

Our Children and Other Animals

2014. Ashgate. Pages: 206. ISBN 978-1-4094-6460-0.

At the very beginning of their book Cole and Stewart introduce us to a paradoxical concept of “the juxtaposition of death and delight”. They wish to further explore it as a commonly accepted occurrence in today’s marketing and media, most often seen in the linking of likeable, animated animal characters with promotional fast food meals which contain mutilated animal body parts (Cole, Stewart: 4). This paradoxical occurrence is often called out as such and those who do the calling are often marginalized and labeled as extremists. This has motivated the authors of “Our Children and Other Animals” to explore the social processes responsible for the construction of what is today’s mainstream concept of human – nonhuman animal relations. It is necessary to explore and expose the underlying processes of child socialization (in the family, school and through the media) in Western cultures, which serve to legitimize an instrumental appreciation of animals and obscure their violent exploitation. However, in order to do this we must start by reexamining the dominant discourse on the topic and choosing our words carefully. Vocabulary is one of the tools used to create space between the two inextricably linked concepts (human animal – nonhuman animal). It also perhaps diminishes identification and empathy. Cole and Stewart’s motives are moral but their appeals for a deeper look at these issues are based on the undisputable and dire consequences these practices have on us – human animals – our habitat and our physical health.

At the turn of the 19th century, mediated by intense industrialization and a diverse set of social changes it made possible, the trend of exploitation of animals for food, scientific and medical research, entertainment and education drastically intensified. These changes soon brought about the simplification and distortion of human – nonhuman animal relations. Before mass urbanization, most men and women lived in rural areas and shared quarters with a large number of different nonhuman animals. Children grew up surrounded by their scent, grew accustomed to their sounds, fed them, cared for them, and witnessed their births, moments

of procreation and deaths. Through this daily interaction, according to the authors, a specific type of relationship was formed. Mass migration to urban centers at the beginning of the 19th century included the livestock – live animal markets and slaughterhouses resided at the heart of every major city. However, with the development of education, the rise in health awareness, as well as the drastic change in the perception of childhood, most children were moved from factories into schools where the concept of children's innocence was further developed. The abusively treated and violently exploited animals thus had to go. Both the perceived health risks and the detrimental influence of slaughterhouses on children's morals were deemed too high. Consequently, the ever intensifying exploitation (labeled as a necessary condition of progress) was expelled from the cities, moved to the outskirts and hidden behind inconspicuous architecture. The spatial and social positioning of nonhuman animals into 'appropriate' spaces, out of sight, completed their naming as 'Others'.

While the true nature of nonhuman animal exploitation rose in quantity and cruelty, paralleled with efforts to conceal such practices, the concept of pets arrived in the home of the urban dweller and with it a possibility of a new kind of relationship. Pets opened the door for the capitalist proliferation of cultural representations of nonhuman animals aimed at children. Cole and Stewart find this fact worth investigating since it seems to point towards the secretive, underlying processes that reproduce human – nonhuman animal relations during human childhood. It is also their belief that the study of these issues will shed light on other kinds of 'othering' as a consequence of a patriarchal, colonialist and classist society since such processes, be they intra-human or inter-species, use the same methods. The objectification and containment of 'Others', their removal from the public sphere and their comparison with animals (vermin) all serve to dominate. The processes this book investigates are those that belong to a social system called anthroparchy – “a complex and relatively stable set of hierarchical relationships in which 'nature' is dominated through formations of social organization which privilege the human” and encompasses “the interplay of the material and discursive constitution of domination” (Cudworth qtd. in Cole, Stewart: 27).

Hence “Our Children and Other Animals” presents its argument by covering five subjects: 1) a critical examination of the human use of other

animals in UK society during early socialization, 2) the interconnection of dominant practices and representations in this socialization process, 3) the sociological importance of nonhuman animals in human children's lives, 4) the consequences of these early socialization practices for other animals' lives and deaths, and 5) the ways in which these dominant practices and representations are and can be challenged (Cole, Stewart: 6). Cole and Stewart recognize the existence of Foucault's discourse pertaining to nonhuman animals which legitimizes and reproduces their oppression. They work to create specific types of knowledge that serves to objectify the 'Other', to turn them from ends into means. The authors argue that the positioning of nonhuman animals depends on the dominant discourse backed by scientific knowledge which legitimizes their specific usage. Alongside the dichotomy of those who do the naming and those who are named due to their usefulness, another important moment ushers in Max Weber's understanding of the role of rationalization in modern Western society. Western rationalization, for Weber, demands a weakening of the effect of emotions and tradition on human action making it a product of calculus that is applied in all spheres of life. He distinguishes between four ideal types of meaningful social action: 1) instrumental-rational, 2) value-rational, 3) affective, and 4) traditional. Most human action towards nonhuman animals can be called as instrumental-rational. By placing nonhuman animals onto what Cole and Stewart call an instrumentalization continuum, some animals are most directly objectified as clothes and consumed as food, while others become companions and toys. On each side of the spectrum the animal has lost the ability to be the agent and is used, controlled or at best 'cared for'. It is the humans who name, supervise, control and inscribe purpose and fate onto their objects.

The importance and omnipresence of media in the socialization process of children did not escape the authors and exploring their role is crucial for the book. What is presented are the ways in which caricatured representations of nonhuman animals direct children into forming a specific kind of relationship with abstract, non-existent characters whilst the real experience of touch, smell and sound of living animals is eliminated and their oppression hidden. Animals are presented through the prism of cuteness that uses a specific style of photography, eliminating representation of true animal behavior and focusing on certain species mostly outside of their natural habitat. The consequence is an isolated

and controlled experience that teaches children to direct their affection and empathy towards representations and away from actual animals being exploited as a result of our everyday choices. The concept of an animal is fragmented into two parts from early childhood: an infantilized caricature to adore on the one hand, and a living animal to consume on the other. Animal representations are used in marketing of animal products aimed at children whilst the violent process of the production of those products is completely hidden from view. Cole and Stewart touch upon the socialization methods of children within the family as well as the educational system where discourse and an established set of norms (e.g. curriculum, school lunches etc.) normalize a sense of natural human domination over animals in the mind, as well as the habit of their consumption. Another issue is the state subsidizing of certain programs that further enforce and perpetuate the discourse and practices in question.

"Our Children and Other Animals" presents an interesting argument by investigating the nature and power of the discourse around human – nonhuman animal relations in present day Western society as well as Weber's instrumental-rational social action behind it. The narrative is backed by a historical inquiry into social change that occurred in the UK and might have had an effect on how that discourse and action became the norm. The book also contains a detailed analysis of marketing and media directed at children, as well as popular videogames, in order to support its claims. More work could have been done in respect to alternative representations of animals children come into contact with through documentaries and other educational programs dealing with wildlife. Such programs deviate from the processes Cole and Stewart believe legitimize objectification and oppression of nonhuman animals in the media and are not far from children's reach. Despite the fact that more realistic representations exist, it is true that they are less available and perhaps do not target children directly. Thus the authors suggest the broadening of discourse and the need to introduce new elements into the socialization process of children. One of the ways this can be done is through vegan literature that portrays many species of animals in their natural surroundings whilst interacting with their kind without the need to make them appear cute. Such books contain realistic illustrations and give agency to their nonhuman characters independently from their human ones. Nonhuman animals then finally cease to be "blank or near-

blank slates awaiting the inscription of human meanings and practices that will define their purpose and mortal fate" (Cole, Stewart: 19).

*Mateja Penava*¹

.....
1 Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb; spfpoz@gmail.com