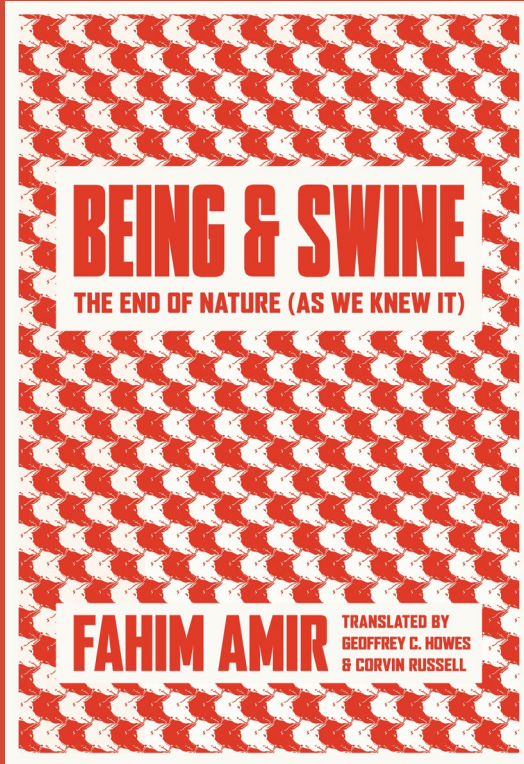


BOOK REVIEW

Animals, Capitalism, Resistance

Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel



Review of:

Fahim Amir. *Being and Swine: The End of Nature (As We Knew It)*.

Translated by Geoffrey C.

Howes and Corvin Russell

Toronto: Between the Lines,

2020. 228 pp. \$24.95 (pb).

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Fahim Amir's *Being and Swine* collects together an array of probing and brilliant quick-fire provocations on human-animal relations, capitalism, and resistance. Amir's style as a writer is distinct. The text, while theoretically rich and reflective of current academic debates, is unencumbered by excessive in-text referencing, an approach Amir suggests was aimed at ensuring "readability" (177n2). And certainly the text is eminently readable and engaging: *Being and Swine* is written in a sharp, ironic, and sometimes darkly humorous style.¹ Every chapter is composed of snappy subsections; each subsection offers a curious or original reflection, often by juxtaposing ideas in unexpected ways. A criticism could be advanced that *Being and Swine* lacks sustained philosophical arguments; however, this misses the point of the text, which is not to labour over argumentation but to provide a succession of prompts which provoke the reader and inspire thought in new direction. Perhaps confirming the intent of this stylistic approach, Amir provides the following "reading advice" in the Preface: "The chapters build on each other, but that doesn't mean that they have to be read in this order. Every chapter stands on its own and can be chosen according to the reader's own interests as a point of access to the book" (xv).

The introduction sets the concerns and orientation of the book, and includes some personal reflections which articulate Amir's standpoint. Importantly, the introduction situates the questions raised by Amir in relation to Marxism and the left project. This includes pointed criticisms that highlight the apparent indifference of the left to the violence and exploitation experienced by nonhuman animals. John Sanbonmatsu has previously remarked that "leftists and rightists converge on the question of animal rights."² Amir produces a similarly pithy diagnosis: "When it comes to animals, the left turns right" (5). This highlights one important contribution of *Being and Swine*: namely to intervene into left and Marxist theory, a trajectory of the text I shall return to below.

1 On humour, Amir advises the reader: "this cannot be done without humour, for the more politically charged a problem is, like today's 'ecological crisis', the more crucial it is not to tense up when dealing with it. If you grab hold too hard, you might damage the object of interest, and what's more, not be able to let go" (xv).

2 John Sanbonmatsu, Introduction to *Critical Theory and Animal Liberation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 1–32, here p. 13.

In chapter two Amir explores the inter-relation between pigeons and urban space, the attempts by city authorities to stigmatize and control these birds, and examples of human and nonhuman resistance. This chapter highlights Amir's distinct style of analysis, which draws together humans, nonhumans, economies, machines, and built environments in a constant and dynamic interaction, shaped by power, pleasure, vitality and resistance. It is on the latter dimension — resistance — that Amir provides an important contribution to the field: I shall discuss this further below.

Being and Swine's third chapter continues the theme of the interaction between life and urban spaces through a focus on pigs. Here Amir highlights both the physical interactions between working class people and pigs within urban landscapes, but also the metaphoric interaction between the “radicalized masses” and semi-feral hogs, captured in the phrase the “swinish multitude” (52). Then, in chapter four, Amir examines the rise of industrialized intensive animal agriculture. While the factory farm is a common focus within Animal Studies, Amir's approach is unique due to the theoretical gaze applied, drawing from critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, as well as offering a deep dive into the fascinating perspective of the historian of architecture, Sigfried Giedion. In this context, Amir advances a fresh narrative on the relation between developments in industrial animal agriculture, Fordist production and capitalism.

