

FELICE CIMATTI AND CARLO SALZANI (EDS.)

THE BIOPOLITICAL ANIMAL

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every creature is full of God

Meister Eckhart

ABSTRACT

Among the new scholarly publications currently concerned with thinking through both the limits and the promises of the ‘biopolitical turn in animal studies’ (215), *The Biopolitical Animal* — a collection edited by Felice Cimatti and Carlo Salzani and published in the ‘Animalities’ series by Edinburgh University Press — stands out for the richness of the topics addressed and the overall quality of its chapters. Ambitious in scope, timely in its demands and bold in its theoretical proposals, *The Biopolitical Animal* — a title reminiscent as well as explicitly critical of Aristotle’s foundational definition of the ‘human’ as *zōon politikon* or ‘political animal’ — is divided into three parts featuring fourteen chapters, with the addition of an agile afterword and an extensive editors’ introduction. What follows is a review of the aforementioned collection.

KEY WORDS

Animal; animality; biopolitics; Agamben; Foucault; taming; management; vulnerability; violence.

RESUMEN

Entre las nuevas publicaciones académicas que reflexionan sobre los límites y las promesas del «giro biopolítico en los estudios sobre animales» (215), *The Biopolitical Animal* —una colección coordinada por Felice Cimatti y Carlo Salzani y publicada en la serie «Animalities» de la Editorial de la Universidad de Edimburgo— destaca por la riqueza de los temas abordados y la calidad general de sus capítulos. Ambiciosa en su alcance, oportuna en sus exigencias y audaz en sus propuestas teóricas, la colección *The Biopolitical Animal* —título que recuerda y, a la vez, critica explícitamente la definición fundacional de Aristóteles de lo «humano» como *zōon politikon* o «animal político»— se divide en tres partes que incluyen catorce capítulos, a los que se suma un ágil epílogo y una extensa introducción de los coordinadores. A continuación, se ofrece una reseña de la citada colección.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Animal; animalidad; biopolítica; Agamben; Foucault; domesticación; gestión; vulnerabilidad; violencia.

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Among the new scholarly publications currently concerned with thinking through both the limits and the promises of the ‘biopolitical turn in animal studies’ (215), *The Biopolitical Animal* — a collection edited by Felice Cimatti and Carlo Salzani and published in the ‘Animalities’ series by Edinburgh University Press — stands out for the richness of the topics addressed and the overall quality of its chapters. Ambitious in scope, timely in its demands and bold in its theoretical proposals, *The Biopolitical Animal* — a title reminiscent as well as explicitly critical of Aristotle’s foundational definition of the ‘human’ as *zōon politikon* or ‘political animal’ — is divided into three parts featuring fourteen chapters, with the addition of an agile afterword and an extensive editors’ introduction. While Neel Ahuja’s afterword sums up the shared reflection carried out by all contributors and attentively casts it beyond their different perspectives, the editors’ introduction is clearly conceived to provide the readers with a useful compass for navigating through the complex archipelago mapped in the volume, the size of which could seem intimidating. Each of the three parts of the book deals with the question of the ‘biopolitical animal’ focusing on, respectively, I) ‘how some traditional biopolitical theories have approached the question of the animal, and the place and function the animal has taken or could take within this framework’ (7); II) ‘five multispecies stories or narratives of the intertwining of biopolitics and animality’ (9) and III) ‘how the animal question pushes the boundaries and redefines the scope of traditional biopolitical theories’ (10). Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of their focus, all three parts of the collection are solidly tied to one another by a twofold common goal: on the one hand, by pushing for an ‘anthropo-decentralisation’ as well as ‘an andro-decentralisation and Euro-decentralisation’, to fight the ‘nightmarish’ face of biopower; on the other hand, through ‘re-centring on animality and corporeality as *lively potentials* and *creative forces*’, to figure an ‘affirmative biopolitics’ or, in the words of Cimatti and Salzani, ‘a politics no longer based on the taming of animal (human and nonhuman) life’ (3,6,7).

Needless to say, as often happens in collective works of this kind, some chapters are perhaps less persuasive than others but certainly not less interesting, since all yield insightful commentaries on how to possibly reach such a twofold emancipatory goal. As clearly expressed by the editors in their introduction, *The Biopolitical Animal* ought to be taken, in fact, both as a theoretical wager and as a political call for action, for it

is aimed at retrieving, beyond the human-nonhuman divide produced by biopower and sanctioned by the hegemonic Western metaphysical tradition, an ‘originary community of all life’ (94), bound together — as James K. Stanescu argues in his chapter — by vulnerability and precariousness but also by an untamable ‘will to persevere’ and an irreducible potential for resistance (183-84).

