On the genesis of speciesism

Towards a Political Approach to the Man-Animal Relationship

Marco Maurizi

Eine deutsche Übersetzung des Artikels findet sich hier:
Maurizi, Marco: Die Zähmung des Menschen, in: Witt-Stahl, Susann (Hrsg.):
Das steinerne Herz der Unendlichkeit erweichen.
Beiträge zu einer kritischen Theorie für die Befreiung der Tiere, 2007, S. 109-124.

The ambiguity of Speciesism

After the publication of Peter Singer's most famous book – Animal Liberation – the word 'speciesism' has become largely acknowledged in the Animal Rights Movement. Even if many animal rights activists never read Animal Liberation, certain general assumptions derived from this book have indeed become the lingua franca of the whole movement.

Animal Liberation defines speciesism as the moral privilege given to one's own species, i.e. we assume the interests of human animals to be more important than that of not-human animals, just like white racists do with black men (or sexists with women).[1] This is a strict theoretical definition of speciesism. But Singer himself introduces a historical description of the origins of speciesism in his book; his sources are indeed poor but he cunningly manages to quote Aristotle, Augustin, Saint Thomas, Descartes and Kant to unveil the speciesist nature of Western civilization.[2]

Yet, speciesism is a praxis and not only a moral prejudice: it has a material and not only an ideal side. It is not clear whether Singer is here describing how speciesism as a praxis came to existence in history or how different human societies justified a posteriori their concrete attitude towards animals. I assume that the fallacy of Singer's speciesism is that it doesn't make such distinction, because it cannot. First of all, because he doesn't seem to see it. In his 'Short History of Speciesism', Singer merely juxtaposes the ideas of philosophers and the material treatment reserved to animals as if the latter was produced by the first.[3] But the real reason for such confusion and inversion of the material and ideal aspects of speciesism is that Singer's starting point is the abstraction of philosophical ethics rather than the concreteness of history and politics. Singers must suppress the distinction between material and ideal in order to present our modern society and its values as something 'given', because abstract moral theory only makes sense in an abstract and static world. Universal principles cannot apply to a world that is conceived in perpetual change. This is evident when we think that Singer is not even preaching new moral values but simply asserting that our society contradicts itself if it doesn't extend its already existing values to not-human animals.

In a word: the real problem with antispeciesism is that it lacks any historical understanding of human society and it lacks any social understanding of human history.[4] This may seem a wordplay but it is not. Such moral theory is not interested in the historical and social conditionings of man; Singer is of course aware that such conditionings do happen and his own moral theory is possible under certain obvious historical circumstances. If the category of 'speciesism' was first elaborated in the 70s and not in Ancient Greece it is only because modern society forged the concepts of 'universal rights' and 'egalitarianism', while Pythagoras was more concerned about not eating the souls of his dead friends; Singer simply demonstrates how illogical it is not to extend such concepts to not-human animals once Western Civilization has imposed his values – and, indeed, its economic and political hegemony – over the whole world. Consequently, many Animal Rights activists seem not to be worried about such hegemony, they simply accepts it as a fact; the moral values they play with are not questioned, their origins are uninvestigated.

History could tell us when did speciesism begin. A critical look on Society could tell us how. 'Apolitical' antispeciesists have good reasons not to answer to these questions: their theory only works when we forget them. These two mistakes can be also expressed synthetically as the lacking of any political understanding of human history and society. It is not surprising that many animal rights activists dismiss political change, preaching animal liberation as a moral and intimate choice that concerns 'everybody': it is not important to know who s/he is, where and when s/he lives or even if this 'everybody' does factually exist. According to such vision, Polar hunters and New York policemen should both join a vegetarian diet and advocate animal rights, even if this means that the first should try to grow plants on ice or become a New York policeman himself.[5]

When?

So, when did speciesism begin? As I already pointed out this is itself an ambiguous question, since it implies what we called a material and an ideal side: from the material side, speciesism is the praxis of using animal for our needs, turning them into mere 'things'.[6] But such process of reification implies an ideal side, i.e. the ideological justification that animals are indeed things at our disposal.

