

# What is the Animal Class?

## Idea, Position, Goal

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The article sees politics as aimed at happiness, happiness as dependent on sentience, and animals, the bringers of sentience, as the baseline of politics. Since class, as a relationship of unequal power, destroys happiness, the animal class, having the least power, is also the baseline of class. Partly accepting animals' positioning as working-class or slaves, but rejecting their classification as super-exploited parts of nature, the article identifies the animal class as subaltern, in respect of powerlessness, epistemic injustice, moral and political invisibility, and colonization. As the lowliest, the animal class defines class itself, providing the strongest argument for its dissolution.

*Keywords:*  
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### IDEA

#### *Politics Is Aimed at Happiness*

This article considers political class and its inequalities, rather than categorization, although supposedly neutral categories can be invidious, with oppressed beings deemed “inferior” by various standards, especially in vertical lists. That being clarified, the sphere of politics, in which class exists, has happiness as its aim.

Let us ... state, in view of the fact that all knowledge and every pursuit aims at some good, what it is that we say political science aims at. Verbally ... both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and doing well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ .... (Aristotle, 350 BCE, I.4)

The phrase “aiming at happiness” is redundant, because to aim at something is to expect its achievement to bring happiness. As Aristotle (I.7) observes, “to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is still desired.” His account excludes animals—but it also excludes boys, and anyone who has not yet achieved a “complete” life. Happiness

has been said to be a virtuous activity of soul. ... and political science spends most of its pains on making the citizens ... good and capable of noble acts ... It is natural, then, that we call neither ox nor horse nor any other of

the animals happy; for none of them is capable of sharing in such activity. For this reason also a boy is not happy, for he is not yet capable of such acts. (Aristotle, 350 BCE, I.9)

However, the present article locates happiness in its origin: in the “life of perception” which “also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal” (Aristotle, 350 BCE, I.7) and is deemed their function by Aristotle, with the function of humans extending higher in the pyramid of needs. In the account offered here, happiness is available to all those who have perception, and thus can feel good or bad. The animal class, marking the point at which sentience enters the world, is a baseline of potential happiness or unhappiness, thus of politics and of political class.

In fact, lack or deficiency of sentience is sometimes given as an excuse for animal oppression (and for non-recognition of it as oppression), through the claim that they are less sensitive than humans: the most extreme example being Descartes, but found also in the notion that they suffer differently or are less “aversive.” When people argue this way, they unintentionally confirm the relevance of animals, as sentient beings, to politics in the logical sense, despite rejecting it empirically.

The fundamental importance of sentience is revealed by Horkheimer (1978), who, when tracing the human hierarchy from top to bottom, uses the conventional political terms “proletarian,” “capitalist,” “colonial,” and “exploitation,” but when he reaches the animal, can only speak of “the indescribable, unimaginable suf-

fering of the animals, the animal hell in human society” (p. 66).

The features of political class discussed below are recognizable in the human case. Given the goal of happiness, with sentience as its driver, the possession of these features by animals, later to be argued as a subaltern class, confirms the animal class as the foundation of class itself.

**It is a relationship.** Political class is a relationship, not an identity. Individuals can be born to working-class parents and hence working-class circumstances, but there is no “working-class” DNA: there is a working class because there is a capitalist class, and vice versa. Among sentient beings there is an animal class—as distinct from “animals”—because there is a human class (with its sub-classes)—as distinct from “humans”—that oppresses them. Animals are more diverse than humans, but while animal exploitation continues, that relationship overrides the difference, with the animal class comprising the totality of animals in relation to the totality of humans.

**It entails unequal power.** Stronger beings seek happiness at the expense of weaker ones, while the latter seek happiness through freedom from oppression by the former. Inequality lies here, since access to goods, including the means of producing them, is controlled by the powerful. In addition, the most harmful impositions of power include deprivation of power itself; that is, of autonomy. Animals are the least powerful group of sentient beings, since even dangerous predators can mostly be controlled by humans.

**It is a relationship of conflict.** The presence of unequal power entails conflict rather than consensus. Inequality is sometimes deemed acceptable because of different capacities, provided it possesses elements of fairness, but against this the question may be asked: imagining yourself alternately in the positions of the powerful and the powerless, where would you rather be?—as per Rawls’s “veil of ignorance.” Applying the question to the present context (although Rawls excludes animals from his scheme), would you want to be (re)born as an animal? Even in the human case, Rawls qualifies the image’s egalitarian implications with the “difference principle” whereby “Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, ... and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity” (quoted in Haslett, 1985, p. 111).

Here, as in the animal’s class-consciousness discussed later, the absence of rationalizing words removes

a barrier to reality. With the exception of most pets, who are kept for love rather than use, animals resist human domination until, in some cases, they are “broken” (and even pet horses are broken and oppressed in the belief that it is natural to them). Thus the animal illustrates the essentially conflictual nature of class.

