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Beyond Anthropocentrism: Critical Animal Studies and the Political Economy of Communication [I]

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Abstract

This article argues that the political economy of communication is ready and ethically obliged to expand its moral vision beyond human life, as other disciplines of the social sciences and humanities have already done. Such an expanded moral vision does not mean pushing human suffering to the background, but rather realizing that humans only form part of the planet, and are not above it. Not assigning individuals of other species the same moral consideration we do human beings has no ethical grounding and is actually deeply entangled with our own suffering within capitalist societies – it being particularly connected with human inequality, power relations, and economic interests. Decentering humanity to embrace a truly egalitarian view is the next natural step in a field driven by moral values and concerned with the inequality triggered by power relations. To make this step forward, this article considers the tenets of critical animal studies (CAS), an emerging interdisciplinary field which embraces traditional critical political economy concerns, including hegemonic power and oppression, from a non-anthropocentric moral stance.

Critical media and communication scholars are concerned with what prevents human equality and social justice from blossoming. More particularly, they examine the fundamental role media and communication play in preventing or promoting social change. Those scholars devoted to the political economy of communication (PEC) focus upon the structural power relations involved in capitalism or, in Vincent Mosco's words, in the "power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources, including communication resources" (2009: 2).

As a critical approach, PEC has always been involved in a process of rethinking, renewal and, in particular, broadening of scope. From focusing mainly on media imperialism and corporate concentration in US and European old media, the field went on to experience the globalization of its research. PEC now incorporates a commitment to the history of communication (particularly the history of resistance to dominant powers) and a variety of approaches to new media (including the continuities and discontinuities of capitalistic patterns). The field has also engaged with the disciplines on its borders (mostly cultural studies, sociology, economics, and political science). It

has also used the analysis of class, gender, race, social movements, labor, and hegemony (and counter-hegemony) as categories to describe the social relations of communication practices (Mosco, 2009).

This critical PEC approach is grounded in a normative-moral stance rooted in the cornerstones of traditional political economy. As summarized by Murdoch and Golding (2005) and Mosco (2009), this foundational basis: (i) gives priority to understanding social change and historical transformation; (ii) takes into account the wider social totality; (iii) is oriented by social values and by conceptions of appropriate social practices; and (iv) merges research with praxis (that is, to be committed to the aim of improving the world and oneself). As political economists of communication, we must address the moral challenges of our time involving the power relations behind media, communication and culture. As Golding and Murdoch (1991) insist, what precisely distinguishes critical political economy is its willingness to engage with basic moral questions of justice, equity and the public good.

However, the PEC's approach has reproduced a very common bias in social sciences and humanities: the positioning of humans at the very center of meaning, value, knowledge, and action. The social sciences and humanities, as their very names reveal, are devoted to the study of social relations from a human-centered perspective. Yet the paradox is that anthropocentrism prevents scholars from addressing a most remarkable aspect that also shapes the quality or condition of being human: our relationship with the rest of life on the planet. In this respect, the latest noteworthy innovation in PEC studies is without doubt the environmental approach.

A commitment to the environment in political economy was, and is, crucial to the alliance between socialism and feminism. They both needed to correct the Neoclassical and Marxian neglect of nature in their analyses. Both inside and outside this alliance, environmental political economy has been very fruitful over the past few decades. More recently, this expanded view has started to produce results in the political economy of communication (Maxwell and Miller, 2012; Maxwell et al., 2014). In fact, the environmental section added by Mosco to the 2009 edition of *The Political Economy of Communication* suggests the embracing of a more holistic, less anthropocentric perspective:

An environmental approach advances political economy's interest in the idea of the social totality by incorporating the natural totality of organic life. Concomitantly, it broadens political economy's concern for moral philosophy by expanding the moral vision beyond human life to all life processes (Mosco, 2009: 61).

In my view, because of its moral engagement, the PEC approach is ready and ethically obliged to expand this moral vision beyond human life, as other disciplines of the social sciences and humanities have already done very successfully (particularly moral philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and psychology). Such an expanded moral vision does not mean pushing all the human suffering to the background, but rather realizing that humans only form part of the planet, and are not above it. Not assigning individuals of other species the same moral consideration we do human beings has no ethical grounding and is linked to human inequality, power relations, and economic interests.

This expanded vision is needed for critical media studies in general, and the PEC in particular, for three main reasons. First, because the environmental approach is not enough, since the ecologic perspective simply perpetuates the duality between nature and culture (the social construct at the core of the destruction of life in the planet by humans). Second, the expanded view is necessary

because the focus on what concerns *humans* and what it is *social* within PEC, and critical communication studies in general, has been arbitrarily restricted. Third, this view beyond human beings is needed because of the moral progress of ethical thinking [2], as reflected in moral philosophy during the last decades.

