

From oppression to dystopia and back to colonialism
Review of Fahim Amir's book **Being and Swine: The End of Nature (As We Knew It) (2020)**

Marina Gržinić

I read Fahim Amir's book in Ljubljana, in lockdown, teaching my students and taking part in all the numerous activities of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna through ZOOM.

The book I will review is by Fahim Amir and entitled **Being and Swine: The End of Nature (As We Knew It)**. It came out in winter 2020, translated from German by Corvin Russell. The publisher is Between the Lines (a social movement press founded in 1977, based in Toronto, Canada). The original is in German, published in 2018, under the title **Schwein und Zeit. Tiere, Politik, Revolte** [Swine and time. Animals, politics, revolt] for Edition Nautilus, (Hamburg). The manuscript was awarded the Austrian Karl-Marx-Award even before publication.

Fahim Amir is a philosopher and cultural scientist, working at the intersections of nature, culture and colonial historicity, transcultural agency, and urbanism. He is currently teaching at the Department of Experimental Design of the University of Art and Industrial Design Linz. Amir was curator of Live Art Festival 2013 "Zoo3000: Occupy Species" (Kampnagel, Hamburg) and "Salon Klimbim: Feeding Vegetarian Tigers – Entertaining Utopian Sensibilities" (Secession Vienna, 2014). He co-edited "Transcultural Modernisms" (Sternberg Press, 2013) and provided the afterword to the German translation of Donna Haraway's "Companion Species Manifesto" (Merve, 2016).¹

Being and Swine: The End of Nature (As We Knew It) (2020) enters the writing section inside animal studies, for the rights of non-human animals. The book is a philosophical and theoretical work that persuasively and tirelessly ties findings by activists, historians, and theorists engaged on behalf of the non-human animal: critical animalism, the philosophy of animal ethics, intersectional theory analysis on non-human animals, ecocriticism and ecofeminism, and rights, in which we also strive to promote political veganism. Non-human animals are—this is a fact that we can utter without philosophy—continually abused and overused inside the long history of capitalism through a systematic and thoroughly majoritarian non-pensive human agreement, to such an extent that it is necessary to react.

The book has seven chapters and there is a new preface to the English translation. The English translation of the book sees the light of day in a different setting; now we are in COVID-19, bringing nature into the centre of global capitalist life, the social, political, and economic. It brings stories and stories that are all pulled together, excellently researched genealogies of different pandemics, mostly taking place on the peripheries of the world or presented as external to the Occident. We can see the lines of connection; we depart from swine flu to come to the new COVID-19 global pandemic.

Let us dive into the book, its thesis showing precisely the history of capitalism and its contingency and necessities through the abuse of animals. The main point is not fake morality but to show that historically the abuse of animals is always co-substantial to capitalism and its trans-

¹ <https://uklitag.com/autor/fahim-amir/>.

formation that involves the modernisation of technologies. Amir researches the life of pigeons: at the moment they are not “postmen” as other ways of communication appeared, and nor are eaten in the thousands, as chickens were brought as substitutes (they ceased to be roasted in their thousands as food for the Viennese in the 1950s); therefore, they are systematically abducted as flying rats. Pigeons are removed from the symbolism of peace and depicted as filthy nuances. Capitalism and its modernisation agenda, but primarily profit, is not more merciless toward pigs that were the food of the poor in New York in the 19th century; at that point, the pigs or hogs were scavengers of the cramped New York streets. The expulsion of pigs from NY took decades (as they would not be free anymore for the poor but sold and controlled): this happened only as they were mixed up with the pest and illnesses in the 19th century. Transformed into a mark of dirtiness they could be expelled.

But through Amir the animals return as “zombie Marxism” or as a historical collective revolt of the multitudes and animals (swine revolt) when they had to be removed from New York; pigeons also resist, the love for pigeons by the proletariat was specifically about the proletariat who trained pigeons in the same way as they (the working class) were trained to time preciseness and execution drill in the factories. The pigeons also disappeared as the use of their shit as fertiliser was replaced by nitrate, another modernisation of capitalism and the chemical industry. The complete techniques of how non-human animals have been misused are apprehended poignantly at the end of this brief trajectory at the research labs. I define them, their working, as academic slow slaughterhouses; a laboratory is a place only of power and not a relationship. In 2014, Jonathan L. Clark explained that in the late nineteenth century, the experimental animal and bio-medical laboratory intertwined, forming the new biopolitical space. In this space, as exposed by Robert G. W. Kirk, the non-human animal was transformed into an object of biopower and “enmeshed within biopower even when the biopolitical is ultimately about the transformation of human life.”²