**It encompasses both culture and matter.** For Thompson (2013), the “making of the working class is a fact of political and cultural, as much as of economic, history,” (p. 213) while Curran (2016), asserting the complementarity of Marx, Weber, and Bourdieu, argues that

the impact of inequalities in cultural capital on contemporary inequalities and domination is too important for class analysis to ignore ... and likewise inequalities in control of the means of production and corresponding recent re-distributions ... are also too important for class analysis to neglect .... (Curran, 2016, p. 70)

Animals’ identity, when free from human domination, contains both material and animal-cultural factors (see Masson & McCarthy, pp. 52, 200-202). And their powerlessness as a class comprises both (a) the material factors of their own harm and death plus the material goods and labor that humans get from them, and (b) their cultural transmission of threat, plus their victimization by humans’ myths and excuses, discussed later under “epistemic injustice.”

Having discussed the idea of class in general and the animal class in relation to it, the article will explore the differences and similarities between the animal class and recognized human political classes.

### **POSITION: WHAT CLASS DO ANIMALS BELONG TO?**

The main claims regarding the animal class to be addressed are: identification of it with the two most prevalent oppressed human classes; the association of animals with “nature”; and the animal as subaltern.

#### *The Working Class or the Slave Class as Possibilities*

The working class are “a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital” (Marx & Engels, 1969 [1848], p. 18). The animal class comprises those who are allowed to live, if at all, only as long as they are useful to human beings.

Jason Hribal (2003), arguing that animals are part of the working class, describes the actual work done by particular species as well as their enforced, passive role in production, whereby, for example, in “New England’s first ever large-scale production site for sheep and cattle ... they labored to get fat, to be taken to a central location, and to be slaughtered” (p. 438).

He shows how non-Marxist socialists linked the oppression of humans with that of animals and gave this view a political presence in the form of Pythagoreanism, the name derived from the 6th-century BC vegetarian Greek philosopher Pythagoras. Pythagoreans “directly challenged the increasing exploitation of their ‘fellow-creatures,’ and thus opposed the nascent capitalist system—a system that depended upon the increasing exploitation of these same fellow creatures” (Hribal, 2003, p. 451). Links between human and animal oppression abound in this era; for example:

the early abolitionist Benjamin Lay ... saw no difference between the slavery of humans or that of other animals. Hence not only did he refuse to eat his fellow-creatures or wear clothing procured at the expense of another, Lay would not burden any horse—traveling only by foot and sowing his own food. (Hribal, 2003, p. 451)

The 19th-century anarchist Joseph Proudhon saw how, under capitalism,

the exploitation of humans and other animals were interconnected. “Thus,” the Frenchman realized, “the horse, who draws our coaches, and the ox who draws our carts produce with us, but are not associated with us; we take their product, but do not share it with them.” (Hribal, 2003, p. 450)

Christian Stache, whose aim is “to develop a sustainable theoretical basis for a socialist–animalist class struggle” (Stache, 2019, p. 2), argues against the definition of animals as wage laborers or slaves. Contesting Hribal’s advocacy of the former classification, he writes that it would mean:

giving up the very content of what wage labour means in capitalism ... being politically free (not subjected to direct political domination) and economically free (not owning means of production and selling one’s own labour power as a commodity)... animals ... are unable to organise collectively to consciously resist and

overthrow the capitalist mode of production. Thus ... animals are not part of the working class. (Stache, 2019, p. 10)

They are not slaves because, while the form of human exploitation has progressed from slavery to wage labor, “animals ... cannot be integrated as wage labourers into the capitalist social relations even if class struggle would be expanded to non-humans” (Stache, 2019, p. 11).

However, even though human wage workers have political freedom, while working animals lack it, *during the time that they are working*, given the humans’ lack of industrial freedom, humans and animals have the condition of oppressed workers in common. Even though human slaves can individually or collectively become free by their own efforts, while animals cannot, *during the time that the human being is a slave*, the human and the animal have the condition of slavery in common. But not being applicable over time, these conditions cannot define the status of animals.

### *Animals as a Super-exploited Part of Nature*

Stache’s solution is:

As Marx presents them in *Capital*, animals enter a relationship with capital as a part of nature—in the strict socio-economic sense of the term—although animals differ from the rest of organic and inorganic nature. This concerns their capacity to suffer, their interest in life and so on. Thus, the relation between capitalists and animals—the capital–animal relation—is a part of the relation of the capitalist class to nature. Economically, it is a relation of super-exploitation compared with the exploitation of human wage labourers and even to human slaves. Their exploitation of animals ... has no limits. (Stache, 2019, p. 12)

But there are reasons to reject this view of the animal class.

**“A part of nature” conflicts with “a relation of super-exploitation.”** Consider two standpoints: that of the pro-animal socialist, and that of the speciesist such as Marx or the average member of society.