Mosco's emphasis upon "expanding the moral vision beyond human life to all life processes" is not enough if this is conducted only under an environmental perspective, because the ecologic stance alone does not critique the social construction of nature versus culture. We must start by acknowledging how *nature* (and the *environment*) is constructed and rendered distinct to *culture* by processes of mediation that are severely influenced by economic interests based on a non-egalitarian, oppressive ideology. This ideology is non-egalitarian because only a (human) elite takes economic advantage of the exploitation of life on earth. It is oppressive because it does so by imposing deprivations and suffering on a large number of human and nonhuman beings. Yet to acknowledge the latter we need a view that goes beyond ecosystems to focus on all individuals without discrimination. The traditional environmental perspective cannot provide this since it is very much centered on protecting natural ecosystems as a whole for the sake of humans over and above the interests of the nonhuman individuals that inhabit them. Such environmental approaches cannot unveil the industrial complex that exploits nonhuman animals. They do not analyse the interests which shape the processes of mediation that perpetuate the myth of idyllic rural farming or idyllic wildlife while concealing the callous and polluting reality of factory farming. In short, not addressing how humans behave towards individuals of other species prevents PEC scholars from grasping the global picture of structural exploitation and the practices of mediation involved.

The media and communication research field has traditionally been defined as dealing with processes of *human* communication. More particularly, critical media and communication studies have been considered as a resource for examining the power and influence of media on *human* society. Political economist Christian Fuchs, for instance, uses the approach of critical theory and critical studies to study media and communication. This requires the examination of human communication processes focusing "on the analysis of phenomena in the context of domination, asymmetrical power relations, exploitation, oppression and control as an object of study" (Fuchs, 2011:132-33). The object of study here is not the human being itself but the communication processes by which humans interact and, more particularly, how these processes prevent or perpetuate domination and oppression. However, because of a narrow view of what the *social* is, critical media and communication studies have neglected a major component of domination and oppression. This limited view implicitly promoted a rationale whereby if direct victims were not human beings, then the topic should not be of concern to social sciences. For this reason, nature and nonhuman animals were almost absent from media and communication studies in general until very recently (Stibbe, 2012). Yet nature and animals have not been absent at all from the media and communications sphere and have actually been increasingly mediated by nature programs, news, books, magazines, cartoons, films and documentaries, museums, exhibits, and of course the Internet. This is simply a logical consequence of the role nonhuman animals play in human society, or better said, the role they are forced to play because of how we exploit animals and nature in our interest. This *use* therefore must be recognized as a social phenomenon inasmuch as the *social* in a human society cannot be restricted to only some selected human deeds. All our actions make the *social*. For these reasons, the ethical, political, economic and social implications of our exploitation of nature and other animals are already considered part of the social by a long list of moral

philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, political scientists and other social scientists.

As mentioned, nature, through the environmental concern, has already been incorporated into critical media studies, including the political economy of communication. However, the media's role in manufacturing human consent for the oppression and exploitation of nonhumans is still a budding research topic in which critical media studies have been primarily focused on questions of representation. Cultural studies scholars have already conducted innovative critiques of representation of other animals in art, film, news and visual culture (Adams, 1990; Baker, 1993; Lippit, 2000; Wolfe, 2003; Daston and Mitman, 2005; Chris, 2006; Molloy, 2011; Pick, 2011; Stibbe, 2011; Malamud, 2011; Weil, 2012; Pick and Narraway, 2013; Plec, 2013; Freeman, 2014; Almiron, Cole and Freeman, 2016). Nevertheless, the topic is still a blind spot in the PEC's research with very few exceptions (see Almiron, 2016; Almiron and Khazaal, 2016).

The anthropocentric perspective is a hindrance for PEC not only because of its limited view of nature and of the *social*, but also because of its inconsistency with moral progress. Generally speaking, the anthropocentric perspective does not acknowledge the current claims for redefining egalitarianism made by a number of fast-growing ethical movements. These include effective altruism, which examines, alongside human poverty and suffering, the suffering of nonhuman animals (Singer, 2015). As we will see, the redefining of egalitarianism to include other species is the logical corollary of acknowledging that sentience—and most particularly the capacity for suffering— is what matters (or at least it cannot be ignored in assessing moral considerations) [3]. As moral philosophers have convincingly argued, our treatment of individuals of other species is morally perverse and unjustified. As social science scholars have increasingly shown, our treatment of other animals is also a form of violence interconnected with all other forms of violence. We will review at length both sets of arguments in this article but it is important to note here that this egalitarian and moral claim does not automatically mean we shall consider the interest of human beings and the interest of other animals as equal but that, when there is capacity for suffering, all interests deserve moral consideration.

Decentering humanity to embrace a truly egalitarian view is the next natural step in a field driven by moral values and concerns about the inequality triggered by power relations. Furthermore, as we will see, the intersections between the oppression of other animals and the oppression of humans are so relevant that it would be negligent on our part to stay blind to them, not only for the sake of ethics (to right a wrong) but for the sake of convenience as well (to reduce human suffering). Interestingly, by decentering humanity PEC scholars will be actually recentering their work on humanitarian values.

To make this step forward, we should draw upon some of the tenets of a young but well established intersectional field: critical animal studies (CAS). It promotes a political economic critique of capitalism that has become a growing field of inquiry in the last decade. Yet media and communication were typically out of the CAS picture until recently. Cultural studies has already caught up with the representational issues of anthropocentrism and speciesism —the ideology that privileges the human species over the rest. PEC should follow to provide its own perspective on the human-bias behind our cultural industries.