In chapter five Amir continues to focus on urban animals, exploring the less apparent connections and co-habitations between human societies and “nature”. Scholars like Donna Haraway are known for their work challenging dualisms between nature and culture.³ Amir has a distinct voice within this context; he highlights the way in which animals, in resistant and non-intuitive ways, flourish in environments that feel far from natural, like wild animals that thrive in militarized areas such as the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge. Amir's distinct sense of humour is on display here too

3 See for example Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991) and *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

when he makes these observations. For example, commenting on the sewers under Berlin’s famous Berghain nightclub, Amir notes:

sooner or later all the drugs that get consumed up above have to get out, too—they flow down the through the sewer system, where the animals that live there take a bath in veritable showers of hormones and other potent molecules. There is no research on this particular habitat of urban ecology, but why shouldn’t there be rats here, hopped up on amphetamines and raving to themselves, or cockroaches copulating at high frequencies, or snuggledrunk toads on MDMA sliding against each other, or psychoactively dissociated mice, with ketamine coursing through their bloodstreams? (97)

This humour works to disrupt the reader’s associations of what comprises a “natural environment”, bringing to the fore the unseen forms of community and agency that animals might develop in response to human urban ecologies. A similar analytic gaze informs the book’s sixth chapter, which focuses on the interconnections between bees, mosquitos and termites on the one side and colonialism, military technologies, racial segregation, nation and city building on the other. The final chapter provides a number of concluding provocations, in part shaped by more politically tactical questions about how to move forward. This final chapter is notable for its particular critique of consumerist veganism and urges readers towards a deeper, more enduring political project which, crossing ethics and epistemology, involves the reorientation of our senses and knowledge systems “to make reality stutter” (173).

Being and Swine is a translation of a 2018 text published in German by Edition Nautilus.⁴ It is notable that the English text contains a number of revisions and adjustments.⁵ The original text carries the title *Schwein und Zeit* (literally “Pigs and Time”) a play on Martin Heidegger’s classic philosophical text *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*); this

4 Fahim Amir, *Schwein und Zeit. Tiere, Politik, Revolte* (Hamburg: Edition Nautilus, 2018).

5 In personal correspondence, Amir confirmed that the English translation has a number of alterations, including a revised Introduction and chapter order to aid readability and better reflect the transition of ideas, as well as minor changes to address an Anglo-American audience. The English edition will likely be the preferred source for future translations.

allusion is repeated in the English title. The German edition also utilizes an alternate subtitle, *Tiere, Politik, Revolte* (“Animals, Politics, Revolt”), which suggests a different — perhaps more politically-focused — orientation of the text for this audience. This is mirrored by some of the differences between the chapter and section titles chosen: for example, chapter six, which is focused on insect relations, is given the enigmatic title “Cloudy Swords” in the English edition, while the original German text carries the title “Neoliberale Bienen, Soli-Mosquitos und Anarcho-Termiten” (“Neoliberal Bees, Soli-Mosquitoes and Anarcho-Termites”).⁶ There are also a number of other changes to the text itself: there are sections in the German edition which are not reproduced in the English edition; the English edition, however, includes a very informative preface, and a revised introduction, both of which orient the reader to Amir’s approach, method and distinct theoretical outlook, which as discussed above both situate the book within Animal Studies and Marxist theory, but also adopts a particular style of analysis which combines cutting observations, a radical political standpoint and a significant helping of whimsy. Further, as Amir notes in the preface, the English edition appeared after COVID-19 had swept the planet, and this allowed the author to reflect on the pandemic and its relation to the themes in the book.

In my view *Being and Swine* makes at least two important critical contributions to Animal Studies. The first relates to Amir’s original account of animal resistance. Animal resistance has been theorized by a select group of scholars within animal studies.⁷ Amir’s work on resistance advances a distinctive view;⁸ and it is one that has proved highly influential for my own theoretical work describing animal in-subordination to power.⁹ My interest in Amir’s work is in the use of

6 “Soli” here is a shortened form for “solidaristic” or “solidarity”.

7 See for example Jason Hribal, *Fear of the Animal Planet: The Hidden History of Animal Resistance* (Oakland: AKPress, 2010); Sarat Colling, *Animal Resistance in the Global Capitalist Era* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2020).

8 In addition to *Being and Swine*, Amir had previously published short essays detailing this approach to resistance. See, for example, Fahim Amir, “1000 Tauben. Vom Folgen und Fliehen, Aneignen, Stören und Besetzen”, *Eurozine*, 7 May 2013. <https://www.eurozine.com/1000-tauben/>.

