



MAKING A KILLING

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ANIMAL RIGHTS

BOB TORRES

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *MAKING A KILLING*

“Bob Torres’ *Making A Killing* draws a very straight line between capitalism and the oppressive system of animal agribusiness. Drawing from social anarchist theory, Torres provides a convincing argument that in order to fight animal exploitation, we must also fight capitalism and, in doing so, animal rights activists will need to reconsider their methods and redirect their focus. While his critiques of the animal rights movements’ large organizations may not earn him friends in high places, such considerations are crucial to keeping the movement on track and for preventing stagnation. *Making A Killing* is an important work from a new voice in animal advocacy, that will surely spark heated discussions amongst activists from all corners of the movement.”

—Ryan MacMichael, vegblog.org

“In *Making A Killing: The Political Economy of Animal Rights*, Bob Torres takes an important and timely look at the animal rights movement, calling for a synthetic approach to all oppression, human and animal. His analytical framework draws together Marxism, social anarchist theory, and an abolitionist approach to animal rights to provide a timely social analysis that will no doubt have profound effects on the animal rights movement and its associated literature.”

—Gary L. Francione, Distinguished Professor of Law, Rutgers University

“Bob Torres’s socioeconomic analysis of nonhuman animal-use is a welcome and important addition to the understanding of human-nonhuman relations at the beginning of the 21st century. In particular, *Making A Killing*, makes a vital contribution to understanding the role of the property status of animals and the continuing strength of various welfarist positions on the ethics—and indeed the economics—of the human utilization of other animals. *Making A Killing* will become required reading for social scientists and others interested in modern social movements and the socioeconomic forces that shape their activities and their claims-making.”

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“This is the book I’ve been waiting for. *Making A Killing* is a rare and powerful example of first-rate scholarship, searing critique, and a lively declaration of the rights of animals and humans. You will walk away from this book with a clear understanding of why social justice movements for people must take animal rights seriously, and vice versa. Bob Torres has forever deepened my thinking about these relationships.”

—David Naguib Pellow, vegetarian, animal rights and anti-racist activist, and Professor of Ethnic Studies, University of California, San Diego; and author of *Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago* and *Resisting Global Toxics: Transnational Movements for Environmental Justice*

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by Bob Torres



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akpress@akpress.org

AK Press
PO Box 12766
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Scotland
www.akuk.com
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To Jenna
and
to Emmy, Michi, and Mole

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THOUGH THIS BOOK BEARS my name, it would not even exist were it not for the generosity and friendship of many.

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During the time I wrote this book, I spent a great deal of time with my companion animals Emmy, Michi, and Mole. Emmy spent a year in a no-kill shelter prior to coming to us, and she and the rest of the animals with whom we live remind me every day that animals are complex creatures with emotions, thoughts, and feelings. The

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This book bears my name, but there is little doubt that it is a collective effort. Thank you all.

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TAKING EQUALITY SERIOUSLY

AS A SPECIES, OUR relationship with animals is admittedly odd. We have 24-hour cable television channels devoted to shows about animals, and at least in the global North, the institution of companion animal ownership is deeply embedded in our cultural traditions. With the advent of stores like PetSmart, shopping with your animal companion has become a regular part of the lives of many. At PetSmart, for example, you can take your dog in the store with you to browse the toy section and sniff provocatively around the aisles of dog food. Our companion animals have occupied a place in our lives that is closest to the role of children. We spend billions annually on our companion animals in North America, buying them treats, toys, premium foods, and furniture. Many dogs even share our beds.

Any of us who live with companion animals know that they are sensitive, intelligent, and thinking creatures. Any dog or cat owner does not need to get into long-winded and abstract philosophical debates about the nature of mind to know that dogs and cats have a sense of themselves. They understand their surroundings. They have wants. They can feel pleasure and pain, and they have moods. So many of us know this about the animals we live with daily, yet, it hardly ever oc-

curs to most of us that other animals are capable of these same things. What of the cows, the chickens, the pigs, and the sheep? Can we safely presume that they also do not want the companionship, comfort, and pleasure that the animal companions we know also want? We have created a false dichotomy between behaviors attributable to companion animals and those of other species that blinds us to the inherent worth and needs of all animals.

The problem is that we have constructed a society in which we are rarely forced to think about where what we consume comes from, and this extends to the animals reared for our consumption. While we pamper one set of animals, another set of animals becomes our food. The main difference is that we come to know one set of these animals, while the other set is raised and killed for us, delivered in plastic wrap and Styrofoam, and served up as dinner. If nothing else, this belies the deep moral confusion that we have about animals as a culture. What makes our dogs family members, while pigs become our pork? And how do we justify the difference?