For the socialist as animal advocate, if animals as a political class are a part of nature, it would have to be on equal terms with humans, who are also part of nature, otherwise the person’s stance toward animals would be simply that of “unequal and exploitable but sentient and so entitled to some kindness.” But for the same animal

advocate as socialist, it would be unthinkable to define the human working class as “a part of nature” by contrast with the human capitalist, managerial, or professional class. Being “a part of nature,” offered as alternative to worker or slave status, would imply, not equality, but some intermediate status between human and insensate nature.

However, the pro-animal socialist can fully endorse the view of animals as super-exploited. So for him/her, the verdict is “part of nature,” no; “super-exploited,” yes.

Then, consider the speciesist view of animals as part of nature; for example: “All those things which labour merely separates from immediate connexion with their environment, are subjects of labour spontaneously provided by Nature. Such are fish which we catch and take from their element, water, timber” (Marx, 1887, p. 127); or “Take ... the fattening of cattle, where the animal is the raw material, and at the same time an instrument for the production of manure” (p. 129).

Apart from economics, Marx (1887) is at pains to establish the ontological superiority of humans; the architect and the bee (p. 127) will be promptly adduced by the typical socialist confronted with an animal-rights argument. This superiority outweighs Marx’s acknowledgment of a degree of animal consciousness (“...the horse has a head of his own”: p. 263) and sentience, in that the notion of cruelty is admitted: the slave laborer “takes care to let both beast and implement feel that he is none of them, but is a man. He convinces himself ... that he is a different being, by treating the one unmercifully and damaging the other *con amore*” (p. 140, n. 17).

Thus the speciesist socialist can fully endorse the view of animals as “a part of nature” inferior to humans. But can he/she, as a socialist, accept that animals are in “a relation of super-exploitation”? As a political term, “exploitation” is a negative moral judgment which speciesists do not pass on animal usage itself, as long as that usage is devoid of (a narrowly and self-interestedly defined) cruelty. The speciesist, always on guard against equalization of humans and animals, would consider it insulting to human workers to refer to animals as “exploited”.

So, for the speciesist socialist, the verdict is “part of nature,” yes; “super-exploited,” no.

Altogether, the combination of “part of nature” and “super-exploitation” is an uneasy one which does not serve the project of “a sustainable theoretical basis for a socialist–animalist class struggle.” In addition, some features of the modern, environmentalist concept of “na-

ture” give reason to reject any lumping-together of animals with it.

**It undermines the significance of sentience.** Although Stache (2019) acknowledges that “animals differ from the rest of organic and inorganic nature” by virtue of “their capacity to suffer, their interest in life and so on” (p. 12), in the context of animals-as-parts-of-nature sentience could be seen as just another descriptive feature, like feathers or gills, rather than as a key moral determinant. To do the animals justice, it is necessary to distinguish between “nature” as the whole non-human world, and nature’s feeling components. A focus on sentience, rather than on “nature,” takes animals out of the field that includes mountains, trees, and rivers, and brings them into a moral bubble along with humans, where their rights can be asserted.

**It enables the guilt-free killing of animals.** The lack of a focus on sentience enables people to regard themselves as “nature-lovers” while killing or supporting the killing of animals. People may see shooting or fishing as “getting close to nature”; if done for food, as a “natural” means of survival. When animal supporters condemn hunting “for fun” or “for sport,” they imply (perhaps unintentionally) that if it were done for food it would be acceptable.

On a superficially ethical and hence more dangerous level, people endorse the killing of animals to protect other animals or other elements of the environment. Animals may be “culled” to preserve species numbers of animals who are going to be killed anyway for sport: this is the most politically vulnerable context. When they are killed to protect farmed animals, who are going to be killed anyway for food, it is accepted within a meat-eating culture, although here protesters may offer the evasive argument that “it doesn’t work” (see the Badger Trust, 2020 on the cull carried out to protect cattle from bovine TB). But when animals are killed because they are an “invasive species,” and thus allegedly harmful to the environment, it is positively supported—as when, in response to a trophy-hunting scandal, Scottish Natural Heritage “said the culling of wild goats was legal on private land. The animals are classed as an invasive, non-native species in the UK” (Green, C., 2018).

Similarly, the Scottish Government agency Forestry and Land Scotland (2020) defends the killing of deer, writing: “Deer are an important and treasured part of Scotland’s biodiversity. ... However, high deer impacts can be detrimental to ... woodland regeneration, ground layer species and to fragile ecosystems.” Here, even the limited appreciation of deer is based on “biodiversity,” a

human concern, rather than on their status as individual living beings. The agency doesn't actually use the word "kill" in its apology; rather, the deer are "managed," although the title of a subsection—"Our policy on using lead-free ammunition"—gives a clue.

The reality of meat-eating may be obscured beneath the image of the "food web," with its quasi-religious implication of intelligent design; or even more poetically, the image of the "circle of life."