9 See Dinesh J. Wadiwel, *The War against Animals* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 10–16; and Dinesh J. Wadiwel, “Do Fish Resist?”, *Cultural Studies Review* 22, no. 1 (2016): 196–242.

an “operaist” or “workerist” model of resistance that is informed by autonomist Marxist theory, which emphasizes the way in which productive systems always work in a tussle with the lives they seek to subsume;¹⁰ this process of interaction can be understood as the interplay of domination and resistance. For autonomist Marxism, this meant that the forms capitalist production takes are a direct response to the resistance of its labour force to the work that is imposed upon it. For example, according to this theoretical perspective, it could be argued that the contemporary deployment of employee surveillance software by some workplaces—such as the use of keystroke tracking or facial recognition—which has accompanied the move to work from home arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic, is a direct response by capitalist production to creative acts of non-compliance and absenteeism by workers (taking naps, long lunches and attending to care labour). Resistance here is central to developments in the technologies of work; workers continually seek opportunities for non-compliance, while workplaces continually seek new ways to enforce work to ensure profitability. Amir cleverly reworks this theoretical framing to understand animal resistance: for example, the practices and formations of the city itself—attempts to purify and cleanse streetscapes, the deployment of cut glass on building ledges to deter birds—are responses to pigeon agency and resistance. As such the material landscape of cities are not only the result of human planning but are instead a co-production that represents the outcome of power, resistance and conflict between humans and animals: “where there are cities, there are also pigeons. And where there are pigeons, there is resistance” (37).¹¹

While I am convinced of Amir’s important articulation of this workerist model of animal resistance, *Being and Swine* could also have

10 There are a small number of other scholars I am aware of who utilises this framing derived from autonomist Marxism including Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) and Agnieszka Kowalczyk, “Mapping Non-Human Resistance in the Age of Biocapital” in *The Rise of Critical Animal Studies: From Margins to Centre*, eds. Nik Taylor and Richard Twine (London: Routledge: 2014), 183–200.

11 To an extent, this agrees with contemporary theorists in posthuman urban studies, such as Maan Barua, “Infrastructure and Non-Human Life: A Wider Ontology”, *Progress in Human Geography* 45, no. 6 (2021): 1467–1489.

clarified how this resistance operates. For example, Amir discusses the difficulties faced by animal agriculture in trying to mechanize the “processing” of pig carcasses into food. Because many of these processes in animal agriculture cannot be automated, a significant number of tasks involve manual human labour. In this context, Amir suggests that “the pigs resisted even beyond death” (81). However, I would argue that this use of “resistance” to describe interactions with non-living materials is potentially distracting for the analysis Amir provides. Perhaps it is true that all materials in production processes need to be grappled with and as such evade total attempts at control. However, I think “resistance” must be more carefully differentiated between animated living beings and “inert” commodities. At least in my opinion, there is a qualitative difference between the resistance of living animals within production systems and the difficulties posed to industries who process the bodies of these animals after death. Amir’s text powerfully tracks the way animated life continually poses a challenge to its subordination by processes of domination. Death, however, marks a rupture in this particular domain of political relations: it is a victory over life by the powers that have dominated it. Certainly, the bodies of dead animals processed into meat create difficulties for the human workers and machines who transform them into consumption commodities. But from an analytic standpoint, this latter “resistance” is qualitatively different from the political resistance of the animal who was once alive.¹²

The second contribution offered by *Being and Swine* relates to its intervention into Marxist approaches to understanding human interactions with animals. Following in the footsteps of some of the

12 Nevertheless, I would stress that what happens to animals after they die within animal agriculture has importance for the politics of domination and resistance which shape interactions with animals while they are alive. An example is the relationship between pre-death stress experienced by animals and its impact on meat “quality”; this interaction has compelled producers to deploy methods to reduce the distress experienced by animals prior to slaughter. In effect this has meant that producers have attempted to mitigate and smooth the resistance of animals to their own deaths in order to produce a more palatable consumption commodity and maximise profits. See for example Nikolal Čobanović, et al., “The Influence of Pre-Mortem Conditions on Pale, Soft and Exudative (PSE) and Dark, Firm and Dry (DFD) Pork Meat”, *Acta Veterinaria* 66, no. 2 (2016): 172–86.

early innovators in the field such as Benton, Noske, and Hribal,¹³ there have been a growing number of Animal Studies texts over the last decade which have responded to and built on the foundations of Marxist theory.¹⁴ Amir provides a distinctive voice in this field. As above, Amir deploys a specific understanding of resistance that draws from the tradition of Marxist thought. Additionally, the work is systematically aimed at not merely contributing to Animal Studies but, most importantly, intervening into leftist thought. As I have indicated above, from the opening pages of *Being and Swine* Amir makes clear that the animal question interconnects with capitalism and broader forms of oppression; further, that the left has by and large been uninterested in the treatment of animals. Dominant strands of Marxist theory, to its detriment, have not seen any particular relationship between animal liberation and other struggles against oppression. Many of the reflections in *Being and Swine* provide historical, material, and conceptual resources which make ground towards developing a fuller account of the relationship between nonhumans and capitalism.