What happens if we look at real history and try to trace back the origin of speciesism both in its material and ideal side? Let's begin with the material side. Since Singer defined speciesism as the 'ideology' of a 'dominant species' the first question is: when did we become a 'dominant' species? Was it a heritage of our ancestors? Who was the first speciesist ape?

1. DOMINATION AS PRAXIS

We can surely count out the Australopithecus, as he could barely hunt and was himself most certainly food for other predators.[7] We know that he could probably kill small animals but he also probably ate the corps of dead ones too. His behaviour towards nature is scarcely different from that of other apes, although he probably began the all-important practice of stone-tooling.

Other ancestors like Homo erectus and Neanderthal developed hunting skills, mainly based on their growing intelligence and cooperation.[8] Although they could themselves still be food for other animals, they were indeed dangerous predators which succeeded in overcoming their physical minority. But this didn't make them 'dominant animals' either. Neither did their relative power and intelligence make them believe they were 'better', 'more important' than or even 'different' from the animals they killed. It is questioned whether such pre-Sapiens humans held the necessary symbolic skills to assert their 'intrinsic value' in the face of other animals. At any rate, the evidence provided by societies characterized by gathering and hunting is that the hunted is sacred and sometimes believed to be a god or to possess an immortal soul.[9] The hunt is commonly preceded by a ritual: the hunters pray the so-called 'Lord of Animals' and ask forgiveness for the killing they're doing. They couldn't go out and shoot to everything that moved.

Although magic and religious ideas surely helped to draw a line between man's self-consciousness and his perception of other animals, the hunters' attitude towards his victims seems to be characterized at this social stage by a mixture of compassion and guilt. Hunters must believe that the animal they kill actually wants to be killed, that such murder is a gift from the part of the animal, that it is indeed a sacrifice. Hunting itself is part of a magic ritual in which the hunter and the hunted are peers; it's the phenomenon that Mercea Eliade called "mystical solidarity".[10]

There's no use in saying that such ideas were an excuse for a speciesist praxis, because magic is not simply an ideological Weltanschauung. It is the first approach of the human mind to reality, the first symbolic description of it, the eruption of meaning: it is science, religion and art shaped into one.[11] It would be pointless to argue that the prehistoric hunter is lying or pretending: he really sees the world as system of visible and invisible forces, between sacred and profane and such dualisms make a stronger distinction than that between human and not-human animals.

We can therefore easily reject the idea that our dominion upon nature is a 'natural' characteristic of our species. We must assume that we became 'dominant animals' only at a certain phase of Homo sapiens' evolution, since our domination of nature needed a powerful symbolic and social system to get beyond the magic cosmos of hunters-gathers societies, where killing and being-killed were still equal possibilities.

If we assume that totemic tribal systems were still grounded on the identification with the animal, 'speciesism' had to be a much later cultural development. That's why anarcho-primitivits like John Zerzan suggest that the dominion of man over nature began later on, during the Neolithic age, with the 'invention' of agriculture and domestication.[12] Although I don't agree with Zerzan and consider his critique of Civilization far too simplified and generalized, he did put the finger on the real problem. The praxis of domesticating plants and animals is indeed the step that makes it possible to change the environment we live in, to make it a mere extension of our own needs, instead of entertaining a dialogue with it.[13] With the so-called 'Neolithic revolution', the human being develops a different relationship to his/her non-human counterpart: if Palaeolithic hunter-gathers societies could exert a certain amount of violence upon nature, Neolithic villages imposed a systematic control on the 'biological cycle' of other species. Such unilateral relationship – in which the existence of one of the partners is totally devoted to the other – is what one usually calls 'domination', Herrschaft, 'signoria'. Such 'enslavement' of non-human nature is the condition sine qua non of speciesism, i.e. the material basis by which humans can consider themselves 'Masters'.