To support this claim I invite the reader to explore two main sets of arguments previously introduced. They both provide strong reasons for PEC to expand its moral view. The first is the modern basis of animal ethics, as developed by moral philosophers since the 1970s. The progress of moral ethicists should be considered not only because it provides the roots for PEC's ethical

concerns but because of its consistent claim regarding the wrongness of conventional assumptions about what makes the *social* (the consideration of how we treat individuals of other species is neglected).

The second set of arguments is related to the entanglements of violence under capitalism. There is an extensive literature that currently illuminates how the human systems of domination and discrimination are deeply intertwined with our exploitation of billions of other animals. This provides a very relevant point for PEC: the futility of fighting against violence and oppression without addressing, or at least acknowledging, *all* structural violence and oppression.

Both arguments will set the ground for the introduction of CAS tenets. I will conclude by reflecting upon the idea of true compassion, solidarity and egalitarianism as foundations for rebuilding the PEC approach.

Animal ethics and science: Why do other animals matter?

The question of whether other animals are oppressed by humans is empirical, not discursive. Every year on this planet trillions of other animals are confined, exploited, genetically modified, mutilated and have their lives shortened. They are subjected to all kinds of physical and psychological pain, and are slaughtered solely for human interests (mainly food, clothing, entertainment, and testing). As a specific example, in 2015 alone 1 to 2.7 trillion fish and 70 billion land animals were killed in fishing (including aquaculture) and land farming, respectively (FAOStat, 2016). Every year, hundreds of millions of animals are killed due to hunting (IDA, 2015) or used in animal testing (Knight, 2011). The total number killed each year in animal shelters, for entertainment, or due to habitat loss is unknown.

Given that there are now completely satisfactory animal-free alternatives available, which if adopted by humans en masse would severely reduce the suffering and killing of other animals, a key question arises. Why do so many humans still keep choosing options involving violence and oppression? According to the already broad critical literature on speciesism—the ideology that privileges the human species over the rest—the answers are mostly related to the moral values we hold (ethics) and the economic system that supports them (capitalism). I will address the ethical aspect here before considering the capitalist system.

Our treatment of other animals is the result of public consent supported by a morally anthropocentric system of values. Joy (2011) well described how this system of values perpetuates as normal, natural and necessary the use of other animals. This produces a huge cognitive dissonance in us because of the inconsistency in our attitudes toward animals (we may express affection towards some animals while slaughtering and eating others, we may express disgust for factory farming while ignoring the implications of what is on our plate). Researchers have started to provide evidence of how this cognitive dissonance is perpetuated by media, for instance by concealing the cruel reality of factory farming (Khazaal and Almiron, 2016) or by analyzing how the media changes our attitudes toward animals over time (Molloy, 2011).

As outlined by Faria and Paez (2014), moral anthropocentrism claims that the preferential consideration and treatment of human beings over the members of other species is justified, and hence that the confinement, exploitation and killing of other animals for human interests are acceptable. Moral anthropocentrism is also speciesist insofar as this system of values denies nonhuman animals a moral consideration equal to humans simply because they do not belong to the human species. Different attempts have been made to defend moral speciesist anthropocentrism and

thereby justify the awarding of less importance to other animals. These attempts typically appeal to certain attributes which are supposedly coextensive with the human species and which would ground the greater moral consideration of its members. However, this general position has been widely challenged in past decades since Singer (1975) and Regan (1983).

Interestingly, all of the attributes typically posited as morally relevant in considering humans as superior to other species are human-centered—that is, they take some cognitive human traits as a benchmark. And naturally, if we seek human traits in other species, they will always score very low. For instance, in the past we deemed humans to be the only species capable of producing arts or technology. Nowadays we know that many species are capable of engaging in artistic activities or producing tools. However, if we expect them to produce complex mathematical systems, space rockets, and realist paintings in the image and likeness of humans, then they are of course no match for us. Yet this is an absurd way of assessing other species' qualities because it conceals the fact that we humans cannot match them in their own unique qualities either. As neuroscientist Lori Marino puts it regarding cetaceans: “Orcas may not be very intelligent humans, but humans are really stupid orcas” [4] (quoted in Neiwert, 2015: 28). The list of capacities that other species have and humans lack is a long one: we score comparatively very low when it comes to seeing in the dark, smelling, or in the audible spectrum of sound frequencies we can hear (to give only examples related to senses). In fact, it is very likely that we are unaware of our real limitations compared to traits that other animals may have because we lack the cognitive capacity to even perceive them. The role public relations and interest groups play in concealing the complex social and cognitive realities of other species is for instance described in a paper on the political economy of manufacturing consent for Orcas in captivity (Almiron, forthcoming).

It is now clear to scientists that evolution is not a single straight line with human species at the top end. Different species have evolved along different neuroanatomical trajectories, providing alternative evolutionary routes to complex intelligence on earth (Marino, 2011). Since the times of Charles Darwin (1859), we have known that evolution produces a tree, not a ladder. This, in short, means that if self-serving views of intelligence (designed to put humans on top) are discarded, other animals will show how intelligence—alongside the capacity of feelings, emotions and suffering—can be displayed in different, fascinating ways.