The biopolitics-biopower relation is key for Amir. With these numerous forms of brutalities, we can learn systematically of the biopolitical machine that governs non-human animals as well as dehumanised humans. The list is long. The Occident, specifically the EU, US, and Japan, exposes the ‘bushmeat’ narrative, the source of HIV and Ebola, or bird flu in 2005 in China. To be even clearer, in *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (2009), Nicole Shukin shows first how capital in its forms of profit is in relation only to destruction and valued through money and more money. Shukin analyses a material genealogy of animal traces that link what she calls “three early time-motion economies: animal disassembly, automotive assembly and moving picture production.”³ Still, what is missing is necropolitics that is at the other end of this process. In James Stanescu’s “Beyond Biopolitics: Animal Studies, Factory Farms, and the Advent of Deading Life” from 2013, I found the most important views on how to think about the non-human animal killing machines literally and metaphorically.⁴ The biopolitical conditions and contradictions of animal destruction pushed forward by the Occidental world are supported by the monstrous biopower desire of the Occidental citizen for more pleasure from destruction and consumption. The result of this biopolitical effort is

² Robert G. W. Kirk, *The Birth of the Laboratory Animal: Biopolitics, Animal Experimentation, and Animal Wellbeing in Foucault and animals*, edited by Matthew Chrulew and Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017, p. 195.

³ Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 90.

⁴ James Stanescu *Beyond Biopolitics: Animal Studies, Factory Farms, and the Advent of Deading Life* in *PhaenEx8*, no. 2 (fall/winter 2013): 135–160.

not more life but a necropower, as pure destruction, suffering, etc.; we cannot talk only of biopower, as non-human animals are being used in the processes of calculation to transform human life at the expense of their extermination seen as raw objects of capitalist science. This element is one of the most important in my study that I learned through James Stanescu.

Marxism failed to see the abuse of nature in all sorts of non-human animals' products; Marxism is also the product of historical time. Amir shows that the Fordist assembly line is made to work from the dis-assembling line of fast, massive rending of the meat industry's animal body. The system invented by Taylor is supposedly a "systematic fast control of animal suffering." The birth of Fordism in 1913 was influenced by the slaughterhouse's fast process of efficiency in tearing apart the body of the animal envisioned by Taylor,⁵ – but in reverse. If, in the slaughterhouse, the killing, dismembering, and packing of the animals were all in tearing apart, in the Fordist model of the assembly line it was the other way around—building assemblages. Consequently, Amir says that the slaughterhouse is primarily a laboratory for industrial modernity (Amir, p. 82).

Amir enters the analysis of Marxism, seeing the colonial aspect of these histories, gender, and race relations. The book shows how difficult it is to accept the destruction of animals, the abuse, controlled and uncontrolled by the Occident and the demands of the capitalist reproduction that kills millions of animals, destroyed their habitat, and reconstructed their way of living in the most artificial way possible. It is also said that we have to fight for animals as victims and that we ultimately do not know what they want. They want to live; this is obvious. Still, capitalism destroyed the entire ecosystem, killed millions of people, and created a subhuman category, transformed them into the ventures of colonialism in object and tools for the capitalist white system power accumulation of profit and wealth. Therefore, the book's central thesis is that animals are seen as agents in their own power. This empowerment is the possible relation to fight back against the established entanglement of capitalism, colonialism, destruction, growth, modernisation, and the bestiality of men for the benefit of the regime of Occidental life.

Contemporary decolonial analysis looking at the histories of subordination, discrimination, exploitation, and expropriation put an end to the century's prevalent relation of master and slave, this relation was in the impossibility of agency. Amir states clearly that there is agency and subversion, revolt and protests by the non-human animals, and animals and people, coming together due to their joint struggles. A common revolt.

Amir's question is, "How did the animals put up resistance, and when did they do so?" He puts the notion of "civilisation" as part of capitalism progress under a big question mark. Capitalism is barbarous in all its forms, and the idea of virgin nature is the utopian myth in the dystopian capitalist reality. The Westerner asks for "seeing of the trivial" as authentic. Some great coinages are reconceived in the book as "pig-napped" or brought to mind again "the swinish multitude" (Amir, 2020, p. 46, both references).