Undeniably, the editors Cimatti and Salzani managed to put together an outstanding collection of cutting-edge contributions by gathering many lucid voices among the most daring contemporary thinkers in animal and bio-political studies alike. Yet, it would be impossible to fairly account for or even briefly describe in these few lines the variety of topics addressed in *The Biopolitical Animal*. It would then be more fruitful to focus on some key elements of the manifold ways in which the decisive ‘relationship between politics and animality’ (3) is tackled in the collection and to hint at some major themes and at a few critical points worth lingering on. The hope, in doing so, is that readers will be able to glimpse what makes *The Biopolitical Animal* a precious tool for imagining a far too long-awaited liberation of the ‘biopolitical animal’ — both human and non — or more — than human — from the mortiferous grips of biopower.

Let us start with the theoretical framework of the collection. It is common knowledge that the hegemonic Western metaphysical tradition, starting at least with Aristotle, has considered the ‘human’ to be a ‘political animal’ defined *per differentiam specificam* from the ‘non-human’ animal. In Ancient Greece, this ‘separation/co-implication between biological life and political life’ (2) allowed for the establishment of the supposed ‘naturalness’ of the *polis* for humans but sealed the exclusion of animals from ‘civil political space’, through an exception which constitutes, as Zipporah Weisberg reminds in her chapter echoing Giorgio Agamben, nothing less than ‘the founding act of politics’ (219). According to Michel Foucault, such a ‘separation/co-implication’ of biology and politics would pertain to a ‘pre-modern’ social mode, while its collapse would mark the crossing of a biological ‘threshold of modernity’ whereby ‘the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies’ (cited in 2, 115). If Foucault was likely right in stressing the epistemic shift between classical ‘politics’ and modern ‘biopolitics’ as well as the ‘progressive animalisation of man’ (cited in 5), *The Biopolitical Animal* claims that, however, for the hegemonic Western metaphysical tradition, and consequently for the current global biopower rooted in it, ‘politics and biology are always already intertwined’ (2). Not only, in fact, is ‘human’ life subjected ‘to the action of the devices of “biopower”’ (277) and to its maximising as well as deadly ‘calculation’ (4). To the extent that the becoming ‘human’ of the ‘human animal’ is produced by that which Agamben has called the ‘anthropological machine’ through the exception, or the inclusion/exclusion, of the (animal) voice from (human) language — as Sergei Prozorov recalls in his chapter —, the ‘human’ is, in fact, always already a ‘biopolitical animal’.

This historical-transcendental always-already, that could be called the human's 'biopolitical condition and conditioning' under biopower, is the first collective theoretical tenet of *The Biopolitical Animal*. It is predicated on Agamben's famous argument that 'anthropogenesis', far from being the apex of an accomplished phylogenetic teleological process, is instead an ever-happening event taking place each and every time the living being called 'human' generates the 'human' out of the living. However, since anthropogenesis is a biopolitical operation, and not a once and for all inalienable acquisition of the human 'species', it needs to be constantly produced anew and reasserted. As Diego Rossello underlines in his chapter, quoting Carl Schmitt, 'to be human remains, nonetheless, a decision' (235). Since anthropogenesis is contingent upon a decision *of* and *on* the 'human' subject — i.e., it takes place at the intersection between its heteronomy and its autonomy —, it can always, however, be 'reverted', or better, it is always-already under the 'latent threat' of being reverted. Biopower watches over life (and death) so that such reversion is prevented for only *some* human life, making it such that only a certain kind of subjectivities — cis/hetero/white/rich/able-bodied etc. — can thoughtlessly live as naturally 'human' forgetting or denying the latent threat of 'animalisation', while other subjectivities are left behind or 'abandoned' to be nonetheless constantly reminded that such a latent threat could very well be actualised — and so it is, in fact, for many 'not enough human' human beings. The consequence of this theoretical framework is that verily there are no 'natural' human or nonhuman animals but only living beings produced, marked, and granted or denied the status, as either by the biopolitical anthropological machine. *The Biopolitical Animal* then follows Agamben in arguing that, as Sherryl Vint reminds in her chapter, in order to deactivate such a machine — and the threat both of its reversion for human life and of its application to nonhuman life —, a 'suspension' of the biopolitical 'anthropogenic processes of making the "human" out of the living' is required (96).