At the same time, since Darwin, evolutionary biologists, cognitive ethologists, and social neuroscientists have provided an amazing wealth of data on just how much we also share with other species. Back in 1872, Darwin already talked about the emotions of animals. After a century-long gap, many other scientists have joined him in providing evidence of animals' intellectual lives (Griffin, 1981) and nonhuman animal sensibility (Bekoff, 2007). Furthermore, research has shown that emotions have actually evolved as adaptations in numerous species, serving as a social glue to bond nonhumans, as catalysts and regulators of social encounters, and as a protective measure (Bekoff, 2013). It is now commonly agreed that consciousness in nonhumans is “real and significant” (Griffin and Speck, 2008: 132), and that emotional awareness is an ancient common quality among all animals, human and nonhuman (Dawkins, 2008). In 2012, a group of prominent neuroscientists gathering at the University of Cambridge signed *The Cambridge Declaration of Consciousness*, unequivocally asserting that other animals also have consciousness. According to them, “convergent evidence indicates that non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviors” (Panksepp et al, 2012). Research has also shown that there might not even be a moral gap between humans and nonhumans, since “animals have a broad repertoire of

moral behavior” and “their lives together are shaped by these behavior patterns” (Bekoff and Pierce, 2009: X). Bekoff and Pierce, for instance, argue that the evolution of moral behavior is tied to the evolution of sociality, and that social complexity will be a distinctive marker for moral complexity. In this context, they allocate at least some degree of morality to other animals in that they show empathy for each other, treat one another fairly, cooperate towards common goals, and help each other out of trouble.

The trend persists today, however, of grounding human superiority on our species’ alleged higher capacity of reasoning. Within a speciesist ideology, this capacity allows us to build and use tools and languages at a much more complex level than other animals, which supposedly also produces more complex (i.e. *higher*) mental states and allows for ethical behavior in humans. This perspective therefore considers the use of other animals for our interests—and their suffering—because we are capable of building computers, atomic bombs, and spacecraft, whereas they are not. Yet this is a very problematic argument, as we would not find Orca abuse of humans acceptable purely because we do not have their capacity for echolocation. More importantly, this perspective is flawed because the speciesist argument cannot even consistently be applied to all humans. If we consider it acceptable to kill a pig for food under the claim, for instance, that the pig may lack self-awareness over time (although today science is telling us the opposite), then we must also accept that killing newborn humans, the senile, the comatose, and the cognitively disabled is acceptable for the same reason, since they may also lack self-awareness. Actually, for any attribute we choose (language, morality, imagination, creativity, etc.), there exist some humans who cannot meet the criterion (this is called “the argument from species overlap”) (Horta, 2014) [5].

Taking some traits of humans as a benchmark for assessing intelligence and thus deserving of moral status is therefore not a good idea. Similar practices have indeed exhibited a poor record in human history. For a long time, white male humans dismissed other humans because of their skin color or gender. Yet nowadays white male supremacy and its racist and sexist cohorts are discredited. Furthermore, even in the event that some of the considered special attributes were really extendable to all humans and exclusive to them, this would be morally irrelevant. Egalitarian doctrines consistently claim that all humans deserve to be treated equally not because of any of these attributes but because of the principles of justice, goodness, and fairness. The ultimate aim of these principles in all cases is to guarantee that individuals can experience a good life, pursue their life goals or, in short, have a life worth living. That is to say, to guarantee avoiding unnecessary suffering and pain. Therefore, what matters for living beings is their capacity for the feelings of pleasure and pain, or their sentience.

Sentience—and most particularly the capacity for suffering—is precisely what lies behind all major Eastern philosophical traditions explicitly espousing non-violence towards other animals since the 6th century BC (notably Jainism and Buddhism). It is also very likely that sentience was what motivated the Greek mathematician Pythagoras—very much influenced by Eastern traditions—to respect other animals and urge humans not to kill or use them. Nowadays, sentience is certainly behind all contemporary Western thought defending the rights and interests of animals as beings capable of feelings and agency since psychologist Richard Ryder (1975) and philosophers Peter Singer (1975) and Tom Regan (1983) first initiated the field. More recently, Martha Nussbaum concludes, in reference to other animals, that sentience is the “threshold condition for membership in the community of beings who have entitlements based on justice” (2004: 309). As a matter of fact, English utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1781) explicitly stated what this

means over two centuries ago; The question with other animals is not, Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?

Today, the idea that human interests are above those of other animals is no longer defensible either from an ethical or a scientific perspective. Other animals do share many traits with us and possess others that we lack. With regard to that which differentiates us, respectfulness would seem to be the wisest attitude to adopt. And as for what we share, it is clear that the time of seeing other animals as Cartesian automates –i.e. as only reflex-driven machines with no intellectual capacities,– is over. As scientists and ethicists have increasingly shown, other animals’ pain and suffering is as real as our own. Therefore, they have an interest in not suffering, enjoying their lives, and continuing to exist in a way that their use and exploitation by humans frustrates. In addition, due to the fact that they are in the worst position, their suffering should in fact deserve our primary attention—along with the most vulnerable human beings—if we are to actually apply the egalitarian principle with impartiality. Yet this need not be done at the expense of human suffering, since, as we will see, the two are deeply entangled and fixing one cannot be truly achieved without fixing the other.

Entanglements of violence. Why do other animals matter for PEC?