It is also notable that such step was followed by an amazing acceleration in human evolution: between 8000 and 3000 years b.C. the political, economic, scientific and technological structures of Civilization as we know it were laid down. A male-dominated, hierarchical order, in which religion and 'science' justify Man's supremacy was born. From its begin history was the history of dominion. From a certain point a view, we can assume that the Neolithic age is not over yet.

2. DOMINATION AS IDEOLOGY

Let us for the moment be contented with such conclusion, we will return on that later. Anyway, if the Neolithic revolution laid down the basis of our dominion over nature, thus producing the material possibility of speciesist ideology, it didn't produce such ideology. The ideal side of speciesism appeared only later on in history. It's time we ask us when did that happen.

If we believe, with Singer, that speciesism is the moral privilege given to our species, we must assume that all human societies that practiced slavery or human sacrifice were not speciesist. Thus, speciesism turns out to be a rather recent phenomenon. For though they adored their king like a human God, the Aztecs used to slaughter and eat thousands of men; Singer's moral criteria would have been a good argument in favour of Aztec cannibalism.

Speciesism is an universal ideology: it needs a universal concept of species, so that we can gather from one side all human beings under the concept 'man' and from the other side all not-human beings under the concept 'animal'. Singer's reasoning only makes sense when such distinction is historically established and has become the basic assumption of rationality itself. Both such distinctions are in fact not at all evident or immediate and it took a long time for them to become widely accepted.

As Erich Fromm argued in his Anatomy of Human Destructiveness, the loss of primordial instincts (like the weakening of the smell due to the erect-posture) makes it difficult for the homo sapiens to establish an immediate identity between himself and other men; if the substitutive form of identity is, for example, to be 'member' of a tribe, it is clear that humans from another tribe can be – and actually has often been – perceived as not-humans.[14] So man's identity as species is a conceptual identity that presupposes a high degree of abstraction. And even when such level of abstraction is reached we may still miss something: Aristotle surely had conceived the idea of 'Man' but made a further distinction between free human beings and slaves. It is only with Christendom that the idea that all humans are equal was given an absolute meaning and it was only with the Enlightenment that such idea became political.

From the other side, that all not-human beings should fall under the concept of 'animal' is also problematic. We have an opposition here. Therefore, if the first term – i.e. 'man' – is not yet established (and we have seen that it takes a long time for it to happen), the second term – i.e. 'animal' – will also be fluctuant. We may find that such distinction becomes clearer, the more the idea of man becomes universal. And this is exactly the case. For Aristotle there was continuity between the animal rationale and the other animals. For Christendom such continuity was weaker and with modern Cartesian Mechanism – with the possible exception of materialists like La Mettrie – such idea was definitively passé.

How?

We see there's a big problem with speciesism: its material side – the physical exploitation – does not coincide with its ideal side – the ideological justification of oppression. They even make up a chiasm: the praxis of exploiting animals began when we didn't think we were different from them; and we started to denounce our dominion over them now that we can't anymore more perceive them as peers. Why? Because such reasoning doesn't take into account the crucial fact: that man is an animal, too. So, the right question should not only be: 'when did we start to oppress the other animals?', but also: 'when did we forget that we are animals too?'.

So, to have a 'historical understanding of human society' doesn't simply mean to believe that human society develops in general but that historical mutation is essential to it. History is essential to humans, it is in fact an important part of their nature. As the first homines sapientes walked the Earth, human evolution began running wild. Human culture, i.e. the product of our labour and intelligence, started to develop at a rate unknown to non-human nature before the appearance of our species. Even if they didn't have idea of who Darwin was, Marx and Engels wrote the German Ideology: "Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life".[15] The making of the human Self is therefore something that only through such process can take place. History is the place where such self-making happens: human spirit, human culture is something we actually produce. When Marx and Engels here say that man is 'different' from the animal, they're not talking about some ontological difference, some universal and static distinction; rather they're talking about an activity. Men differentiate themselves from the other animals through history. History is the act of making ourselves different from the animals. From one side such distinction is real because we permanently change ourselves and our environment through our labour. From the other side it is an illusion, because we are animals, part of nature, material beings. The 'spirit' we created is a lie. But this proves again the undeniable uniqueness of man: man is the animal that forgets to be an animal. History is a tale of forgetting.

