



Book Review

Stacy Banwell (2023) *The War Against Nonhuman Animals: A Non-Speciesist Understanding of Gendered Reproductive Violence*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan

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The Anthropocene epitomises the apex of humanity's millenary effort to exert domination over the uncontrollable: Nature. As John McPhee illustrates in *The Control of Nature* (1990), however, such ascendancy, if it occurs at all, is ephemeral, for it fails to master natural events. Instead, it manifests as a crude exercise of power marked by practices of exploitation and destruction of the natural realm, which ultimately backfires on humanity itself.

Stacy Banwell's *The War Against Nonhuman Animals: A Non-Speciesist Understanding of Gendered Reproductive Violence* portrays human self-destructive arrogance towards nature. Violence and suffering pervade this volume, which depicts industrial profit-driven exploitation of nonhuman animals via reproductive violence. Banwell frames these abuses within the context of a 'species war' scenario: 'we are currently engaged in a war against nonhuman animals, this war involves industrialised slaughter as well as industrialised reproduction' (36). War, understood as a legal category and as a concept of domination, is the architrave of this book, which allows Banwell to highlight intricate connections between infrahuman wartime atrocities and capitalist-oriented industrialized reproductive violence against nonhuman animals.

Situated at the crossroads of multiple disciplines and within the horizon of ecofeminist theories, *The War Against Nonhuman Animals* is a testament to Banwell's distinguished contribution to feminist perspectives on international humanitarian law. Through a critical and intersectional lens, Banwell bridges the neoliberal practices of objectification and exploitation of nonhuman animal sexuality with broader patterns of victimisation rooted in speciesism, sexism, racism and human exceptionalism.

Divided into five chapters, the book develops its premise—we are at war against nonhuman animals—into a comprehensive analysis on the importance of conceptualising such pervasive violence in war terms. In a robust introductory chapter, Banwell reinterprets international humanitarian law (IHL) to advocate for nonhuman animal protections. She then contends that IHL applies under the condition that nonhuman animals are granted the status of passive legal personhood, grounded on the right not to suffer (Chapter 2). Without falling into 'dreaded comparisons' (113), Banwell's analysis then seeks to identify the



common nature, targets, and, ultimately, the source of oppressions informing gendered violence—rape, forced pregnancy, and sexual violence—constituting both intra-human war crimes and the routine violence that occurs within the dairy, egg, and milk animal-industrial complexes. Crude examples of such violence enrich the analysis (Chapter 3 and 4). Banwell then concludes by exposing the thanatopolitical violence that informs human exceptionalism, concluding that the war against nonhuman animals ultimately affects those who wage it: Humans (Chapter 5).

Banwell's multi-optical analysis offers routes for criminologists to explore several landscapes of often-invisible harms related to human violence against nonhuman animals within industrial chains. Here, I wish to emphasise what I believe is this book's main contribution: Reading the connections between carnisms, speciesism and the animal-industrial complex through the lenses of 'war' to highlight the destructive cycle of capitalist nature exploitation.

At first glance, the connection between war and capitalist exploitation of nonhuman animals may seem contentious. Although violence informs both, their underpinnings are different. The underlying logic of war-related violence is founded on the domination and destruction of the opponent. In contrast, industrial exploitation rests upon exploitative and extractive logics aimed at capital accumulation. In terms of theoretical frames, the doctrine of humanitarianism is based on the concept of legal personhood, while the legal category of private property underpins extractivism.

Taking *The War Against Nonhuman Animals* in its entirety, I believe that Banwell employs this apparently unrelated and contradictory connection precisely in order to dismantle the readers' preconceived certainties. By claiming 'the war against nonhuman is ironically then a war humans wage against themselves' (245), Banwell intelligently and creatively conveys the message that capitalist-driven exploitation of nonhuman animals drags humans into a downward spiral of self-destructive violence.

Such violence, arguably, erodes the capitalist-driven structure of the animal-industrial complex. One could here recall Nancy Fraser's (2014) reading of Karl Polanyi's concept of 'fictitious commodities'—basically, anything treated as a market commodity that is not or was not created for the market, such as land/nature, labour, and money. In Fraser's work, unrestrained commodification tends to cause market crises. This can be seen in *The War Against Nonhuman Animals* when Banwell demonstrates that the profit-oriented hyper exploitation of nonhuman animals leads to collateral harms—such as antibiotic resistance, zoonotic diseases, and environmental degradation—which, in turns, destabilises the animal-industrial exploitative system. By incorporating aspects of carnism and speciesism into her analysis, Banwell extends intersectional critiques to the fictitious commodification of both labour and nature to encompass nonhuman animals.

On a deeper level, although *The War Against Nonhuman Animals* describes the suffering of nonhuman animals, this is ultimately a book about processes of *human victimisation*. More specifically, Banwell exposes how those human labourers within mega-farms share with nonhuman animals the status of 'invisible victim' due to the all-consuming physical and psychological violence informing carnist 'battlefield' places (213-217).

Furthermore, Banwell appears to point towards a more profound level of victimisation—one that encompasses humanity as a whole. Premised upon human exceptionalism and capitalism, the animal-industrial complex is not simply a concept employed to highlight the extermination of living beings; it also encompasses the fabricating and destruction of entities that are never treated as alive to begin with—the 'deading life' (194). Such thanatopolitical commodification of nonhuman animals ruptures the sense of being human by reducing us (humans) to mere 'administrators of death' (194-195). This is the 'paradox of the biopolitical dream' (217-218) that Banwell exposes so lucidly: By normalizing the unspeakable suffering inflicted on nonhuman animals to satisfy mundane human needs, we descend into a feral state that contradicts the premises of superiority used to justify violence against nonhuman animals, and more broadly, against nature.

Ultimately, the breadth of these reflections prompts us to consider whether the biopolitical and thanatopolitical power underpinning the capitalist and speciesist violence against nonhuman animals reduces our lives in a mechanistic cycle of life-consumption-death. Do we live, or rather *exist*, just to perpetuate capitalism's rituals of death, which reduce us to mere consumers of dead bodies? Are we, ultimately, victims of our same violence?

The structural violence inherent in the animal-industrial complex is a specific yet pervasive facet of the overarching violence that informs relations between humans and nature. By giving a voice to nonhuman animals, *The War Against Nonhuman Animals* brings this violence within our homes and daily routines: for example, when we purchase eggs or milk at the supermarket, are we complicit in this violence? Regardless of one's personal stance, Banwell's book undoubtedly instils a sense of uneasiness in the reader. Banwell's contribution to critical criminological strands rests in her ability to cut through the veil of ignorance and indifference that fosters our societal epistemic violence towards nature. By addressing a specific facet of this

violence—that against nonhuman animals—Banwell conveys the message that control over nature is a chimera. The invocation of IHL thus seems to carry a symbolic rather than practical significance: it represents the hope for a post-humanist relational equilibrium between humanity and nature founded on moral limits to humans' inner propensity for annihilative dominance. At stake is the very essence of what it means to be human.

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