Hegemony, class struggle and oppression have been at the core of the political economy of communication (PEC) from the beginning. Common to political economy and PEC is also the acknowledged need to incorporate a moral philosophical dimension to any analysis of power relations. Of course, this moral dimension entails an ethical commitment to the abolition of systems of domination and discrimination.

The role of media and communication in the manufacturing of consent for mainstream ideologies –and systems of domination and discrimination– has been described by Herman and Chomsky (1988) and by political economists of communication since the founding of the field (Mosco, 2009; Wasko, Murdock and Sousa, 2011). PEC research has also considered how the entanglements of violence that devalue human lives also entail the exploitation of communications technologies (for instance McKercher and Mosco, 2007; Mosco and McKercher, 2008; Maxwell and Miller, 2012). Yet, the entanglements of violence affecting other animals have been a blind spot for PEC. On the other hand, critical animal studies (CAS) theory has already drawn upon the intersectional social injustice standpoint, which seeks to abolish not only animal exploitation, but the exploitation of humans and the natural world.

I argue here that other animals matter to PEC because their exploitation is not only an ethical issue, as we saw in the previous section, but a class and a political economy one as well—class and political economy are of course at the core of PEC.

It is no coincidence that both theorists of liberal capitalism, such as Adam Smith and the French physiocrat Turgot, and the strongest critic, Karl Marx, agreed on the huge importance of nonhuman animals in the process of early accumulation (Hribal, 2012). Smith, in particular, traced the creation not only of wealth but indeed the origins of inequality to the domestication of animals. Power and status came from the increase of “herds and flocks” (Smith 2009: 512-514; quoted in Hribal, 2012). Not surprisingly, *capital*—the root term for *capitalism*—evolved from *capitale*, a Late Latin word based on *caput*, meaning “head”. The etymology of capitalism confirms Smith’s view and thus reveals how wealth was measured in the first place: the more heads (of cattle), the richer. Capitalism’s origins are deeply rooted in the exploitation, trade, and ownership of other animals, as

has the entire history of humanity since the so-called agricultural revolution. Yet to realize this we must avoid the traditional historical accounts told by elites and attend to history explained from below, that is, from the standpoint of the exploited.

Prominent scholars who have adopted such a point of view in the fields of moral philosophy, sociology and history are Steven Best, Yuval Noah Harari, David Nibert, and Jason Hribal. These authors, among others, have shown how hunting, herding and animal husbandry caused a dominator worldview in humans that was at the heart of the so-called agricultural revolution and has been perpetuated since then. Like Smith, Turgot and Marx, though from a much more critical standpoint, all these authors see the domestication of other animals as the origin of inequality. Harari (2014) even defines the agricultural revolution as “history’s biggest fraud”, since it has been described as a big leap forward whereas the result is in no way net positive: there has certainly been more food available for humanity since then, but also the creation of elites and hard labor for the masses consigned to agricultural toil. Furthermore, there has also been more suffering since the “subjugation and slaughter of animals” that followed domestication “paved the way for subduing, exploiting, and killing other humans” (Best: 2014: 8).

Nibert (2002, 2013) has documented the longstanding link between the domestication of animals and the promotion of violence and destruction in human societies, and the environment particularly well. His sociological history from below unveils the economic and elite-driven character of prejudice, discrimination, and institutionalized oppressions of human and other animals alike. This author describes how the need for land and water to maintain domesticated animals led to invasions and warfare in the earliest societies. European imperialism and capitalism were fueled and shaped mostly by the *livestock* business, and there is an inextricable link between the current pursuit of business profit in the exploitation of humans and other animals.

The oppression of humans and other animals developed in tandem, each fueling the other. From human male domination over females, to hunger generated by the elite’s feeding and consumption of “domestic” animals, to warfare necessitated by the need for new grazing areas (with the added “bonus” of claiming women and other animals as the spoils), to the use of other animals as instruments of warfare, to the sacrificing of devalued humans and other animals in the Colosseum to entertain and placate the impoverished masses, to the debasement and extermination of the Irish by the British (in large part for the appropriation of land to raise sheep and cows), to the exploitation and extermination of indigenous Americans (in part for the skins and hair of other animals and for acquisition of grazing land), to the violence and discrimination against humans of Mexican descent (for land acquisition for increased populations of cows raised for slaughter)—the oppression of devalued groups of humans has been intimately and thoroughly tied to the oppression of other animals (Nibert, 2002: 50).

The role of mediation has also been reported mostly in regard to the strong influence of lobbies and think tanks in normalizing the ‘fast food’ hamburger, dairy, and bacon and egg cultures (Nestle 2007, Nibert, 2013).

Hribal (2007, 2010, 2012) adds a historical analysis of political economy to Nibert’s account, arguing that animals are actually the lowest working class. This is an interesting approach that forces us to redefine our conception of class from a truly egalitarian perspective. To Hribal (2012), other animals form part of the working class for three main reasons. First, it is because they clearly occupy a place in the social division of labor, as recognized by Adam Smith himself. Second, it is because they are implicitly recognized as such by the working class. When someone states that she

was treated “like a mule” this entails distinguishing herself from a lower status and this recognizes an existing class relationship. And the third reason is because, like the human working class, other animals also resist being oppressed. This resistance, a logical consequence of other animals having agency, is convincingly documented by Hribal across history and contemporary capitalism [6].