However, such a 'traditional' biopolitical reading of the human/animal divide would still consider animality in a subordinate relation to the 'humanity' of the human, or, stated differently, it would still consider the 'animal' to be what is presupposed to the 'human' as its exceptional other and *not* according to its own agency, suffering, striving and aspirations to thrive. The question asked by Cimatti and Salzani and, consequently, by all contributors to the volume, is, then, 'what is the *particular* place of "nonhuman" animals within this theoretical framework?' If the decisive insight into the biopolitical condition and conditioning of the 'human' animal remains, in fact, the main focus of biopolitical theories, then, as truthful as it may be, it ends up forgetting the particular place that the 'nonhuman' animal has both in those theories and within biopower. 'This forgetfulness' — Cimatti and Salzani contend — 'perpetuates the exclusionary logic of the Political Animal' (3-4). Consistent with the 'animal turn' in biopolitical studies, the second theoretical tenet of *The Biopolitical Animal* is therefore that the 'subjects of biopolitics are, beyond species barriers, *all* biopolitical animals' (2).

If seen from this angle, the title chosen for the collection is hence all the more fitting as it bridges the complementary and opposite sides of Western metaphysics' human-nonhuman divide by pointing at the shared biopolitical condition and conditioning of all living beings under the sway of neoliberal capitalism in the Anthropocene. The contributions to *The Biopolitical Animal* claim that understanding the significance of such a biopolitical condition and conditioning for the human and the nonhuman alike is of utmost importance to render it a ground for a radical shift of paradigm in biopolitical theories, the purpose of which is to finally overcome their 'species blindness' — i.e., their focus on only the 'human' side of the biopolitical animal — through the creation of a novel taxonomic field that intersects and disrupts the species 'divide'. Interestingly, even those contributors hoping to go 'beyond' biopolitics and recognizing the emancipatory role of subjectivity (such as Weisberg, for instance) or those instead calling for a politics of the 'post-human' and for a destitution of all 'human' subjectivity aimed at uncovering a *humanimal* (such as Cimatti, for instance), share one and the same ethical horizon of liberation of the human and the nonhuman animal alike from such a biopolitical condition and conditioning.

A non-secondary consequence of this acknowledgement of a shared historical-transcendental biopolitical lot assigned to all living beings under biopower is that the 'human' finally loses its superiority over the 'animal' within and without, or stated otherwise, it loses its 'exceptionality' with respect to all non-human or more-than-human life. Hence, the 'human' must rethink itself by coming down from the anthropocentric pedestal erected by the logical apparatus of biopower. As living beings, vulnerable and precarious, in need of care and affection, exposed to decay and death but also harbouring amazing potentialities, 'humans' ought to acknowledge that they live not as 'masters and possessors of nature' — as per Descartes' famous plea — but 'creaturely' — as Salzani suggests in his chapter — that is, not at all differently in both their finitude and their potentials than all other creaturely beings. Nevertheless, as all contributors underline, acknowledging such an inter — or trans-species commonality of all living creatures must never result in forgetting the differences in their treatment by the power over life and death. Human and nonhuman living creatures are subjected to different degrees of exposure, abjection and violence and no 'human' is allowed to dismiss or smear at the incomparable scale of atrocity inflicted upon the 'nonhuman'.

The urgency of rethinking the place that the 'nonhuman' biopolitical animal occupies both within biopower and biopolitical theories makes it such, however, that it becomes imperative to question the 'traditional' critical analyses of biopolitics and, at the same time, retrieve and cherish embodied examples of resistance to the 'biopolitics of rectitude' — as per Salzani's fitting formulation (225) — in Western as well as in non-Western traditions. Hence, the contributions found in Part One of the collection (cf. Calarco, Vatter, Prozorov, Lemm and Vint) are, on the one hand, devoted to take this necessary genealogical step-back by delving into Foucault's pioneering research on biopolitics

and racism, Agamben's inquiries into the logic of exception, *sacertas* and 'bare life', but also into Esposito's reflections on immunity, Mbembe's critique of colonial necropower and 'death zones', Canguilhem's notion of *milieu* and von Uexküll's account of the *Umwelt*. On the other hand, these contributions are attentive to recount subversive forms-of-life such as the unorthodox Cynics' or the ones constituted through Indigenous ways of thinking and practices, since all are paradigmatic instances of 'another mode of being human' (103) to the one produced by biopolitical management and 'mortification' of life. In spite of their potential for liberation being possibly captured by biopower — as Vanessa Lemm and Vint warn in their chapters —, the examples of the Cynics' 'dog's life' and of non-Western inter or trans-species communities nonetheless show that, against Aristotelian biopolitical thought, not only is there nothing 'natural' in the *polis* — that is, nothing that makes it a destinal horizon for the human animal and, at the same time, an impossibility for the nonhuman animal —, but there is no virtue whatsoever in not caring for *all* living things.