Consequently, the book shows many of these stories established between pigs and people (the swine multitude) or presenting animals' politics (from pigeons, pigs, etc.). Nádia Farage, who works in the interdisciplinary dialogues between anthropology, history, and literary criticism, besides working on North-Amazonian ethnohistory in the early 1990s, has recently been working on animal rights and alternative nature projects from a historical perspective. In her

⁵ Taylorism is a management theory first advocated by Frederick W. Taylor in the late 19th century. It uses scientific methods to analyse the most efficient production process in order to increase productivity.

paper from 2013 she focused on the expulsion of animals from the urban space during the modernisation of the city of Rio de Janeiro in the first years of the 20th century. Farage “explored materials and the relationships with domestic species within the larger frame of the modern state biopolitics, which consolidates the notions of pest and stray. She as well exposed the resistance carried by anarchist workers, most notably affiliated to the naturist current, which brought alternative ideas on nature inter-specific relationships with urban workers’ struggles of the period in Brazil.”⁶ We see changes that associate capitalism, dispossession, materiality, propriety, and colonialism.

Amir also indicates that we should think of the agency as a specific multitude. He refers in his second chapter, with the title *Swinish Multitude*, to another analysis with a similar title. It is the text by Stephen F. Eisenman named “The Real ‘Swinish Multitude.’”⁷ Eisenman states that by “killing, consuming, and in many other ways exploiting animals, they implicitly deny these creatures are like themselves: sentient, emotional, and empathetic beings who have close family ties, possess culture, use tools, and communicate with each other. In fact, as generations of researchers dating back to Charles Darwin have demonstrated, many nonhuman animals, including nearly all those we eat, wear, ride, experiment upon, or keep as pets, have these capacities to a greater or lesser degree.”⁸

Another important reference in Amir’s book is how to transform a proper place, the territory of colonial subjugation, into a place of empowerment. Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga’s latest book entitled *The Mobile Workshop: The Tsetse Fly and African Knowledge Production* (MIT Press, 2018) puts this perspective clearly, as he shows “how presence of the tsetse fly turned the forests of Zimbabwe and southern Africa into an open laboratory where African knowledge formed the basis of colonial tsetse control policies. More, he restores the central role not just of African labor but of African intellect in the production of knowledge about the tsetse fly. He describes how European colonizers built on and beyond this knowledge toward destructive and toxic methods, including cutting down entire forests, forced “prophylactic” resettlement, massive destruction of wild animals, and extensive spraying of organochlorine pesticides.”⁹

When the colonial systemic methodologies and their aftermaths were concealed in the Occident, Europe and the US both seemed untouchable. Then, COVID-19 rendered them all naked, stripped of the Welfare State aura nurtured in the West for decades. The caravan of the liberal rhetoric full of democracy prevented from seeing that in the back of Western democracy, huge neoliberal reforms were going on but nothing for the people. More and more, the neoliberal state was abandoning what it was preaching to its western citizens (that is ready there for them): the best public health, schools for free, mobility, pension, and retirement. In fact, the western state and government regulations imposed a purely profit-driven reduction of all services, including food quality. The food was always, let's be frank, like health, social transfers, or school: class diversified and racialised. After WWII, in a joint effort with class and genderisation, racism in Europe was, for a while, a silent segregating, differentiating, machine, etc. In a word, capitalism destroyed the whole welfare system. The

⁶ Farage, Nádia. No Collar, No Master: Workers and Animals in the Modernization of Rio de Janeiro 1903-1904. Open Anthropology Cooperative, Working Paper Series n. 18, 2013. See <https://oacpress.wordpress.com/>.

⁷ Published in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Winter 2016), pp. 339–373.

⁸ <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Real-%E2%80%9CSwinish-Multitude%E2%80%9D-Eisenman/27c87bed8cd195817168adb2c900f15ce699f7ba>.

⁹ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342442277_The_Mobile_Workshop_The_Tsetse_Fly_and_African_Knowledge_ProductionThe_Tsetse_Fly_and_African_Knowledge_Production.

postcolonial citizens, or those seen as the Other, have known this for decades. The regime of whiteness was a regime of myths, lies, and brutalities. When the pandemic arrived, in the Occident, the welfare West, there was what had been there for decades: public ruins and the ruined public “democratic” space.

These elements of the biopolitical “strength” of the Occident (as it was presented) started to collapse as the Welfare State pillars came under huge neoliberal reforms. While the pandemics were outside Europe, another disease that was even more contagious was going on. This was the neoliberal disassembling from the inside of all the structures of the Western world, from health and the social security system to schools. When we talk about the famous sustainability (another creepy neoliberal term as it was social capital in the 1990s) and then propagate this with utopias, these ideas always go solely to white human spaces. Nothing is and never was a virgin, only a history of changes of capitalist dispossession and transformations that culminates and is then normalised. Amir shows unmistakably that the animal protection law, the first one, was embedded in class relations. The protection of horses, as Amir illustrates, is a pure class thing. They were seen as “noble” (entertainment, of course for the rich), and at the same time the cutting of dogs’ ears, and the docking of their tail was not something to be preoccupied with.

