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From Speciesism to a Possibility of Coexistence

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Jussi Heikkilä, *Puffin (Fratercula Arctica)*, 1998, stuffed puffin, plaster, steel, tin of fish, 27cm x 24cm x 11cm
Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen

Animals and the politics of violence

The relationship of humans to other animal species is contradictory. We think of ourselves as animal-loving and our lives abound with different animal images, whether in clothing, the emojis in text messages or in the everyday entertainment offered to us by cute cat videos. On the other hand, our entire postindustrial way of life is founded on widespread killing of animals: the greatest part of animals living in our society ends up on our plates.

The 'Coexistence' collection exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma nudges us to revisit how we perceive our relationship with other species. The exhibition calls into question the place habitually accorded to human beings as above nature and other animals and as their sovereign. In this article I approach the relationship of humans with animals from the perspective of speciesism. I discuss speciesism in the light of climate change but also as a problem of violence. I engage in particular with the relation of factory farming of animals to the history of capitalism and the ensuing need to question naturalised notions of the status of animals in our communities. The questions brought up here concerning communality and coexistence intertwine with my aim of outlining the conditions of a new kind of relationship with animals.

Climate change and speciesism

Fossil fuels are often identified as the main reason for climate change. Replacing these with renewable sources of energy is among the most lively and timely topics of political debate both in Finland and globally. What seems to be frequently forgotten, however, is that factory farming is also a significant culprit in the increase in greenhouse gas emissions. According to



Fanni Niemi-Junkola, *Protection*, 2016,
 screen capture from the video, duration 11min 35s
 Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

figures from the UN, for instance, the emissions from factory farming are higher than those from all transportation in the world taken together – including air traffic.¹

According to the newest research, adopting a vegan or vegetarian diet would provide one of the most effective ways to stop global warming.² The consumption of meat is significantly higher in the industrialised than it is in the developing countries, where the proportion of plant protein in nutrition is already high. This is why the demand for making dietary changes concerns the inhabitants of industrialised countries in particular.

Making changes to one's diet could also slow down the sixth wave of mass extinction. The constantly accelerating clearing of forests for pasture for meat and dairy cattle usurps living space from wild animal and plant species, as well as causing deforestation and desertification. It has been calculated that of all mammals globally, 60 per cent are farmed animals and 36 per cent are humans, while wild mammals only account for 4 per cent.³ Coexistence between the species is characterised by an abyssal disparity: humans, and the species bred for the food industry by humans, dominate over all the others.

Even if it is possible to perceive climate change with its effects as the decisive impetus for giving up an animal-based diet, global warming is not the only unsettling consequence of factory farming of animals. Maximised to the extreme, in addition to exploiting natural resources, it presupposes an enormous machinery for killing, the speed of which is historically unprecedented. In one year, more than 70 billion factory-farmed animals are killed globally for food.⁴ This figure does not include fish or other marine

- 1 Steinfeld & co, *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options*. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 2006.
- 2 J. Poore & T. Nemecek, 'Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers.' *Science*, 360: 6392, 2018, 987–92.
- 3 Yinon M. Bar-On, Rob Phillips & Ron Milo, 'The Biomass Distribution on Earth.' *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* (PNAS), 115 (25), 2018, 6, 506–11.
- 4 The figure is based on calculations by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations. See for instance <https://faunalytics.org/global-animal-slaughter-statistics-and-charts/> (accessed 2 February 2019).

animals; killing these species is calculated in tonnes. More than 71 million animals are slaughtered in Finland each year.⁵ As important and necessary as debating the effects of eating habits on climate change is, it seems at times to make us blind to the suffering that factory farming causes to its immediate victims: the animals. Would it be possible to approach factory farming, in addition to its ecological consequences, simultaneously as a question of violence towards animals?

Rob Nixon, who has written about environmental politics and postcolonial theory, uses the concept of 'slow violence' in outlining the effects of climate change.⁶ The term refers to a chain of events often extending over several human generations in which species become extinct and entire habitats are annihilated. He notes that the first to suffer the effects of climate change are the poor and developing countries, where western postindustrial states attempt to externalise both their waste problems and their political responsibility for climate change.

Because factory farming of animals is directly connected to the extinction of species and ecological destruction, the slow violence described by Nixon is generated by 'fast violence', that is, the industrial killing of animals. This is why the debates on climate change are quintessentially related to the question of violence towards animals, as well as to the political and ethical problem of speciesism.

Speciesism denotes the determination of the worth of an animal based on the species under which it has been classified.⁷ The concept can signify both the oppression practised by humans towards other animals and the elevation of the value of certain animals above others. For example, in our culture, dogs are seen as more morally valuable than pigs. Dogs are loved as family members, while pigs are eaten. Justifying killing on the grounds of species affiliation can, however, be seen as one of the cruellest forms of speciesism.

The concept of speciesism can, on the other hand, also describe the power relation created by humans between farmed animals and wild animals. The intensive breeding, high-speed raising and mass slaughter of farmed animals yield such economic profits to giant food companies in the short term that the connections between factory farming and mass extinction of wild species are simply buried in silence.

Death erased

The changing exhibition section of 'Coexistence' features a video installation by Terike Haapoja (b. 1974) called *Yhteisö – Community* (2007). This five-channel video installation approaches the problem of animal death in the light of communality. Haapoja has used a thermal camera to record the dying process of various animals, showing how the warm shades turn little by little to cold colours that speak of death drawing closer. The humans watching the installation form the community that bears witness to the moment of death.