Political economists have also revealed how both the sexual suppression of women and human slavery were modelled after animal domestication practices and can be seen as an extension of them. In this regard, the current relationship between gender violence, male chauvinism, and animal exploitation has been much developed by renowned ecofeminists since the seminal works by Carol Adams (1990) and Joan Dunayer (2001). Both writers emphasise the role of mediation (mostly through advertising and news) in perpetuating this relationship.

Also from a political economy perspective, Bob Torres (2007) describes how other animals have been caught up in the commodity circuit in contemporary capitalism. They have become commodities, property, and producers of more commodities: they are “superexploited living commodities” (2007: 58). The creatures trapped in the food industry circuit are not even independent organisms anymore. Technological innovations of the last century—particularly intensive confinement, more cost-efficient feeding and breeding practices, the use of antibiotics and hormones, and genetic engineering—have turned many exploited animals into biotechnology (Twine, 2010). This trend has already crossed the species line since many of the ideas the industry has for human *genetic enhancement* today have been previously marketed in regard to other animals by the biotechnology industry. This *enhancement* thus looks very much like a market expansion and includes severe risks to human autonomy, as Hribal reminds us (2012).

Specifically, the massive and cruel commoditization of animals in the modern food industry is the focus of studies that show how throughout the history of humanity creatures with sentience and agency have been reduced to labor-power, products, or machines for vested interests. Noske (1997) has called this the modern “animal industrial complex” (see also, for instance, Shukin, 2009; Imhoff, 2010; Pachirat, 2011). This complex is actually a massive contributor to all major categories of environmental impact: global warming, fresh water shortage, deforestation, grassland destruction, waste disposal, energy consumption, food productivity of farmland, communicable diseases, lifestyle diseases, biodiversity loss, and species extinction (see for instance FAO, 2006; UNEP, 2012; Worldwatch Institute, 2014). The environmental impact of the animal-industrial complex has actually become a major subject in environmental ethics (see for instance Kemmerer, 2015)

The modern food system focused on producing animal protein is also at the core of a central debate regarding the best use of available land. It is as much an ethical debate as one pertaining to economic and social justice. Animal agriculture causes profound inequalities in the distribution of global wealth given the loss of food sovereignty in regions which have invested their agricultural resources in producing food for livestock (which eventually ends up on the plates of the Western or westernized middle classes and elites). Producing food for livestock is a hugely inefficient use of resources (Kirby, 2011). Yet, according to the statistics provided by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, we currently feed around 30 billion animals in factory farm systems every day (FAOStat, 2016). This figure is shocking given that more than 800 million human beings do not currently have enough food to lead a healthy life. The rapid depletion of vital resources that this unsustainable food system produces is what makes many, including Nibert and Best, alert to future resource wars. The Syrian civil war that broke out in 2011 has actually been explained by some as a war born out of climate change impacts (Kelley et al, 2014).

Although agribusiness is a top contributor to structures of violence, the list of entanglements between human and animal oppression also includes, for instance, human health (Tilman & Clark, 2014). High-fat diets based on foods of animal origin are the cause of many lifestyle diseases suffered by the 1.3 billion people in the world that are currently overweight and obese according to the World Health Organisation (WHO). Also, a close relationship exists between animal abuse and all types of domestic violence according to experts (Ascione et al, 1999; Ascione, 2004; Cole & Stewart, 2014) [7].

For Hribal, these entanglements between human and animal oppression are also class issues. The social class where we positioned other animals is so low that we do not even want to recognise it is a class. Yet the class relationship has been expressed historically from African slave narratives to current experiences of refugees, when they state that they are treated worse or equal to “animals” (Hribal, 2012). Certainly, the concept of *class* helps us see the strong role that political and economic interests play in such entanglements. And importantly, the system is supported by state and economic institutions. As Nibert puts it, “the horrid treatment of other animals and devalued humans over the ages was conditioned by economic arrangements and validated by political and ideological systems that supported the oppression” (2002: 31).

This is what leads critical animal scholars like Best to assert that “human, animal and earth liberation movements are different components of one inseparable struggle” for total liberation. “The most promising and relevant politics for this century, I believe, will not focus solely on class struggle or fragmented identity politics pursued along single-issue lines concerning race, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth. It will be, rather, a politics of total liberation that grasps commonalities among various forms of oppression (...).” (Best, 2014: xii).

In line with this, from a liberal perspective, political philosophers such as Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka (2011) complement this claim by advocating universal basic rights for animals. They require a status of citizenship to protect them in the same way that this status protects humans from abuse.

In summary, other animals matter to PEC because the treatment they receive from humans is not only immoral but also deeply intertwined with capitalistic power relations of class and labour exploitation. The role played by the media in perpetuating and justifying this cannot be neglected, and nor can the role of powerful vested interests in the exploitation of other animals.

The politics of total liberation: Critical animal studies and the media

The PEC focus on hegemony and class power, resistance and the social totality has also been central to Critical Animal Studies (CAS) since the field was defined almost ten years ago (Nocella et al, 2007). More recently, CAS has been summarized by the coiners of the term as a “radical, interdisciplinary field dedicated to establishing a holistic total liberation movement for humans, nonhuman animals, and the Earth” (Nocella II et al, 2014: xxvi). Interestingly, however, CAS existed before the term was coined, as an umbrella for bringing together scholars who did critical research on human-animal relations. They were mostly ecofeminists; their writings are considered the catalyst for debate on critical animal studies (Taylor & Twine, 2014).