Against the value of sentience, which can only operate in one being at a time, environmentalism is collectivist, as in Leopold's definition of the land ethic: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (Leopold, 1949, pp. 224–225). Luna Leopold has denied this collectivism, saying:

Rather than interpreting the concept of the land ethic as an indication of disregard for the individual in favor of the species or the ecosystem, ... I see the concept of the land ethic as the outgrowth and extension of his deep personal concern for the individual.

Accepting the idea that the cooperations and competitions in human society are eased and facilitated by concern for others, he saw that the same consideration extended to other parts of the ecosystem would tend to add integrity, beauty and stability to the whole. (quoted in Kobylecky, 2015)

But in practice, environmentalism enables individual animals to be killed not only for the above-mentioned purposes, but even for their own—decidedly collective—good, lest overpopulation of their territory lead to starvation.

Like other forms of environmentalist killing, this is not only collectivist, but speciesist as well, since similar reasoning applied to humans would be controversial and has not so far been put into practice beyond China's compulsory limits on family size—although, in the sphere of theory, some environmentalists condemn individual humans for reproducing at all.

Class theory itself may be seen as collectivist, and totalitarian governments have used the principle of class loyalty to suppress the individual rights of members of the class it claims to support. But for libertarian or democratic socialists, the aim is a classless society; here the analysis of class promotes its own dissolution, thus supporting individual animal and human rights.

**It serves the political overvaluation of the environment.** As of 2022, "the environment," and particularly, "fighting climate change," are sacred causes to which all politicians at least pay lip service, while animal-rights campaigners remain "orphans of the left" (Kymlicka, 2019), seen at best as peripheral, at worst as misanthropes or terrorists (see Shalev, 2007). Indeed, human as well as animal class issues are shoved aside in favour of the environment.

This overvaluation, besides neglecting animal rights, reflects a speciesist ethos. For when people speak of protecting "the environment," "the ecosphere," "nature," etc., what they mean is humans' interests in it and what humans consider its best condition; Gaia isn't a conscious entity with interests of its own, but a human myth. Whether people define nature as "the whole non-human world" or as "the whole world including humans" or pantheistically, as Spinoza's "God *or* nature," the definitions, like the decisions surrounding it, are those of humans.

To be sure, the claims of animal-rights campaigners are also, unavoidably, advanced by humans—mirroring the dilemma of Western postcolonial intellectuals speaking for Eastern people, as mentioned later. This dilemma faces anyone claiming to speak for any subaltern group, for by definition if the latter could speak for themselves, they would not be subaltern. The key question is: whose interests do the definitions, decisions, and claims serve?

The dominance of environmentalism has even led many discouraged animal-rights campaigners to abandon animal-related arguments in favour of supposedly unanswerable claims that animal agriculture causes climate change. The reason these claims are, in fact, answerable is not that they are untrue, but that speciesists are quick to answer them by pointing to alternative, animal-abusive solutions to the problems named.

For instance, an article on new forms of agriculture states: "A new breed of farmers are redefining the rules of agriculture as they join the fight against climate change. Just don't tell them we all have to go vegan" (Allan, 2019).

Throughout the article, climate change is virtually the only consideration. Animal well-being is mentioned once, when extolling "mob grazing" ... "Ah they love it," the farmer says. But the purposes of the system are "to mitigate ... climate change," and to prevent overgrazing. The author contests the eat-less-meat argument (itself presented solely in terms of fighting climate change), saying: "many farmers see grass-fed ruminants ... not as the problem but part of the answer to climate

change” by helping to “restore degraded soils and create carbon sinks” (Allan, 2019).

### *Animals as Subaltern*

The line between the subaltern and the merely subordinate or oppressed is blurred, an example of which is found in Gramsci (2021 [1934]), who ascribes more power and voice to his subjects than can be ascribed to animals, or is ascribed to human subaltern groups by Spivak, or to merely subordinate groups by Fricker. He refers to:

(2) their active or passive adherence to the dominant political formations in order to impose their own demands ...; (4) the formations created by the subaltern groups themselves to press claims of a limited and partial kind; (5) the new formations that assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework.... (Gramsci, 2021 [1934], p. 10)

Against this blurring, animals, as the lowest of the low, can serve as a benchmark of the subaltern. They do so by virtue of powerlessness, moral invisibility, absence from politics, epistemic injustice, and colonization. And the human subaltern class comprises those humans whose conditions in these respects most closely approach those of animals. Indeed, the status of any human class can be gauged by the extent to which its members are “treated like animals.”

**Powerlessness.** As Scully (2020) reminds us, “Animals are without appeal against our every decree and whim. We all bear responsibility not to abuse or tyrannize them.” Individual animals may sometimes escape from humans or even attack them, but in most cases they are defeated. It is through powerlessness, rather than non-productiveness, that, in Gramsci’s concept, as outlined by Liguori (2015), “The concept of the ‘subaltern,’... applies to the relations of force and power beyond the terrain of socio-economic relations” (p. 118).