The first cultural expression of the human spirit can be traced back in magic and animism. If magic did not create the split between our mind and the external world it was anyway the first expression of a split that had already taken place. Magic implies the idea of an invisible force, hidden behind the nature we see: it is such force that explains natural phenomena and makes it possible for the magician to work with them. It's the beginning of the spiritual illusion, but it was also the beginning of an explanation of nature, since magic was religion, art and science at the same time.

But we also said that magic didn't produce the split between the human and the not-human, although it was the beginning of the historical process that lead to it. It didn't produce such split because magic works through the law of similarity. As Marcel Mauss expressed it, the principle of magic is: "one is all, all is one", "nature triumphs over nature".[16] Magic expressed the beginning of forgetting but didn't caused it. It is probable that such forgetting was in fact gradually (self)inflicted on man through education, sexual restriction and alienated labour. The question about when all this happened is therefore inseparable from the question about how, i.e. from the question about society.

We must not forget that man is also a social animal and that historical change is only understandable as social change. Marx' idea that men produce the material basis of their existence only makes sense when we consider men that live in society: i.e. real men, not the isolated individuals that haunts the world of much moral philosophy. If we turn to these real men, we see that material production has always been inseparable from constriction. Whenever society establishes rules through which it can re-produce itself, everybody must do their part. Although such social order implies a sort of prominence of the collective over the individual, the first human societies were probably characterized by a diffuse 'egalitarianism'. When those societies became 'tribes' and later on 'chiefdoms', the social order became increasingly hierarchical and centralized: a central authority, which was religious and political at the same time, started to organize the distribution of the economic resources.[17] Such authority, probably caused by natural differences (like physical or mental cleverness), started to detach itself from the person who held it and to become a privilege. Social constraint, religion and authority all contributed to make men accept an unequal order and social rules started to be inflicted from above and introjected from the individual as 'normal'. Social power is thus not a question of 'strength' or 'violence': its basic tenets is the control that some individuals exert upon the lives of others. And this is exactly the same structure of nature domination. Is interesting therefore that our material control upon nature – something we have already identified with the Neolithic domestication of animals and plants – starts by the same time and becomes the regular mode of production when 'class struggle' is definitively established, i.e. with the birth of the primitive State.

In the early States the central religious and political authority becomes an institution that not only coordinates the economic efforts of society but that makes profit out of it.[18] While the majority materially produces all the means of subsistence, the State stores the products of agriculture and feeds those who don't work (the political and religious elite) or whose work doesn't produce food: like the metal workers whose manufacts were also dedicated to the elite and reinforced their status.[19]

The temple – where the resources are stored for redistribution – is the axial point of the whole process.[20] The authority of the chiefdom discorporates and power becomes impersonal; at the same time, the State incarnates the idea of religious transcendence: the abstract product of social antagonism is imposed over society as a being-in-itself.

Magic, which started as a way of comprehending the world, slowly changed into institutional religions and became a way to hold back social criticism.[21] Indeed, magic had a manipulative side too, and it was also an attempt to dominate the external world. But its effects were ridiculous if compared with that of later State-religions which eventually adopted the patriarchal view of a transcendental dominion over nature. Although religion may have offered the spiritual weapons needed to force the people to work for others, such social development surely involved a certain amount of external violence. As Mario Liverani writes in his insightful book Uruk. The first city, social figures like guardians and soldiers were invented "to protect the central richness from the people, and not to protect the people".[22]

The ideal side of speciesism – i.e. its ideological justification – was a by-product of the institutionalization of religion and, as such, it was a process that involved constriction and repression. But the material side of speciesism was no fun for human beings either. Capital accumulation and the division of labour increased the exploitation rate of both men and animals.[23] It is only when someone can make profit out of them that animals become things and men become slaves. This does not mean that Mesopotamian kings actually saw their oxen as mere things. Nevertheless, the yoked oxen was a precondition of the existence of the Mesopotamian State, as it made possible the necessary 'surplus' accumulation to feed the state bureaucracy.

