

Against Animal Rights?

A Comment on *Contro i diritti degli animali?* Proposta per un antispecismo postumanista (Against Animal Right? A Proposal to a Post-human Antispeciesism), by Roberto Marchesini

Alberto Giovanni Biuso

Associate Professor of Theoretical Philosophy, University of Catania

doi: 10.7358/rela-2016-002-biuso

agbiuso@unicit.it

For Horkheimer, the “indescribable, unimaginable suffering of the animals, the animal hell in human society, [...] the sweat, blood, despair of the animals” (1978, 66-7) are the grounds of capitalism. However, it is clear that these features are not exclusively capitalistic. Our fear for animality is ancient, profound, ancestral. This fear of ours is understandable, after all, because it is based on the need to mark the territory, identify the pack’s identity, impose a hierarchy. All these elements are obviously deeply related to an animal nature. The *homo sapiens* shows his animality precisely as he is trying to distance himself from it. This particular animal, then, has had to create conceptual and practical means to protect himself *from himself*, using his own tools. Herein lies the root of the humanist paradigm.

There are many well-known examples of this view: the adoption of the human as the measure of all things (Greek Sophists), Pico della Mirandola’s *De hominis dignitate*, the Vitruvian icon by Leonardo da Vinci, representing a human being at the centre of the universe. In order to describe these and other manifestations of humanism at its fullest, Richard Ryder came up with the term *speciesism* in 1970, with a clear analogy with racism and sexism. This term is rather ambiguous as it flattens animal specificity within the intra-specific discriminations of our species, but is nevertheless useful to define the consequences of something much deeper: namely, the humanist paradigm.

This is paradigm *à la* Kuhn and, in this sense, it increasingly shows its weaknesses, flaws, mistakes, contradictions and unresolved conundrums. The aim of Roberto Marchesini’s reflection as a whole and of his

latest monograph in particular is precisely the criticism of speciesism. This criticism is intended and practiced as a signal, a caesura, a fracture, a break within the humanist paradigm and supports a new and more correct anthropological and epistemological paradigm. The goal is to identify the speciesist roots of humanism and the humanist roots of speciesism.

Indeed, humanism is based on some fundamental principles, a few precise negations and several categorisations. The principles are the following: “1. The paradigm of the human incompleteness [...]. 2. The concept of culture as autopoietic, autarkic, disjunctive and elevating [...]. 3. The ergonomic view of *techne*, conceived of as the art of making tools that, in an ancillary way, improve the inherent predicates without polluting the purity of the human. 4. The concept of *episteme* as the measure and subsumption of the world [...]. 5. The idea of the human as an end and as a meaning, consequently emptying all other entities of significance” (Marchesini 2014, 23-4). This very short list is enough to understand that speciesism concerns the view that *homo sapiens* has of himself rather than his evaluation of the other animals. Speciesism is a way to consider his position in being rather than a set of discriminative or violent behaviours towards the rest of being.

Being born out of fear, humanism is primarily a radical negation of animality as such. First of all of *one's own* animality and, only then, of the animality of others. The humanist confuses her animal being with the mere corporeality and mistakes the animality of the non-human for the simple mechanism of its organs. The deep spiritualism of this reductionist conception of animality shows that “the humanist paradigm is based on a substitution that, following the theocentric medieval canon, simply replaces god with the human being. In this perspective of the human being, we can talk about a onto-utopia, namely an ontopoeisis placed within a devaluation of nature, which is considered distopic respect to the human predicates” (Marchesini 2014, 25). Theocentrism is, therefore, one of the constitutive cores of humanism, which restlessly operates in favour of distancing and, at the same time, of homologation.

The aim is to distance the human from the rest of animality, while homologating animality into uniform categories - which is an obvious mistake both on an ontological and on a logical level. Simply, the *animal* does not exist. This categorisation causes the dismissal of the only real difference: not the one between the human and other animals, but rather the one *between animals*, humans included. It is “clear that our species is different from the others, but the same cannot be said for chimpanzees, elephants, hummingbirds – just to make some examples. [...] This interpretation gives life to an essentialist anthropocentrism, able to disjoint the human being from the network of living beings and connect him to a dimension which

is other from nature” (Marchesini 2014, 89). In this way, the heterospecific is flattened, discredited, simplified and dissolved. With the same mistaken gesture, the human as contiguous to the *nature that he is*, along with difference within the *nature that he inhabits*, is flattened, glorified, simplified and dissolved.

Hence some behaviours that are supposed to respect difference and, instead, are fully part of the humanist paradigm. It does not make sense, for instance, to ask what *animal is the most intelligent* because this question obviously takes a very precise form of intelligence – that of humans – as a hierarchical criterion. And human intelligence is, too, the result of hypersimplification, as there are several and different kinds of intelligence within the human species. The conviction that the animal different from us is totally other and unknowable derives from this simplification/devaluation. On the contrary, many cases – e.g. that of the gorilla Koko, who learnt and used the language of American deaf-mutes – demonstrate that “the unknowable animal is a humanist invention, and the *umwelten* are not separated entities but rather overlapping contexts with several thresholds of encounter” (Marchesini 2014, 53).

Therefore, the negation of human animality is based upon and explained by the negation of identity and difference. It is a negation of difference because “speciesism is the negation of the otherness of heterospecifics” (Marchesini 2014, 28). This negation of identity unifies the entire animality as active life of matter, and is the core of the human presumption of being something special in the living realm. The human is unique, of course, as unique as the form of existence of any other living being. Every life form is unique in biological terms: there are no gaps or breaks, but rather developments and differences within continuity. Even in some antispeciesist practices “the separation between the human and the non-human is actually a form of speciesism, as it relies on an aprioristic dichotomy between the two terms, that is, it is radically based on humanist speciesism” (Marchesini 2014, 105). Thus, real overcoming of speciesism implies overcoming the very concepts of *centrality* and *primacy* of any entity in the world. Difference is shared by all the species: it is an identity that unifies us in difference.