Those identified as subaltern by Spivak (1988), including “the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat” (p. 78), are actually working and are thus involved in socio-economic relations—many of the urban group, if unemployed, doing casual or “precarious” work; but their powerlessness causes these relations to bring them only low incomes, bad treatment, and social contempt.

This is true also of the subaltern group known as the “lumpenproletariat”: that is, “a diffuse collection of

pickpockets and pimps” dismissed by Marx as the “scum, offal and refuse of all classes” (quoted by Haider & Mohandesi, 2011); and of Marx’s more sympathetically described “proletariat created by the breaking up of the bands of feudal retainers and by the forcible expropriation of the people from the soil,” who “could not possibly be absorbed by the nascent manufactures” and who, “suddenly dragged from their wonted mode of life, could not as suddenly adapt themselves to the discipline of their new condition” (Marx, 1887 [1867], p. 522).

The powerlessness of these human groups is seen most clearly in the ferocity of the laws passed to punish them for their exclusion from the “terrain of socio-economic relations,” laws whose spirit persists in today’s “welfare” regimes.

**Moral invisibility.** Marx’s tone when describing the lumpenproletariat in the *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire* is that of respectable morality: he rails against the “decayed roués ... vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni,<sup>[105]</sup> pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaux* [pimps], brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars” who “felt the need of benefiting themselves at the expense of the laboring nation” (Marx, 1937 [1882]), p. 38) and collaborated with Bonaparte to do so.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, we again encounter the “dangerous class’, [lumpenproletariat] the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society”, who “may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution” but whose “conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue” (Marx & Engels, 1969 [1848]), p. 20).

In *Capital*, by contrast, the tone used in describing the underclass is still moral, but is directed not at the dispossessed, landless proletariat who were “turned en masse into beggars, robbers, vagabonds, ... in most cases from stress of circumstances,” but at those who, having caused their situation, “treated them as ‘voluntary’ criminals, and assumed that it depended on their own good will to go on working under the old conditions that no longer existed” (Marx, 1887 [1867], p. 522).

But whereas, in the cases of both the historical lumpen and the modern underclass, there is moral denunciation either of them or of the capitalists responsible for their situation, animals are seen simply as things to be used, devoid of any moral context or judgment either way. A thing—like “property,” which Francione (1995) identified as the human-assigned status of ani-

mals—is beneath approval or condemnation, and so represents the final subalternity that characterizes animals in a human-controlled world.

As this ultimate subaltern, animals are morally invisible, although their subalternity in this respect is slightly relieved by the famous “cognitive dissonance” whereby, for example, meat-eaters proclaim their love of animals and denounce some forms of cruelty.

**Absence from politics.** This feature of animals’ subalternity is barely mitigated by past and present animal-rights movements and the growth of veganism in the 21st century, movements which are, respectively, denounced as anti-human or dismissed as “lifestyle choices.” Major political parties will include a nod toward animal welfare at the end of their manifestos, but even the more radical manifestos, such as that of the UK Green Party, are never matched by spoken arguments for animals during political campaigns. News broadcasts only mention animals, if at all, at the end, for example when reporting on endangered or newly discovered species. A few animal-rights and animal welfare parties exist, occasionally winning a minor political office, but related developments—like the exclusion of animal agriculture from the 2021 COP26 agenda (see: Compassion in World Farming, 2021), and, by contrast, the election of a vegan as mayor of New York City (Starostinetskaya, 2021)—are mainly reported on websites and social media pages read by the converted.

**Epistemic injustice.** Applying Miranda Fricker’s (2007) concept, the subaltern classes suffer through lack of access to the language of the powerful, and through the latter’s use of that language to deny the subalterns’ rights and justify their ill-treatment. Animals, correspondingly, are subaltern through lack of access to human language and through humans’ use of that language to deny them moral status and justify cruelty.

In the human case, lack of ruling-class language, and consequent subalternity, are not true of the employed, trade-unionized “working class,” who clearly have a voice and are articulate, but they are true of the present-day “underclass,” who are represented only by largely ineffective pressure groups and demonized by the media and state agencies.

The idea is foreshadowed in Marx’s observation that “the ruling ideas of any age are those of the ruling class,” who exert “control over the means of intellectual production” (quoted in Jessop, 2014, pp. 5-6). In the human context, workers steeped from childhood in those ideas become the world’s Alf Garnetts and ragged-trousered philanthropists. For animals, the ideas are

those of the ruling human species, and the means of intellectual production are human speech and writing.

Epistemic injustice, as outlined by Fricker, consists of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. The first “occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word,” for example due to racial prejudice, while the second “occurs ... when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (Fricker, 2007, p. 1), due to the absence of relevant social and political concepts.

Clearly, concern with words or other means of communication is of more than merely cultural importance. Epistemic injustice is a tool employed by the powerful “to maintain the consent of the subaltern social groups and to keep them under control” (Gramsci, 2021 [1934], p. 10), and then handed back as a gift to the powerful and privileged themselves, in the form of conscience-clearing rationalizations.