Once animals become themselves gears in the machinery of dominion they're subjugated not to man but to the superior necessity of the State. It is only when a hierarchy inside society is established that the relation between man and animal becomes hierarchical: men control men who control animals. It's a dialectical process. If it is true that the enslavement of the oxen made the enslavement of man possible, from the other side, human enslavement reinforced the distance between the top of the social pyramid and its basis. Individual peasants may have domesticated individual animals even at the end of the Paleolithic. But it is only with the Neolithic 'class struggle' that animal exploitation becomes systematic and totalitarian.[24] And it is only with institutionalized Religions that (some) humans are worshiped as gods, thus producing the basic ideological weapons of speciesism: i.e. the ontological and moral distinction between (some members of) our species and the others. When we experience speciesism today, we do nothing but see how the modern process of 'democratization' let all members of human society share such ideological heritage.

SPECIECISM AND HUMAN LIBERATION

Although the above historical description is indeed all too generic, I think is worth working in this direction since speciesism is not just a prejudice, but a social structure that deserves detailed sociological and historical analysis. Working on a more subtle and appropriate concept of speciesism might also help to reconsider the relation between human and non-human liberation. I assume that we are far from seeing all the political implications of the struggle against speciesism. Singer writes that "Animal Liberation is Human Liberation too"[25] but for a great part of the Animal Rights Movement such statement is only strategically true. According to Singer, for example, a vegetarian diet could put an end to world starving, as the modern meat industry irrationally destroys the resources of the planet. Which is indeed true. But as I am trying to point out, animal liberation and human liberation are not two kinds of utterly separate and different oppression that only for chance meet. As I have tried to show, the statement "Animal Liberation is Human Liberation" could mean something totally different: once the social implications of speciesism are disclosed, we see that the core of the problem

is the exploitation logic of hierarchical societies, a logic whose basis where established more than 10.000 years ago and that has since not ceased to enslave and sacrifice humans and non-humans to the altar of 'social progress'. Seeing the political implications of speciesism means that speciesism cannot be understood and fought if we don't unveil and question the oppressive structures of Civilization itself.

