more severe. Extensive destruction and degradation of habitats – main causes for biodiversity loss, are primary cases requiring urgent attention.

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Rockström et al. (2009, p. 472), for example, proposed nine “Earth-system processes and its associated thresholds which, if crossed, could generate unacceptable environmental change”. Their analysis shows that “three of these processes – climate change, rate of biodiversity loss and interference with the nitrogen cycle – have already transgressed their boundaries” (Rockström et al., 2009, p. 475) and the rate of loss of biodiversity, terrestrial and marine, appears as the most critical, since the border for a safe range of operation is already far exceeded (see also WWF, 2016).

Likewise, according to the 2016 Living Planet Report (WWF, 2016, p. 3), “species populations of vertebrate animals have decreased in abundance by 58 per cent between 1970 and 2012”. Although climate change is a significant menace, the most common threat to declining animal populations is the loss and degradation of their habitat (WWF, 2016).

It is also paramount to focus on a specific group of vertebrates – mammalians. Smith et al. (2016, p. 101) point out that there has been “a fundamental shift from a world dominated by wild animals to one largely composed of humans and their livestock”. This transition in the biosphere has a number of important implications in terms of ecosystem functions. As the megafauna animals (including elephants, rhinoceroses, giraffes, hippopotamuses, lions, bears, elks, wild buffaloes etc.) have been important ecosystem engineers, “there is an urgent need to understand in a holistic way just how ecosystems may ‘unravel’ with their decline or extinction” (Smith et al., 2016, p. 107). Smith et al. (2016) evaluate several proposals of “rewilding”, but in order to look at this issue through a genuinely holistic perspective, one must investigate the underlying context. In this case, the historical, economic, political and cultural causes of such decline must be taken into account, along with a critical analysis of the dominant solutions that prevail today, which are market-based and extensively dominated by a chrematistic view.

Aristotle, in his book “*Politics*” (see Aristotle, 1999), explained the difference between economics and chrematistics or wealth getting. The first is concerned with the material supply of the *oikos* (the family, house or family property) or the *polis* (the city, city-state or body of citizens) while the latter, even being part of the economy, is essentially an acquisitive technique. Aristotle also made explicit that chrematistics can become unnatural, breaking all limits, and anticipated that the accumulation of wealth would end up destroying the good way of living (Rossi & Tierno, 2009).

Indeed, the financialization of nature has many problems. New technologies, for example, may turn innocuous the value of an “ecosystem service”. Silvertown (2015) cites the case of a species of bats whose “service” concerning cotton productivity was almost wiped out by the introduction of a transgenic technology, combined with a fall in the price of that commodity in the market. He enumerates several other problems concerning the concept of ecosystem services, including “make-believe” fictitious markets. According to him, the dominant way of envisaging our dependence upon the existence and functioning of the environment through monetization devalues nature and provides power to political-economic systems that are at the very basis of the current environmental crisis, such as the neoliberal ideology. Silvertown (2015) also stresses that anthropocentrism lies at the core of the problem of monetization of ecosystem services.

This ethical and moral problem that resides in our relationship with nature, occurs because in industrial societies we have created a very peculiar relationship with technology, taking technical advances as if they were the development tout court. Postman (1993) states that there is a supremacy of technology over all other things, created throughout the history of the Western world, culminating in what he calls technopoly. The idea of technopoly involves a belief in progress, standardization, and superior machine efficiency with respect to humans. Postman (1993) says that because the changes wrought by technology are subtle, they are also wildly unpredictable. He argues that “embedded in every tool is an ideological

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