

Reviews

Book Review

***About Canada: Animal Rights*, by John Sorenson.
Black Point, Nova Scotia and Winnipeg, Manitoba:
Fernwood Publishing Company Limited, 2010. \$17.95
CAN, paper. ISBN: 978-1-55266-356-1. Pages: 1-192.**

Reviewed by Priscillia Lefebvre¹

About Canada: Animal Rights is one in a series of books that critically examines vital issues pertaining to social justice, healthcare, and public services in Canadian society. John Sorenson delivers an extensive analysis of animal rights in Canada, which is both extremely disturbing and informative. In his exploration of this important and controversial topic, Sorenson provides us with numerous examples of the exploitation and abuse of animals within industry, as well as the sad shortcomings of Canadian legislation intended to regulate it. He explains the issue of animal rights in a comprehensive and yet extremely accessible way. Because of its broad nature, Sorenson does not delve into an exhaustive analysis of any one topic but provides the reader with an excellent overview of the legal, historical, and social issues surrounding animal rights in Canada as well as the arguments, misconceptions, and industry propaganda embedded within it.

Sorenson begins with a discussion of animal rights within the broader social justice movement by remarking that all too often animal rights are disregarded by many otherwise progressive people as a legitimate concern. For many, he explains, animal rights are considered inferior to the widely accepted notion of the hierarchical order of nature in which human beings dominate and take priority over concerns of other species. Labeled as pretentious or sentimental, animal rights issues are placed at odds with other struggles instead of being considered central to many sites

¹ Priscillia Lefebvre is a Ph.D Candidate in the Department of Sociology & Anthropology with a concentration in Political Economy. She can be reached at plfebvr@connect.carleton.ca

of oppression. Sorenson takes issue with this by stating that to view a compassion for the suffering of animals as somehow indicative of a disregard for the suffering of humans is nonsensical and creates a false dichotomy between the two, as if systemic violence towards animals and the environment does not also include an attack on human labour and health under patriarchal capitalism. Animal rights activists, to a great extent, are also accused of extremism and called terrorists, mainly pointing to groups such as the Animal Liberation Front, by those who would defend animal exploitation and cruelty under the present system. Sorenson likens this socially constructed bifurcation to racism and sexism, ideologies which have been historically used to justify the oppression of marginalized others. Sorenson readies his audience for this discussion with the following passage (p.11):

Capitalism involves exploitation of animals as well as humans and the profit-motive extends suffering to a broader scale: billions of animals are killed each year in the food, vivisection, fashion, hunting, and entertainment industries. Mistreatment of animals is shaped by systems of oppression that developed over time to maintain profit, privilege and power.

Sorenson's abolitionist perspective is based first and foremost on the premise, outlined by Gary Francione, that animals are to be recognized as having one basic right—the right not to be considered property. All animals are sentient beings who deserve respect and are not to be seen as at the disposal of humans, and for this he makes no apologies. Sorenson maintains that the commodification of animals enables their usage by humans to attain whatever ends deemed fit by the owner, be it for profit, labour, experimentation or otherwise. He details accounts of the gruesome activities taking place in industrial meat production, factory farming, and in the slaughter of cows, pigs, chickens as well as the production of more so-called upscale delicacies such as duck *foie gras*, marine animals, and exotic meats. He explores animals being tortured and abused for entertainment purposes and sport such as in hunting, rodeos, horse-racing, circuses, and zoos. Sorenson also speaks of the ugliness of the pet industry in his examples of puppy mills, as well as cases of extreme animal cruelty on the part of pet owners and individuals. He also refers to and provides examples of the redundancy and ineffectualness of animal research in Canada. Although reading numerous accounts of violence and excruciating pain being inflicted on animals does not make for an enjoyable read per se, it is an important one for those willing to confront the truly horrible production methods of what we, as a society, consume on a daily basis.

Sorenson reestablishes the links between animal and human suffering through a survey of the detrimental role that animal exploitation and the killing of animals for profit plays in capitalist colonial expansion. He argues that animal rights issues

must be integrated as part of the greater ecological and economic crisis by interrogating the animal industry's contribution to serious threats to human survival such as global warming and starvation. Corporate interests will never allow for animal rights as that would interfere with their profits. To combat this, corporations have invested millions of dollars, a significant portion of which comes from taxpayers awarded through government subsidies, in public relations propaganda. For example, Sorenson outlines the opportunistic use of Indigenous people by the fur industry as marketing tools to promote themselves as preserving Canada's rich cultural heritage and supporting traditional ways of living by paying Aboriginal fur-trappers next to nothing for the bloody work of killing animals. Many would say this relationship is far more representative of Canada's tradition of colonization and genocide of Indigenous people than it is of respecting or preserving Aboriginal culture.

Lending to the strength of his arguments, particularly when speaking of Canada's indefensible seal hunt, he also lays out the irrationality of much of the animal industry's practices not only in moral, but economic terms. In doing so, he calls into question the sustainability of such practices and explores who really profits from them. In most cases, such as the seal hunt, it is fur industry corporations who lobby the federal government's Department of Fisheries and Oceans to continue defending the mass killing of seals under the guise of job creation for off-season fishermen and animal population control, even in the face of embarrassing international public anger and costly boycotts. Ironically, this also follows the same Orwellian logic that conservation through culling initiatives propagate in that in order to preserve animals we must kill them. Sorenson also points out that, in reality, these brutal annual practices only account for a tiny fraction of income for labourers, while producing hazardous consequences for the ocean's ecosystem and costing governments several times more money to orchestrate than it generates. In fact, one gets the impression that it would be cheaper to cancel the hunt altogether and just give sealers the money they make during this mass killing outright. As the fur market declines, it would seem that the seal hunt, referred to by many as 'Canada's Shame,' is only lucrative for the commercial fur industry.

In the final chapter, Sorenson presents veganism as the only ethical choice when facing an industry bent on such cruelty and total disregard for the wellbeing of both animals and humans; an industry inflicting countless long-term harms on the environment in search of profit. However, his call for veganism as a (at least partial) solution fails in part due to the lack of addressing the shortcomings of following a vegan lifestyle without examining other forms of exploitation that, on its own, veganism does not address. Problems surrounding grain production and other foods under capitalist industrial agriculture that are not animal based, for example.

Where does veganism situate itself, in the resistance of not only animal exploitation but human exploitation as well, in the import of fruits and other foods from countries such as the Philippines and Costa Rica grown under extremely oppressive, dangerous, and environmentally harmful conditions, not to mention the use of migrant labour in Canada's own fruit and vegetable production? Sorenson's call for veganism would have been much stronger had he clarified this point. Nor does Sorenson problematize his call for eco-tourism as an alternative to safari-style vacationing as a colonial practice in itself which often requires the appropriation and 'clearing' of land already in use by indigenous people in order to prepare it for viewing as a pristine wilderness. In my opinion, these are vital topics for discussion if we are not to simply trade one oppression for another in an attempt to, as Sorenson himself would say, "salve our consciences." That said, *About Canada: Animal Rights* provides an excellent overview of this issue, as well as its far-reaching implications and vital place within the broader movement for social justice for all.