1. P. Singer, Animal liberation, Haper Collins, New York 2002, p. 6.
2. Ibid., pp. 185-212.
3. See M. Maurizi, „Marxismus und Tierbefreiung", in Susann Witt-Stahl (ed.), Das steinerne Herz der Unendlichkeit erweichen - Beiträge zu einer kritischen Theorie für die Befreiung der Tiere, Alibri - Forum für Utopie und Skepsis 2007.
4. M. Maurizi, "Nove tesi: antispecismo storico e antispecismo metafisico", in Rinascita animalista, February 2005.
5. A point made by B. Noske, "Two Movements and Human-Animal Continuity: Positions, Assumptions, Contradictions", in Center on Animal Liberation Affairs, II, 1.
6. See D. Nibert, Animal Rights/Human Rights, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham/Bovider/New York/Oxford 2002.
7. See F. Martini, Archeologia del paleolitico. Storia e culture dei popoli cacciatori-raccoglitori, Carocci, Roma 2008; J. Diamond, Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies, W. W. Norton, New York and London 1997; J. Chavaillon, L'age d'or de l'humanite: Chroniques du Paleolithique, O. Jacob, Paris 1996; M. Harris, Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Cultures, Random House, New York 1977; Louis-René Nougier, L'économie préhistorique, PUF, Que sais-je, Paris, 1977.
8. Fromm objected to Washburn that man's violence upon other men was not brought forth by hunting, as this apparently helped the development of solidarity and social coordination. See E. Fromm, The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness, (1973), Hanry Holt, New York 1992, pp. 149 ff.
9. M. Eliade, History of Religious Ideas, Volume 1: From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries, University Of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 7 ff. See also, H.-C. Puech (ed.), Histoire des religions, Tome III, volume 2, Gallimard, Paris 1999.
10. M. Eliade, History of Religious Ideas, ibid. See also G. Van der Leeuw, Religion in Essence and Manifestation, Princeton University Press, 1986.
11. See Lèvi-Strauss' definition of magic as 'science of the concrete' in C. Lèvi-Strauss, The Savage Mind, The University of Chicago Press, 1966, pp. 1-34.
12. J. Zerzan, Elements of Refusal, C.A.L. Press, Columbia 199, pp. 15 ff. See also: J. Zerzan, Future Primitive: And Other Essays, Autonomedia, 1994.
13. See E. Giannetto, "La rivoluzione neolitica", in Id., Saggi di storie del pensiero scientifico, Bergamo University Press, 2005.
14. See E. Fromm, The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness, cit., pp. 153 ff.
15. K. Marx – F. Engels, The German Ideology, International Publishers, New York 1963, p. 7.
16. M. Mauss, A General Theory of Magic, Routledge, New York 2001, p. 92.
17. See E. R. Service, Primitive social organization: an evolutionary perspective, Random House, 1971. Chiefdoms are characterized by a better control on social production and a certain growth of population (coordination of economical, political and religious activities). See also A. Guidi, Preistoria della complessità sociale, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2000, pp. 59-60.
18. Ibid., pp. 60-61. Chiefdoms are based on the control of other people's labour. See M. Liverani, Uruk la prima città, Laterza, Roma-Bari 20042, p. 28 (English tr. by Z. Bahrani and M. Van de Mieroop, Uruk. The First City, Equinox Publishing , 2006). For the archaeological and anthropologic implications I'm drawing here in relation to the (pre)historical origin of State see also F. Giusti, I primi stati: la nascita dei sistemi politici centralizzati tra antropologia e archeologia, Donzelli, Roma 2002. M. Frangipane, La nascita dello Stato nel Vicino Oriente: dai lignaggi alla burocrazia nella grande Mesopotamia, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1996. H. J. Nissen, The Early History of the Ancient Near East, 9000-2000 B.C., University Of Chicago Press, 1990. M. Liverani, Antico oriente: storia società economia, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1988. Id., L'origine delle città. Le prime comunità urbane del Vicino Oriente, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1988 (2a ed.). C. Renfrew, Before Civilisation, the Radiocarbon Revolution and Prehistoric Europe, Pimlico, Londra 1973. J.-C. Margueron, Ancient Civilization of Mesopotamia, Barrie & Jenkins, 1971.
19. V. Gordon Childe, The urban revolution, in "Town Planning Review", n. 21 (April, 1950), pp. 3-17. On metallurgy and power signs see A. Guidi, Preistoria, cit., p. 87 e p. 130.
20. V. Gordon Childe, The urban revolution, cit., p. 12. See also M. Liverani, Uruk, cit., p. 29.
21. V. Gordon Childe, The urban revolution, cit., pp. 12-14; A. Guidi, Preistoria, cit., p. 28.
22. M. Liverani, Uruk, cit., p. 24. The monarchical principle and military nature are typical of the early states. See A. Guidi, Preistoria, cit., pp. 19 e sgg.
23. M. Liverani, Uruk, cit., pp. 47-56.
24. Whereas phenomena of domestication (like the dog, for example) were already known in the Paleolithic Age, it is only with the Neolithic economy that such domination becomes part of the social instrumental ratio and part of the subsequent economic development; as Childe put it: the domestication of the ox was the first step towards the steam machine. See V. Gordon Childe, Man Makes Himself, Ibid., Coronet Books, 2003.
25. P. Singer, Animal Liberation, cit., p. XXV.