Such communicative wrongs are an important feature of subalternity. Spivak (1988) argues that, while the “working class” are merely “oppressed,” and thus “according to Foucault and Deleuze ... *can speak and know their conditions*” (Spivak, 1988, p. 78, emphasis in original), those in the “subaltern” category are oppressed but are also “subaltern” in that—as Spivak concludes—they “cannot speak” (p. 104).

In order to bring animals into the field, Podosky (2018) distinguishes between “self-oriented” and “other-oriented” hermeneutical injustice (pp. 218–219), noting that Fricker’s concept is limited to the former kind whereby “‘the subject is rendered unable to make communicatively intelligible something which is particularly in his or her interest to be able to render intelligible’ (p. 162)” (Fricker, 2007, quoted in Podosky, 2018, p. 218).

Thus, such injustice toward the subaltern animal may be clarified by considering, first, the role of the animal (corresponding to “self-oriented”), and then the role of the human (corresponding to “other-oriented”) in the process of actual or attempted communication.

**The animal’s role in epistemic injustice.** Can animals speak, and can they form the concepts that (from a human standpoint) they speak about? In fact, “animal studies have demonstrated that agency in human-animal interactions proves complex and irrepressible” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 416). As Skabelund (2019) suggests, “The bark, as well as the neigh, bray, roar, and even the meow of other creatures deserve to be heard and included in the histories we humans tell.” In a popular example, “To just about every audience she speaks to, Dr.

Goodall gives a greeting in ‘chimpanzee’” (Jane Goodall Institute USA, 2009). Altogether,

scholars who do animal studies ... have established that ... the range of human interactions with and beliefs about animals have provided alternatives to the dominant, modern, western default position of an assumed superiority over nonhuman creatures ... Rather, nonhuman animals can be credibly described as having intellectual and even (in some cases) cultural lives comparable to ours. (Chaplin, 2017, p. 513)

As for concepts, do the animals suffer from “a gap in collective interpretive resources” that put them “at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences”? Some concepts relevant to human oppression of animals are “pain,” “cruelty,” and “wrong.”

All concepts are words that emerge from experience and depend on it for their meaning, and all experiences embody their corresponding concepts. To take the most concrete one, “pain,” the word “pain” exists because the experience of pain exists: the reverse—that pain exists because the word “pain” exists—isn’t the case. The animals’ expression of pain is their embodiment of the concept.

As for “cruelty,” in suffering pain, the animals are aware that what they are experiencing suffering is bad, and that humans are inflicting it on them. Their lack of the word “cruelty” is not the same as lack of its embodied concept.

The word “wrong” seems highly abstract, and is, in the sense that humans can differ in their metaethical choices of the type of acts that merit the title. But the animals’ metaethics are implicit in their cries of pain and attempts to escape, reflecting the crying or struggling animal’s non-verbal sense that “What is happening *should not* be happening.”

This is the case also with the lack of class-consciousness that may be invoked to deny animals’ right to a place in politics. Thompson (2013) defines human class-consciousness in two parts: “the consciousness of an identity of interests as between all these diverse groups of working people and as against the interests of other classes,” and “the growth of ... political and industrial organization” (p. 212). As powerless subalterns, animals cannot meet the second criterion; but they do meet the first, in that, without knowing the relevant words, animals know who their enemies are: namely, the various classes of human and non-human preda-

tors. This knowledge is culturally transmitted; elephants “learn from their elders which humans to fear based on the history of the herd with humans” (Masson & McCarthy, 1996, p. 52).

In short, animals suffer testimonial and hermeneutic injustice not through their own lack of epistemic capacity, but through humans’ self-interested dismissal of that capacity.

*The human’s role in epistemic injustice.* Gramsci’s observation that “subaltern groups ... face a harder struggle to liberate themselves from imposed ... principles” (2021 [1934], p. 59) is true of human subalterns in relation to their own interests and class-consciousness, but subaltern animals, who only know the non-verbal truths of danger from predators, fear, effort to survive, and suffering, cannot have been influenced by such principles; rather, they must rely on a minority of humans’ liberation from speciesist principles.

For it is on the other-oriented side that the humans, more than the animals, become entangled in epistemic complexities in their relationship with their victims.

On the most practical level, human modes of communication have provided the technology and organizational capacity needed to control animals.

On the theoretical level, language supports two claims that are held to justify animal oppression. One is that animals are “inferior” and “less important” because of being less intelligent in the human way, and that therefore humans are entitled to hurt and kill them for human purposes. This does not constitute a theory: the words “inferior” and “less important” do not assert anything definable; they are quasi-magical terms embedded in human social psychology, but they work as an argument when animal usage is threatened.