Although death seems to happen at that moment only to the animals in the video images, from the perspective of the inevitability of death, humans do not differ from other animal species. The isolation of the viewers from the dying animals in the installation turns out to be an illusion that dissolves, as a novel experience of communality emerges: we are all heading towards death.

Most of the animals in the installation have been euthanised due to serious illnesses. However, one of the animals included is a slaughter animal, which changes the meaning of death. Our society, like a large part of the food industry, is founded on the killing of non-human animals and the productisation of their bodies. Regardless of the massive

5 <http://animalia.fi/tuotantoelaimet/> (accessed 2 February 2019).

6 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

7 The concept of speciesism was first introduced by psychologist and animal rights advocate Richard D. Ryder but made familiar to the wider public by philosopher Peter Singer in his book *Animal Liberation* (1975).



Terike Haapoja, Yhfeisö – Community, 2007,
five-channel video installation, duration 180min
Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen

scale of quotidian killing, the death of a factory-farmed animal is taboo and not shown in the nostalgia-inducing advertising images of sunny fields or in the cartoonish drawings on the packaging of ground beef. Death and killing have been alienated, erased as if they had never happened.

Utilising animals in food production is often justified on the grounds of symbiosis: the animals benefit from the protection, care and nutrition provided by humans – the humans from the meat, leather, milk and eggs produced by the animals. As a form of coexistence of sorts, symbiosis creates the impression of there being a natural balance that satisfies all parties. It is, however, important to keep in mind that factory farming of animals is a historical phenomenon: there is nothing ‘natural’ in the way we treat farmed animals.

As Nicole Shukin, who has researched the cultural history of factory farming and capitalism, writes, factory farming is a result of historical development, the capitalist social system in particular. Owing to it, the bodies of farmed animals are almost universally seen only as raw material and a means of accumulating capital. The connection of capitalism to industrial animal killing is not only historical but very concretely material as well.

The blueprint for the assembly line or ‘conveyor belt’ introduced by the car manufacturer Henry Ford in 1913 was derived from a technique of killing used in the first mass slaughter institution that maximised productivity and instigated a highly detailed division of labour. The assembly line later became the key symbol of mass production. Ford had visited in person this famous Chicago slaughterhouse that had been organising paid tours for visitors and even foreign tourists since the 1860s.⁸

This entertaining spectacle organised around the killing of animals demonstrates that bearing witness to death did not reflect an ethical identification with a dying being. Historical, economic and cultural norms control how we see, experience and react to killing and death. The deaths of some upset us, stopping us in our tracks and calling forth questions of justice and ethics; the deaths of others do not.

⁸ Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, 87, 92.

According to Cary Wolfe, a theorist on posthumanism and biopolitics, our comprehension of the justification for killing is regulated, in particular, by the conceptual and historical distinction made between the human and the animal.⁹ In his view, this dichotomy is in line with the idea of who or which beings are perceived to be included in our moral and political community. Those who are not thought as belonging to the community may be treated 'like animals', regardless of whether the being in question is a member of the human or animal species.

The question of belonging or non-belonging to a community, emphasised by Wolfe, also explains why pets and farmed animals are treated so differently by the law. History is likewise full of devastating examples of what happens when some humans are 'animalised' and excluded from the juridical and moral community. Consequently, the category of 'animal' is never neutral but a concept that is always already at the core of political struggles.

Ecofeminist theories have been focusing already for decades on how the oppression of animals connects with other social power relations.¹⁰ Researchers have studied, for instance, how women were for a long time thought of as irrational and animal-like, less human than men. This classification was used both to justify the conception of women as male possessions and to explain why they were denied human and civil rights. In Western sciences, politics and religions, the prevailing notion for a long time was that human was a synonym for a white heterosexual male belonging to the property-owning class. All others held a lower place in the hierarchy: women, the racialized, workers, the disabled, homosexuals, gender minorities and animals.

The central idea of ecofeminism is that ending all kinds of social oppression presupposes critically engaging with different forms of oppression at the same time. In contemporary feminist discourse the approach has been characterised as intersectionality.

Towards nonviolent coexistence

In the preface to the exhibition catalogue, Leevi Haapala notes that "Coexistence" falls within the museum's theme year of exploring the conditions of a good life'. One of the fundamental questions posed by the exhibition is: whose is the life that is referred to as a 'good life'? Throughout the history of Western philosophy the concept has by and large been used to reflect on the good life of human beings, and often, that of a very small and privileged group of people indeed.

But as the feminist philosopher Judith Butler points out, the question of a good life is based on an assumption of a certain kind of life.¹¹ A life that is already beforehand considered as worth living. Without this assumption the entire question would be meaningless. The idea of a good life includes social and cultural norms regarding who or what kind of beings are deserving of a good life. According to Butler, the question of a good life thus cannot be posed separately from the social relations of power that dictate what kind of life even matters and whose lives are seen as valuable – and whose are not. This implies that the moral philosophical question of a good life presupposes critically questioning the prevailing power relations.

As with Haapoja's installation engaging with the death of animals and the dimensions of communality, 'Coexistence' as a whole offers us an opportunity to reflect on our relationship with the lives of non-human animals in a new way. What can the ecological crisis teach us about nonviolent coexistence? What kind of possibilities can we create for justice between the species?

9 Cary Wolfe, *Animals before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, 21, 104–05.

10 See, for instance, Carol J. Adams & Lori Gruen (eds.), *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals & the Earth*. New York & London: Bloomsbury, 2014; Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands & Bruce Erickson (eds.), *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010.

11 Judith Butler, 'Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?' in *Notes toward A Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2015, 193–219.