Throughout this book, I urge you to be open-minded enough to consider these questions. Though it is easy to dismiss people who care about animals as sappy sentimentalists or judgmental, lecturing idiots—I know, because I used to think this way myself—I present an analysis in the coming pages that relies upon a clear-eyed understanding of our economy and society. In looking at how commodities are produced, I locate animal agriculture and related industries, which profit from the exploitation of animals, within the larger dynamics of capitalist exploitation. Like most other products, the processes and methods involved in the production of the animal goods we consume are hidden behind an elaborate system of production and consumption. In the coming pages, I ask you to consider these conditions, and to think about whether we can truly justify what we are doing—day in and day out—to billions of sentient creatures.

For those of you who are skeptical: I understand your skepticism, and I ask you to be patient. Admittedly, it took me more than a decade to really come to terms personally with much of what is in this book, and I fought my own awareness along the way, warring with my own intellect each step along my own long path. After a birthday a few years ago, I took stock of my life and came to the realization that if I

was serious about my ethics and principles, and serious about living in a world that challenged domination and hierarchy, that I had only one choice—to step away from participating in animal cruelty as much as I could. This was a choice that was motivated not only by my desire to end the suffering I saw, but also by a desire to live my life critically as a social anarchist. Though there are probably as many anarchisms as anarchists, I generally tend to root my own social anarchism in the broad desire to promote liberty and to challenge hierarchy, domination, and oppression. While social anarchism draws on the power of collective responsibility to restructure a better, more just, and more equitable society, I also think that to be an anarchist, first and foremost, is to think critically about hierarchy—why it exists, who it benefits, and why it is wrong. By examining forms of domination like sexism and racism that are naturalized in our culture, one begins to see that domination is not merely a natural artifact of human society, but rather, that it is a set of historical relations used to benefit one class or group of people over another. When I turned a similar lens towards our relations with animals, I could not help but be struck by the fact that our relations with animals are structured with many of the same hierarchies, and that a great amount of suffering is taking place, either to produce profit, or to fill human wants and needs that could be filled in other ways.

In short, when I thought long and hard about it, and decided to be honest with myself, I found that my own politics and ethics could not justify domination based merely on the category “species,” just as I could not justify domination based merely on gender, or race, or nationality. When I looked at how animals are exploited as commodities, I saw similarities with how humans are exploited as labor power. When I thought seriously about whether I could continue to cause suffering simply because it was easy and made my life more convenient—even though I had the means to do otherwise—I realized I could not in good conscience.

What it comes down to is this: if we are serious about social and economic justice and reject a world view where “might-makes-right,” then we must expand our view to everyone—especially the weakest among us. There can be no half-justice for the weak, or justice means nothing at all and we live in a world of might-makes-right. As a social anarchist reared in a broad tradition that roots itself in the work of

thinkers like Peter Kropotkin and Emma Goldman, I found myself thinking about these difficult questions, critically querying my role in oppression, and coming to the conclusion that I could no longer be part of it simply because it was the “way it has always been.” As you work your way into this book, I’d encourage you to open yourself to the same critical inquiry, to do the hard work of taking stock of your own ethical positions, and to decide if you, too, can justify your participation in one of the most pervasive and deeply-rooted forms of domination in our contemporary culture.

Though this book makes extensive use of anarchist theory—particularly the work of Murray Bookchin and his ideas around what he calls social ecology—I also draw broadly on a framework of Marxist political economy to provide an understanding of how the relations of animal exploitation are extended, deepened, and maintained through the dynamics of capitalism. Others before me—most notably, David Nibert, in his book *Animal Rights / Human Rights*—have used Marxist and sociological analyses to understand animal oppression.¹ Nibert’s analysis is vital, because it traces out the long history of animal exploitation, rewriting history from the stance of the oppressed. Most compellingly, though, Nibert begins his work by providing a sociological analysis of oppression that shows how oppression has structural causes rooted in the economics, ideology, and practices of a society. Nibert’s ideas show how the ideological components of a society necessarily have a material dimension, or, put more simply, the way that we’re socialized to see the world influences how we act in it. This socialization is broadly responsible for re-creating the social and economic processes that keep people and animals in oppressed positions. In short, it helps us to understand why we aren’t encouraged to think about these issues more often, and how our not thinking about them maintains power.