Even the evidence of animals’ ability to speak, valuable though it may be both scientifically and (through satisfying our—cognitively dissonant—affection for animals) emotionally, does not convince speciesists, because it can be used to present animals as only partly successful imitators of humans rather than as moral claimants in their own right. As Preece (2005) comments, in the Great Ape Project the apes “are accorded preferential consideration” even by their supporters “precisely because they are so like humans!” (p. 309).

The other claim is that the animals’ low cognition indicates their lower sensitivity, so that (as noted earlier), while they are no longer dismissed as unfeeling machines, they are deemed less aversive than humans would be in response to the same treatment, and their



testimony is accordingly rejected. Another tool for rejecting evidence of animal suffering is our old friend anthropomorphism, since “many scientists regard even the notion that animals feel pain as the grossest anthropomorphic error” (Masson & McCarthy, 1996, pp. 43–44). Of course, some animals suffer silently, and here injustice may lie in human unwillingness to infer suffering from circumstances that would cause it in humans.

Animals also suffer testimonial injustice when their case, derived from their message of pain, is simply not mentioned. Spivak’s (1988) article on the subaltern recognizes, in its postcolonial context, the “epistemic violence of imperialism” (p. 84). But only once does the word “animal” appear in the article (with reference to Freud’s theory of repression as perhaps partly stemming from “a preoriginary space where human and animal were not yet differentiated”: p. 92). The animals’ almost total absence from this discussion of the subaltern is the most relevant argument for their inclusion.

Moving to the more consciously moral level, humans have mainly altruistic concepts of right and wrong, and resist threats to their belief in their own compliance with these concepts. For this purpose, they have been able to develop all the excuses for animal abuse over history: ranging, with changes in the modes of production, from the apologetic myths of early hunter-gatherers, through the dominionist religious excuses of agricultural societies, to the rationalist, cognition-based excuses of the modern world.

On the political level, the dominant, speciesist majority of humans can neutralize the arguments of animal-rights campaigners with accusations of misanthropy or extremism, as noted above with particular reference to environmentalism, plus the vague but powerful concept of what is “normal.” And because the more absolute is the power of an oppressing class, the more invisible and taken-for-granted is its ideology, speciesism itself as a power-supporting ideology has been invisible until very recently, and is still omitted from any political list of discriminatory isms, outside of explicitly animal-rights discourse.

**Reasons for hope.** Humans have begun to recognize language distortion as a political weapon. The twentieth-century language turn showed how phenomena treated as material or immutable can actually be constructions of language. Orwell made “Newspeak” a household word, and Carol Adams (1990), whom Podolsky (2018, pp. 223–224) cites, applied similar insights to the animal realm, with the concept of the “absent referent.” The effect of categorizing slaughtered animals as

“meat” (ibid.) is now frequently noted by animal advocates.

Epistemic injustice provides a platform for all equality campaigners to stand on: what’s needed is to bring the animals onto the platform to stand alongside humans and press their unanswerable argument of suffering.

**Colonization.** The link to postcolonialism, which is a recognized theme within political theory, can strengthen the case for admission of animal rights to the political agenda.

The role of land in the colonization of animals or humans exceeds physical occupancy of it, since land (including the sea and its floor) is the source of all raw materials used in production. For this reason, it can be seen as the basis of both the larger class system, and colonialism as a subdivision involving movement of oppressors from one country to another.

On the material level, animals are directly colonized, although, being “endowed with voluntary motion, the animal resists the imperialist desire to represent the natural—and especially the colonial terrain—as a passive object or a blank slate ready for mapping by Western experts (Birke, 1994)” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 415). However, their opportunity for resistance depends on the way humans use this supposed terra nullius. “Wild” animals who are hunted or “culled” by invading humans can hide or run away, but animals “domesticated” out of their species’ original environment and imprisoned on farms (intensive or not) by humans have no such recourse.

There are more indirect commonalities between colonization of animals and of humans. “A common antagonist” of postcolonialism and supportive animal studies

can be recognized immediately in the continued supremacy of that notion of the human that centers upon a rational individual self or ego. This humanist self was fundamental to the practice of European Enlightenment colonialism as a “civilizing” mission, involving the pacification (and passivication) of both savage cultures and savage nature (Fiddes, 1991). It is no accident that postcolonial critics and animal advocates share an antipathy to Descartes.... (Armstrong, 2002, p. 414)

Moreover, “Evolutionary theory, which helped redefine the human in relation to the animal,” led to social Darwinism when “reconceived as a theory of racial and

cultural progress by Galton,” thus giving “ideological force to a whole new century of imperialist activity, from European and American eugenics to apartheid in South Africa and assimilationist state policies in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (Sahlins, 1976)” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 414).

One can add to these commonalities the historical difficulty of colonialism being addressed by members of the colonizing group (in the human case by Western intellectuals, as explored at length by Spivak (1988), and in the animal case by humans).