Amir takes us through the whole history of philosophy and the system of reproduction of capitalism, systemic racism, and proprietary relations. The influence of these relations of expulsion, suppression, and destruction is powerful. I learnt some important points when reworking details and paralleling them in this very present moment with referenced authors and those not mentioned. I want to share some of these insights.

Dinesh Wadiwel, in his seminal 2015 book *The War Against Animals*,¹⁰ talks about the contemporary industrialised chicken slaughter system that echoes the industrialised prison system. As Wadiwel writes “The war on animals is located upon a violent form of continual appropriation, and an equally violent form of conversion of the lives of animals into value within a human exchange system; property and commodity cohabit as artefacts of war.”¹¹ Wadiwel raises one important point and this is that in the privatisation of sovereignty through capitalist private property, the violence of property is full and untouchable. Privatisation of sovereignty is possession without penalty, which is also referred to by Achille Mbembe in his writing. It is the colonial possession of human beings as slaves, of white women by the white master in the bourgeois family; a white man who has full ownership of women, children, and other “matters.” Materiality is transferred to matter.

Neel Ahuja writes about colonialism, which he develops in relation to postcolonial and biofeminist scientific studies: “Because colonialism is a large-scale process that has shaped human settlement across the planet, it has an intimate relationship to matter. In fact, the very idea of “matter”—physical objects making up the universe and its constitutive systems and elements—has developed in tandem with the spread of colonial forms of knowledge and settlement over the past five centuries. Modern colonialism involves the development of sciences that describe the material form of the universe as well as the biology of human, animal, and plant life. These sciences, along with capitalist industries that deploy them, have historically helped spread colonial worldviews that separate inanimate matter, the living biological body, human culture, and the spiritual domain into distinct spheres.”¹²

¹⁰ Dinesh Wadiwel *The War Against Animals* (Brill, 2015).

¹¹ Dinesh Wadiwel *The War Against Animals* (Brill, 2015), p. 147.

¹² <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.ucsc.edu/dist/f/396/files/2014/11/Ahuja-Colonialism.pdf>.

This resonates well with another shift that leads into what Kelsey Dayle John in “Animal Colonialism—Illustrating Intersections between Animal Studies and Settler Colonial Studies through Diné Horsemanship” defines *animal colonialism*.¹³

Why did I want to finish this review with a reference to colonialism? As it seems the weakest part in Amir’s book. It is there but needs an even stronger reconciliation with the time we live in.

Kelsey Dayle John states that the concept of animal colonialism is necessary since it allows us to rethink how “to articulate the interconnected nature of Indigenous nonhuman animals, peoples, and lands, and the ways these relationships encounter and are tangled with oppressions confronted by various disciplines. I also center animals in colonialism to show that settler colonial erasures specifically assault on animals, but also that animals resist and show humans how to resist. I use the word “Indigenous” or “Diné” before horses, animals, or land, not as a way to show anthropocentric dominance over nonhumans (that is to say, land is possessed by those of Indigenous heritage), but to designate these nonhumans as belonging to an Indigenous ontology that might not make the same divisions that the western world does (i.e. animal/human, alive/dead).”¹⁴

As we cannot, as Billy-Ray Belcourt asserts in his in “Animal Bodies, Colonial Subjects: (Re)Locating Animality in Decolonial Thought” (2014), “address animal oppression or talk about animal liberation without naming and subsequently dismantling settler colonialism and white supremacy as political machinations that require the simultaneous exploitation and/or erasure of animal and Indigenous bodies.”¹⁵ Therefore, we find ourselves at the very start of this trajectory.

The Book of Amir takes us to Jules Joanne Gleeson, who appears at the end with brief acclaim for Amir’s Book. Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O’Rourke proposed the first collection of this type, *Transgender Marxism*, which is due to be published in 2021 (Pluto Press, UK). They establish relationships between work, sex, and the agency down to the intestines.

In the book, the non-human intestines are put naked, as it is the politics of that matter set to work. We have no other ways, then, to join forces to radically change what is in front of us.

¹³ Published in *Humanimalia: a journal of human/animal interface studies* Volume 10, Number 2 (Spring 2019).

¹⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 42–43.

¹⁵https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307841644_Animal_Bodies_Colonial_Subjects_ReLocating_Animality_in_Decolonial_Thought.