Nibert turns this lens towards our relations with animals, with a desire to understand how our domination of animals occurs at both ideological and material levels. Citing a broad failure of some key theorists—including the “father” of the animal liberation movement, Peter Singer—to think critically about how oppression has a structural component based in ideological and economic relations, Nibert draws on sociological analysis to create a more encompassing theory of op-

pression. Looking at categories such as race, class, gender, and species as “interlocking” and “interactive systems” of oppression, Nibert’s framework identifies all of these oppressions as related and mutually reinforcing. He writes:

The oppression of various devalued groups in human societies is not independent and unrelated; rather, the arrangements that lead to various forms of oppression are integrated in such a way that the exploitation of one group frequently augments and compounds the mistreatment of another.²

The important thing to note here is that, for Nibert, changes in this oppressive arrangement require changes in the structure and ideology of society—not merely simple changes in individual behavior. The economic structures, arrangements, and processes of a society matter most significantly in this analysis, even if our particular intentions are good (or bad). Through long-term socialization, particular world views become part of our psyche, sort of like an invisible, but always-present, script for understanding how it is that we should approach, categorize, and understand the world—including oppressed groups.

Maintaining our current understanding of the world is central to the functioning and maintenance of the relations of power within capitalism. Capitalism is marked by a division between classes, with one class holding private ownership of the means of production, and another class forced to sell their labor to live. Through the use of workers’ labor power, the owners of the means of production—the bourgeoisie—extract value in production, paying workers less than the actual value they are producing. This basic class division is essential for capital; without the labor power that adds value to commodities, the owner class would be unable to leverage and expand their own worth. Within the system of capitalist production, competition is central in two main ways: First, competition between workers for the morsels tossed to them by the capital-holding class helps to weaken solidarity among oppressed groups and to fracture evolving resistances to the power of capital. Second, market competition and a grow-or-die mentality drives the owners of the means of production to constantly retool and rethink production in a multitude of ways. This not only has disruptive effects on labor, it also leads to what economists call

“externalities,” or the side-effects of the desire for infinite growth on a finite planet. As the ecosystem groans under the burden of supporting a system that needs to grow at all costs, the externalities become clear: our ecosystem becomes burdened with the toxins we dump into it, our oceans empty as we pull net after net full of fish out of them,³ and those who cannot escape pollution suffer as victims of environmental classism or racism. The effects of this entire system on humans, animals, and the ecosystem are devastating. We not only come to devalue our fellow humans and animals as mere laboring machines, but we also are led to believe that this is the only option for human survival and happiness. Consequences be damned.

Seeing humans as world-transformative and inherently creative creatures, Karl Marx argued that as we made our lives in the world, we then made others who propagated that same kind of life, and that our consciousness of the world is a social product based in this materiality.⁴ “Life,” Marx wrote, “is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.”⁵ In this sense, then, the *way* we make our living in the world materially connects us to others, a process that is as old as humanity itself. In making these theoretical arguments about humanity and its mental life, Marx is tying our material forms of life to our ideological forms.

Ideology—a set of social and cultural scripts that we use to make sense of the world—is the tool by which the world is remade on a daily basis. Ideology explains to us our place in the world, it gives us the tools for understanding how the world operates. By living through the ideology we have inherited, we recreate the conditions such that the world, as it is, can be reproduced through social institutions and practices.⁶ Given this, ideology is never neutral; it is, instead, imbued with the relationships of power that govern our society. For Marx, the ruling material force of a society was also its ruling intellectual force.⁷ Those that run the productive forces of a society are, at the same time, able to rule the means of mental production, creating ideas in all of us that “are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships,” or ideas that justify the dominance of a particular ruling class.⁸ Considering that we live within a capitalist society run by a capitalist economy, our heads are bound to be full of ideology that upholds the domination inherent in capitalism. To many of us, this

ideology is completely familiar, the everyday scripts that explain the world to us. In many of my introductory sociology classes, I often begin discussions about poverty by asking students why people are poor. Inevitably, people tell me that poor folks are lazy or unintelligent, that they are somehow deserving of their poverty. However, if you begin to look at the sociological literature on poverty, a more complex picture emerges. Poverty and unemployment are part and parcel of our economic order. Without them, capitalism would cease to function effectively, and in order to continue to function, the system itself must produce poverty and an army of underemployed or unemployed people. Simple little mantras that so many of us have floating around in the back of our heads about the lack of industriousness are hardly a way of explaining what is essentially a core part of our economic order.