When the term “colonialism,” or in the case of animals “species colonialism,” is applied to oppression within one country, it may be used (1) symbolically to evoke the brutality of international oppression, while its literal referent is simply capitalist oppression of animals or humans; (2) historically/intellectually with reference to the postcolonial movement; or (3) materially to refer to the expropriation of land. The land referred to might be taken (a) from free animals to occupy it for human use and to enslave them, as described above, or (b) from rural humans to enslave them either on the land, as serfs, or away from it, as industrial workers.

So, the term “species colonialism” is applicable in the senses of (1), (2) and (3)(a), as a subdivision of the larger human-animal class relationship. Nevertheless,

post-colonialists have concentrated upon “other” humans, cultures, and territories but seldom upon animals.

One reason might be the suspicion that pursuing an interest in the postcolonial animal risks trivializing the suffering of human beings under colonialism. ... Spiegel’s [1996] opening paragraph acknowledges, “... in our society, comparison to an animal has become a slur.” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 413)

This rejection of the human-animal comparison—familiar as a reaction to the “marginal cases” argument—confirms the subaltern status of animals inasmuch as even the most appalling animal suffering must, to preserve human honour, as it were, be assigned a lower level of importance than equivalent human suffering.

### GOAL: A CLASSLESS SOCIETY

Even “Utopias’ and so-called ‘philosophical novels,’” not just active campaigns, are an “unwitting reflection of the most basic and most profound aspirations of subaltern social groups ... albeit through the minds of

intellectuals governed by different concerns” (Gramsci, 2021 [1934], p. 12).

Such aspirations were expressed in 1833, before Marx’s *Capital*, when syndicalist trade unionists used their voice to argue that the trade unions would “ultimately abolish wages, become their own masters, and work for each other; labour and capital will ... be indissolubly joined together in the hands of the workmen and work-women” (quoted in Thompson (2013), p. 912).

The classless society sought by Marx meant a revolution that “abolishes the rule of all classes with the classes themselves, because it is carried through by the class which no longer counts as a class in society, is not recognised as a class, and is in itself the expression of the dissolution of all classes, nationalities, etc. within present society” (Marx & Engels, 1968 [1845–1846], p. 42).

But Marx’s utopia, if realized, would not be a classless society, as animals would remain fixed in the relationship of domination by humans. This was made clear in his vision of the human under communism, who, freed from division of labor, would be able to “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic” (Marx & Engels, 1968 [1845–1846], p. 12).

Since class, as a relationship of unequal power, obstructs happiness—in principle through the possibility, and in practice through the reality, of the powerful serving their own interests at the expense of the powerless—optimal happiness depends on the disappearance of class. And since all sentient beings are, by definition, capable of happiness or unhappiness, that goal must include the end of the oppressed and subaltern animal class.

The goal of animal rights has been thoroughly promoted from various perspectives, but animal exploitation and abuse continue apace, with animal-rights campaigners still forming a defensive minority. It is essential to bring nonhuman animals into the political arena where action is taken to optimize happiness, and this goal might be furthered by establishing their class as not merely similar to, but foundational of, all class.

### CONCLUSION

This article, examining political class in relation to animals, argues that class, as a relationship of unequal power, minimizes the happiness which is the aim of politics by destroying the happiness of some beings to promote that of others. With sentience the prerequisite of happiness or unhappiness, animals, whose emergence

brings sentience into the world, provide the baseline of happiness or unhappiness, and the animal class, whose members in relation to humans have less power than the members of any subordinate human class, provides the baseline of class.

Besides unequal power, the animal class, through its wordless resistance, embodies the conflict inherent in class, and through its cultural transmission of threat, showing a class-conscious awareness of humans as the enemy, embodies the cultural as well as material nature of class.

To promote the political recognition of animals, the article has examined various accounts of their class status. They have been considered as members of the working class, as slaves, as parts of nature (within the Marxist view), and above all as members of the subaltern class. Of these views, most of which have something to contribute to the total picture, only the linkage of animals with “nature” is rejected as damaging their interests. It does so by obscuring the sentience that differentiates animals morally from the rest of the human and non-human world, supporting environmentalist motives for killing them, romanticizing human or animal predation, and allowing the cause of “the environment” to further obscure the cause of animal rights. Moreover, the view of animals as super-exploited parts of nature is contradictory because the term “exploitation” places animals within the realm of human politics, while the term “nature” places them outside it.

It is concluded that the animal class, as the lowest of the low, constitutes a branch of the subaltern class, denied voice partly through the dominance of human language and ideas, partly through humans’ refusal to respond to the animals’ own vocal and active protest, and partly through political dismissal of their representation by human supporters. While the subaltern animal class may be compared to the subaltern human “underclass” or “lumpenproletariat,” the animals are even lower through being subject not even to disapproval, but to categorization as things outside any moral or political context.

The article relates resistance to such exclusion to the postcolonial intellectual movement, whose members have endorsed the concept of subalternity. Besides this association, animals have been colonized through human appropriation of all territory.

In all these ways, the animal class, grounded in sentience, is the foundation and model of class itself, and the embodied case for its abolition.

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