Within this context of an engagement with the left *Being and Swine* offers directions for a reformed Marxism that is capable of taking into account the concerns of animals. On occasion Amir appears to express a solidaristic hope for a shared struggle between traditional left movements and animal liberationists. We see this to an extent in chapter three, which highlights the interconnection and shared constituency of the “swinish multitudes”: “the political power and the resistance of aggregates that included animals” (58). The book here draws upon Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s concept of the “multitude”, which as Amir describes has the capacity to bring together diverse

13 See Ted Benton, *Natural Relations: Ecology, Animal Rights and Social Justice* (London: Verso, 1993); Barbara Noske, *Beyond Boundaries: Humans and Animals* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1997); and Jason Hribal, “Animals Are Part of the Working Class: A Challenge to Labor History”, *Labor History* 44, no. 4 (2003): 435–53.

14 See for example, Ryan Gunderson, “Marx’s Comments on Animal Welfare”, *Rethinking Marxism* 23, no. 4 (2011): 543–548; Corinne Painter, “Non-Human Animals within Contemporary Capitalism: A Marxist Account of Non-Human Animal Liberation”, *Capital & Class* 40, no. 2 (2016): 1–19; Katherine Perlo, “Marxism and the Underdog”, *Society & Animals* 10 (2002): 303–318; Christian Stache, “Conceptualizing Animal Exploitation in Capitalism: Getting Terminology Straight”, *Capital and Class* 44, no. 3 (2019): 1–21; and Marco Maurizi, *Beyond Nature: Animal Liberation, Marxism, and Critical Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

movements, conglomerates which differ from both the State and the nation: “a storm of passions, relations and understandings that cannot be reduced to the number one” (57).¹⁵ At the close of *Being and Swine*, this hope for unity between diverse struggles is repeated: “what Marx wrote about the relationship between English and Irish workers also holds for the relationship between humans and animals [...] there can be no freedom as long as there is unfreedom” (173).

Despite this optimism, however, it is here that I would like to express caution. The nature of structurally antagonistic relationships is that, of course, the freedom enjoyed by some may very well conditionally require the unfreedom of others. In these circumstances, possibilities for solidarity and alliances are fraught. This structural reality was central to Marx’s description of the relation between workers and the bourgeoisie in *Capital* Vol.1:

the same bourgeois consciousness which celebrates the division of labour in the workshop, the lifelong annexation of the worker to a partial operation, and his complete subjection to capital, as an organization of labour that increases its productive power, denounces with equal vigour every conscious attempt to control and regulate the process of production socially, as an inroad upon such sacred things as the rights of property, freedom and the self-determining “genius” of the individual capitalist.¹⁶

We find a similar structural relation described in other forms of oppression: for example, theorizations of racial inequality which highlight that the freedom which attaches to whiteness is interconnected with unfreedom for others, including through anti-black violence.¹⁷ This understanding of freedom and its relation to unfreedom is relevant to human relations with animals. Structural antagonisms overtly shape human animal relations, including in the

15 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004).

16 Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 477. See also 280.

17 See Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Cornell University Press, 1999); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Frank B Wilderson III, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

context of food systems and research industries which overtly position the freedom and survival of humans against the unfreedom of billions of animals.

Being and Swine frequently draws attention to these contradictions, highlighted in the institutions and systems of production described in detail which systematically attempt to quell and counter the resistance of animals to their own subjugation. For thinking in the Marxist tradition this poses a challenge: can it overcome its own persistent, and perhaps foundational, anthropocentrism in order to imagine social transformation that also includes non-human life? Or alternatively, is it possible for the left to imagine socialism beyond its traditional bounds as a liberation project for the “working class”? How is the socialist project instead potentially about liberation of all life from the grips of domination; a project which might seek to establish social relations which enable flourishing for life in the broadest sense, including humans, animals and the planet? To this extent, *Being and Swine* is an important stepping stone towards a wider multispecies conception of a socialism to come. In this context it is no accident that, referring expressly to *both* human and animal liberation, Amir remarks that “it should be expected that communism, as an unredeemed promise of humanity, will let the apes out of the zoos—physically and metaphorically” (173).