Recent volumes demonstrate that CAS is currently on the rise (e.g. Nibert, 2013; Taylor & Twine, 2014; Best, 2014). As Taylor and Twine stress, although CAS falls within the broader field of animal studies (AS), it seeks to differentiate itself by having a direct focus “on the circumstances and treatment of animals” and by linking “activism, academia and animal suffering and

maltreatment” (2014: 1-2). In fact, for the founders of the CAS concept, the inclusion of the term “critical” addressed perspectives typically ignored by the animal welfare and animal rights movements; namely, political economy, subjectivity, holistic understanding of the commonality of oppressions, activism, abolitionism (rather than reformism) and anti-capitalism (Best et al, 2007).

Critical animal studies argues for an engaged critical praxis, from the political economy perspective, and for political stances that dismantle structures of exploitation, domination, oppression and power. But CAS also provides a much needed deconstruction of the binary opposition between human and nonhuman animals. They advocate a holistic understanding of oppressions or intersectionalities, a concept that describes the ways in which oppressive institutions and systems are interconnected. As Nibert points out:

[t]he growing field of Critical Animal Studies (CAS) stands as the only area of study that promotes scholarly examination of the entangled oppression of humans and other animals; places this investigation in the context of historical and social structural forces; recognizes the role of capitalism in promoting systemic oppression of all types, and proposes strategies for purposeful action (Nibert, 2014: xi).

For this very reason, CAS research (as illustrated by the work conducted by, among others, Nibert, Best, Kemmerer, Hrival, Adams, Dunayer, and Twine) can provide the theoretical and empirical grounding that PEC needs to broaden understandings of social justice. The political economy of communication should be extended into the environmental and animal ethics fields. By this I mean studying the role of media and communication in reproducing structures that sustain and promote the oppression of other animals and nature. How do mediated discourses perpetuate anthropocentric-speciesist ideology? What links do media elites have with business elites in the exploitation of other animals and nature? What impact do communication technologies have on other animals and nature? How is labor in the communication and media sectors affected by speciesist ideology and how is this interconnected with other types of discrimination (like sexism and classism)? How can a non-speciesist, non-anthropocentric ethics of mediation be built? How can media and communication policies be redefined according to a non-speciesist, non-anthropocentric perspective?

Among the many topics that PEC can address, the role of interest groups is especially important. Lobby groups and think tanks no longer try to influence policy makers alone, but also public opinion and the media as well. Nowadays, almost all of the large economic sectors have lobbying structures and ‘front’ coalitions trying to shape mainstream ideologies. Historically, these have played a major role in institutionalising nonhuman animal exploitation (Nibert, 2013). Many profitable industries are either partially or fully based on the exploitation of other animals (agrifood, health, chemical, entertainment) or have a huge impact on animals and nature (energy, transportation, military). Interest groups work to influence society by directly lobbying stakeholders to influence decision-making, and by shaping and disseminating mainstream discourses. Decision-making at the media level can be strongly influenced when interest groups, for instance, work on behalf of companies that are advertisers or stockholders of media companies. Alternatively, media discourses can be strongly influenced by the dissemination of specific narratives that apparently provide the scientific evidence demanded by news journalists because of the complexity of many topics. This heavy reliance on scientific research has fostered huge corporate investment into the use of think tanks that serve as lobby platforms disguised as research institutes. To unveil the real

nature of them, a critical political economy approach of interest groups and their public relations strategies is needed.

Addressing environmental ethics and animal ethics from a PEC standpoint can be advanced by drawing upon cultural studies perspectives to consider not only the *who* and the *why*, but also *what* is said. Speciesist messages may reveal what Adams (1990) called the *absent referent*—the suffering and death of sentient beings other than humans hidden behind words. This is actually what Almiron, Cole and Freeman (2016) do with their edited volume *Critical Animal and Media Studies*. This collection represents the first anthology addressing the convergence of critical animal studies and critical media studies (including the political economy and cultural studies perspectives). On this basis, Almiron and Khazaal (2016) analyse the strong influence of interest groups (mainly lobbies and think tanks) in the manufacturing of consent for animal testing.

Naturally, the relevant work already done by cultural studies in the field of critical animal and media studies can also be a fruitful reference for PEC—from the pioneering analysis of other animal representations in art, film, and visual culture to the latest volumes adopting a more global perspective on the role of media and communication (for a summary, see Almiron, Cole and Freeman, 2016).

The next step is for PEC research to go beyond traditional Marxist anthropocentric views (Marx identified nonhuman animals as central actors in the accumulation process, yet still considered them as mere resources). The Marxian analysis of class and exploitation on which PEC is grounded is still absolutely necessary, but I suggest here the development of a neo-Marxian, non-speciesist, non-anthropocentric approach where human, nonhuman, and earth are equally respected and defended. This actually broadens the field from all points of view: politically, economically and socially. A non-speciesist, non-anthropocentric approach expands PEC's analysis by introducing a deeper understanding of the interests involved in the reproducing of hegemonic power and prevalent mainstream ideologies. To paraphrase Hribal (2012), nonhuman animals are a working class to which humans have been joined periodically throughout history (its membership extended to human slaves, women, children...). The unpaid labor of animals has provided the structural conditions for the rise of capitalism and is the driving force behind modern society's productivity. This has been supported by an ideology that justifies animal oppression by means of human supremacy. This has a huge impact on nonhuman animals, on humans and the earth. Embracing this approach allows PEC to cultivate moral consistency.