Yet, to advocate and act for an 'animal' (human and nonhuman) liberation, one must first retrieve and redeem the long and still-standing history of atrocities made possible and inflicted upon both the human and the nonhuman by biopower. Or, as Vint warns, 'we must first undo the damage of modernity before we can imagine something new in its place' (107). In this regard, Part Two and Three of the collection, venturing into literary 'encounters' with animality, into instructive case studies as well as into concentrationary, disciplinary and 'deading' zones of exceptions, are quite illuminating. As Serenella Iovino's reading of Italo Calvino and Timothy Campbell's reading of Dino Buzzati thoroughly show, literature is not — unlike philosophy — bound by the bias of 'objectivity' and therefore is given the chance to explore human/nonhuman animal relations in much more insightful and sensitive ways. For instance, by decrying the cruelty of zoos — explicitly created to assert human hierarchical superiority over all other nonhuman life by structurally preventing any possible encounter with the 'gaze of the animal' — Iovino reminds her reader that the 'total withdrawal from a world of meanings [...] is indeed the most radical form of inflicted pain for other animals' (135).

On their part, Stanescu and Dinesh Wadiwel, by exhibiting the awesome violence exerted upon 'deading life' by thanato-breeding machineries such as the factory farm and the fish farm, provocatively deconstruct their paradigmatic biopolitical role, while David Redmalm/Erica Von Essen cleverly point out the biopolitical threshold between 'distinct' pet and 'exceptional' pest in the management and culling of rabbits, questioning whether a 'benevolent' pastoral biopower which takes into account life's grievability could be a viable management of human-nonhuman animal interactions. Weisberg and Rossello, instead, take on the task of analysing the different scenarios opened by animal magnetism and interspecies erotic relationships such as friendship, arguing that the primacy of vision in human/animal relations might be overthrown and dethroned by the sympathetic proximity of a non-domineering form of 'touching' and

even of magnetic ‘influence’. Finally, in his chapter on ‘creaturely biopolitics’, Salzani claims that rethinking the human/nonhuman divide requires a terminological shift no longer grounded in the specific differences of the *genus proximum* ‘animal’ but on both vulnerability and the ‘creative energies of life’ in order to recover ‘a condition that does not pertain only to fully individuated beings but cuts across the very boundaries of the individual’ (258-59).

As Miguel Vatter recalls in his chapter, through its biopolitical management of zoonotic risks and intraspecies contagion, the Covid-19 pandemic has again shown that the fates of human and of nonhuman or more-than-human life are inextricably woven. The contributions to *The Biopolitical Animal* suggest that, without an animal liberation, environmental and climate justice, as well as without a de — and anti-colonial, trans-gender as well as crip or dis — politics, both human and nonhuman or more-than-human life’s survival remains literally unthinkable or, worse, only thinkable through biopolitical immunitarian protective bubbles, such as the ‘cartesianisation’ of intra — and interspecies spaces of encounters into sheer ‘spaces of contagion’ or even the techno-billionaires’ outer space and underground most horrific bio-architectural phantasies. As Vint justly writes in her chapter, the projects ‘of rethinking the place of animals in human sociality, of decolonising our social and material relations and of resisting capitalist accumulation” (102) are indissoluble. The lesson one is to draw from *The Biopolitical Animal* is that struggles against racial capitalism, necro — and thanatopower, as well as cishetero — and ablenormativity ought to be sustained and practiced together and that none of them can succeed if it is disengaged from the others. Hence, in a time of emboldened identity and identitarian politics, another merit of *The Biopolitical Animal* is the stress it lays on intraspecies intersectionality within the biopolitically divided ‘sections’ of the ‘human’ — ultimately, all those *not* incarnating the ‘straight’ normativity of a ‘biopolitics of rectitude’. However, the different voices one hears out of the volume chorally speak up how necessary it is to turn a much needed ‘human’ intersectionality into an *inter-species-sectionality* in which a truly emancipatory ‘creaturely’ biopolitics can be invented and experimented. To reaffirm and claim an originary, ‘natural’, crookedness — or one could easily render, *queerness* — of all life is but the first move, both epistemic and ethical, towards such ‘creaturely’ biopolitics. *The Biopolitical Animal* reminds its readers that there are no excuses left not to do so, lest we forget that, as stated by Stanesco in the concluding remarks of his chapter, ‘it is only as earthlings together that we get out of the current crises’ (186). Otherwise, ‘the war against animals’ — to quote Wadiwel — would loom on the future of Earth as the eternal return of an inescapable, never-ending zoocidal present.