Nevertheless, students—and many others, including a significant number of those in poverty themselves⁹—will argue that poverty is based wholly on individual behavior, not that it is produced by our social and economic order. By drawing on the example of poverty, one can see that ideology can be horribly injurious if it justifies and recreates unjust social orders. In the case of poverty, ideology gives us the mental machinery to blame people who are victims of a rapacious economic order for their own victimhood, while simultaneously protecting the privilege of wealth and capital. If we're all led to believe that poverty is just a matter of laziness or stupidity or whatever other justifications we come up with, then we're not likely to be in a real position to do much about it when it comes to attacking the root causes of the problem. Instead of demanding a more equitable system for the distribution of social and economic goods, we blame the victim. This is insidious, because ideology is something we carry around with us in our heads; it forms the basis of our day-to-day understanding of the world. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci argued that the unique constellation of economic and social forces created a hegemonic order, one that was constantly being rewritten in a struggle between the oppressive drives of capital and the oppositional forces of liberation.¹⁰

For Gramsci, this evolving hegemony sculpted our day-to-day “common sense,” defining the boundaries of the possible and the believable for us, defining the topology of the maps that we use to

live and to understand the world. This is the mental technology of domination, and whether we like it or not, we're all living it. It is as relevant to understanding poverty as it is to understanding sexism, racism, and even speciesism. Oppression operates within this ideological framework, a combination of mental and physical forces that work to maintain the status quo through social institutions. To understand this relationship, Nibert developed a three-pronged theory to explain how oppression takes place through mutually reinforcing social and economic mechanisms. The first factor in maintaining oppression is the notion of economic exploitation or competition, driven by difference. If it is in the economic interests of a society, that society will generally tend to exploit or drive out a group perceived to be an "other." This requires that the dominant group actually has the power and ability to drive out or economically exploit the "other," which brings us to the second prong of Nibert's theory: there must be unequal power, with a large measure of control vested in the (capitalist) state. Power and violence sanctioned and provided by the state allows the dominant group to enforce the exploitation developed in the first prong, and to reinforce any exploitation already in place. Third, ideological manipulation based on the economic order established in the first two parts of the formula helps to create attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices that simultaneously drive and reinforce exploitation.

Considering these points, exploitation becomes a phenomenon that is part of our economic and ideological systems, not just something that can be attributed to mere individual prejudices. Racism, for example, can easily be considered through the framework that Nibert proposes. Within the history of capitalism, racism has functioned as a profitable and manipulative force, dividing the working class, and providing cheap labor to a burgeoning capitalist system. The boundaries of racism may change depending on the society in question, but its form is constant, and it serves a key role in maintaining social and economic hierarchies within a capitalist economy. Providing a justification for those who work in the least desirable sectors of the economy and who get paid the least, racism provides the ideological glue that holds parts of our economic order together. Racism provides the logic that non-whites in American society generally should get the worst jobs because they are less intelligent and less industrious—and therefore,

less deserving. Simultaneously, racism structures and socializes classes of people to play what Wallerstein calls the “appropriate roles” within an exploitative economic order.¹¹ All the while, racism allows for the exploitation and oppression of an entire class of people without any *real* justification beyond their membership in the socially constructed category of a race. Instead of seeing a history of enslavement, oppression, and exploitation, we simply see a racial “other” who is deserving of her structural disadvantages.

Given this economic and structural base of racism, it is important to remember that even if a significant number of people stopped using racial epithets tomorrow, the root causes and the economic structures that drive racism would still be in place; we’d still have institutional racism, the pernicious and persistent economic and social injustice for racial “others,” that, in the US at least, has been maintained and established over several hundred years of exploitation. Similarly, if we stopped being sexist tomorrow, we’d still have a systematic sexism that devalues the labor of women and which exerts pressure upon women to do labor—such as the maintenance of the home—that serves as an invisible subsidy to capitalism.

Though many people are resistant to the notion, speciesism functions in a similar way. Far from being a simple prejudice against animals simply for being animals, speciesism is woven into our mental, social, and economic machinery, and reproduced through the interaction of these parts—it is a structural aspect of our political-economic order. Using Nibert’s three-pronged theoretical frame, even an elementary analysis of the way animals are integrated into our lives, cultures, and economies shows they are oppressed. Taking the first part of Nibert’s theory—that maintaining oppression relies upon economic exploitation or competition—it is clear that we exploit animals for our own interests and tastes. We directly consume the bodies of animals for food, but we also use them as factories for milk, eggs, and other products; we wear the skins and fur of animals; we use animals for medical and scientific experiments; and we exploit them for the purposes of our own entertainment and companionship. Animals have even played a direct role in the development of industrial capitalism, functioning as our property—as chattel slaves—and in this regard, they should be considered part of the working class.¹² As I will discuss in Chapter 3,

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