That said, in doing so, we must avoid being caught in the humanistic fallacy that states “we must first fix human problems to be able to address other issues”. This, as we have seen, is neither ethical nor appropriate. Addressing nonhuman animals and nature secondarily will weaken other social struggles. And, ultimately, it is the right thing to do. As Richard Ryder reminds us, “speciesism, like racism, ageism, sexism and classism, has no place in a modern morality” (2011: 36).

Conclusion: The need for true compassion, solidarity and egalitarianism

The theoretical framework of this article is based, as Nocella et al. put it, on “the seemingly simple, but profoundly radical, premise that nonhuman animals are subjects with agency, not objects to be used as humans see fit” (2014: xix). My reflection is grounded on the basic tenet that selective compassion, selective solidarity and selective egalitarianism are only forms of discrimination, not

true values. True humanitarianism should indiscriminately seek justice for all. This is ethically urgent when so many cruelty-free alternatives to the exploitation of other animals are at hand.

The political economy of communication can unveil the power relations, vested interests, ideologies and capitalist forces that influence communication practices. Such practices may prevent structural violence towards other animals and nature from being, at the very least, reduced. This article maintains that the PEC is not only prepared but morally obliged to do this and that the CAS framework may provide a sound inspiration.

PEC and CAS share an economic critique of capitalism, an interdisciplinary perspective, a claim to link theory to practice, and a skepticism of academic orthodoxy. CAS advances a controversial radical politics that may not be shared by all PEC scholars. Yet, it does stand against an anthropocentric status quo which produces unprecedented threats to life on earth, and reveals an holistic understanding of a larger global, interlocking, system of domination.

Generally speaking, as Taylor and Twine suggest, CAS can be liberatory for humans “just as feminism is (counter-intuitively for some) also liberatory for men and all of us living with gender” (2014: 5). More particularly, CAS, drawing from its ecofeminist roots, fully comports with the PEC’s critique of the social totality from a moral philosophical point of view. This can produce tangible research on the ethics of mediation, the role of mediation in regard to power relations, violence, the environment and social inequality.

The historical and current treatment of other animals by humans represents a grievous indictment of human values. Following the abolition of slavery, women’s emancipation and civil rights for all humans (at least on a moral and formal plane), the fight for the billions of nonhuman sentient beings we force to live in pain and misery is the next step forward in moral progress.

Endnotes

- [1] The author of this article would like to thank philosophers Eze Paez and Catia Faria for their help and support in clarifying the animal ethics references in this paper; to the reviewers for their insightful comments; and particularly to Peter Thompson for his incisive and inspiring notes.
- [2] By ethical thinking I refer here to decision-making after taking into consideration the benefits and harms each of our alternative courses of action may produce for the entities affected by them. Moral philosophers have advanced competing approaches about how to engage in ethical deliberation, such as: utilitarianism; rights-based theories; fairness, justice or common-good accounts; and virtue or care ethics. Yet almost everyone accepts that sentience, that is the capacity to experience suffering or pleasure, is a sufficient condition for being positively or negatively affected. Therefore, any sentient being deserves moral consideration (that is, to be taken into account) because of their interest in avoiding suffering. Of course, this does not mean that all interests are equal, since some are more important than others. It does mean, however, that we have strong reasons to respect these similar interests along with the potential suffering of sentient individuals.
- [3] Egalitarianism is an ethical theory which claims that the happiness present in a given situation ought to be distributed as equally as possible. Yet there are different types of egalitarians. For some, equality is good because inequality is bad in itself or because it’s unfair. For others, equality is good, and inequality

bad, because we should give priority to the interests of those who fare worst. This last type of egalitarianism is often called prioritarianism, as it prioritizes helping those who are worst off (Animal-Ethics, 2016).

- [4] Lori Marino refers to the much superior breadth and depth of perception that the echolocation sense provides to cetaceans when compared to humans.
- [5] The argument of species overlap—also, yet misleadingly, called, as Horta argues, “the argument from marginal cases”—points out that the criteria commonly used to deprive nonhuman animals of moral consideration fail to draw a line between human beings and other sentient animals (since there are also humans who fail to satisfy them) (Horta, 2014).
- [6] According to Hribal (2010), animals explicitly express resistance during capture, taming, domestication, manipulation, and confinement—the latter two even when born in captivity. Actually, taming, domestication, and confinement are only necessary due to animal resistance. Hribal particularly documents the resistance of other animals in confinement parks devoted to entertainment. For instance—though Orca attacks on fishermen in the wild are almost unknown—these cetaceans have attacked and killed their captors several times in so-called marine parks.
- [7] For a comprehensive bibliography of the link between animal abuse, domestic violence, child abuse and elder abuse see <http://animaltherapy.net/animal-abuse-human-violence/bibliography/>

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