Speciesism also means to think that this difference is not ontological but hierarchical. This is what happens whenever – with the best intentions – we claim that the heterospecific only has a *lesser* ability compared to the human. “Are we sure”, though, “that by saying that between the human and the other species there are only quantitative differences, we do not fall into an even worse anthropocentric statement? Viewing the others as subjects *minus habentes* and not as owners of different predicates, *aliud*

habentes, is one of the most boorish forms of anthropocentrism” (Marchesini 2014, 58). On the contrary, we must understand and accept that it is not possible “to establish if the perceptive canon of a cat or a horse is the best, as these perceptions are specialised in in order to accomplish functional goals that do not overlap. The function of an attribute cannot be considered in terms of plus and minus, and no species can be the measure of another, because adaptive means cannot overlap and each species – including the human – is not a neutral entity but emerges from an immersive declination” (Marchesini 2014, 65).

Speciesism also means being convinced – as many philosophies and “progressive” political stances have historically been – that there is no such thing as *human nature* and that the *homo sapiens* coincides with that described by Pico della Mirandola, Leon Battista Alberti and other humanists: namely, a historical, voluntary and autopoietic entity. But “considering the human being as the exclusive result of social or historical contingencies means supporting the humanist idea of Pico’s manifesto. If human nature is negated or reduced to the point of being inconsistent, what follows is a clear form of speciesism” (Marchesini 2014, 104); “[...] those who reject speciesism and yet negate the complexity and articulation of human nature inadvertently adhere to the very disjunctive mechanism that grounds speciesism” (Marchesini 2014, 93).

The negation of human nature is also articulated by attributing temporality only to *homo sapiens* as well as describing non-human nature as the realm of the invariable and the same. “On the contrary, if we consider the thought of complexity, as it emerges from the 1960s onwards, it is clear that the meaning of time, in its two terms of contingency and necessity, has come back to the fore” (Marchesini 2014, 95).

The twofold negation of the temporality of nature and of the consistency of the human originates from some forms of “progressive” speciesism, which are as subtle as it is tricky. It originates the acknowledgement of the necessity guiding the natural world and the assignment of free will only to the human being, “seen as free, responsible for his destiny as he is undetermined and therefore able to escape a canon, to emancipate and determine himself” (Marchesini 2014, 89). It originates the universalism of rights and therefore the application, to non-human beings, of criteria of liberation typical of our species; this universal principle is “already anthropocentric *per se*, as it is informed by the human matrix that thinks it can take a framework (which is a right) that can also apply to the non-human sphere” (Marchesini 2014, 100).

Despite the merits of their works, scholars such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan belong to the universal canon and, “in homage to the theoretic-

cal, anthropometric coordinates, they follow an inclusive logic towards the human universal instead of the pluriversal required for the formulation of 'different rights'. The inclusion of non-human animals in the human universal is the most speciesist act there can be, even though its discriminative expression is hidden by an obviously and courageously emancipatory intention – the revolutionary implications of these thesis must be acknowledged with frankness” (Marchesini 2014, 101). Hence the contraposition between the *innate* (animal/natural) element and the *apprehended* (human/cultural) element, while the truth is that complex reality of being-in-the-world consists of the recursion that every animal experiences between the modalities allowed by its structure (innate) and the refinement of practices allowed by that structure (apprehended).

All of this mainly produces the concept and the practice of utopia as the separation from the chthonic state of the human and as “the humanist aspiration not to be animals, the utopian desire for a different reality, the concrete fear of seeing ourselves in the eyes of the non-human” (Marchesini 2014, 23). If there is no such thing as human *nature*, all of this is possible. However, all of this is possible *only* for the human, who sets himself, once again, beyond the identity/difference relationship with the rest of animality. Therefore, as Marchesini clearly states, “utopia, however disguised it may be, is a speciesist *topos* because, in accordance with human virtuality and the negligence towards the telluric, it highlights Neverland rather than the real. [...] Whoever professes a utopia inevitably negates human nature and, therefore, places the human being in a different domain to the heterospecifics’, thereby actually supporting the humanist dichotomy between the human and the other species, which is propaedeutic to every speciesist ideology” (Marchesini 2014, 99-100).

Utopia also expresses another fundamental character of humanism: its dualism. “So: *a*) the animal belongs to nature, while the human to culture. *b*) the former is the product of phylogenesis, while the latter is destined to ontogenetic freedom. *c*) the former is closed off within an *umwelt*, while the latter is able to dwell within a *welt*” (Marchesini 2014, 90).

Beyond historicisms, (human) rights, utopias and dualisms, the reality of human animality consists of an original and constant hybridation with other animals, and of the hybridation of all those animals with collective, relational and instrumental technologies marking the dynamism of life on our planet: “An introjective anthropocentrism gives birth to such a rooted *forma mentis* that it is even hard to make oneself understood when claiming that human predicates are the product of hybridation with otherness. The result of this is a trivialisation of the heterospecifics and today’s total negligence of the human towards the relationship with the non-human: we

believe we are self-sufficient in our ontological dimension and, at most, we read biodiversity through the ecologic, aesthetic, economic, preservationist lens. In so doing we do not realise that, by depriving the heterospecific of their referential meaning, we will find out that the human is the emperor with no clothes” (Marchesini 2014, 82).

Contra Gehlen’s anthropology – Marchesini’s ancient and constant polemical target – it must be understood that culture does not exempt the *homo sapiens* from some biological lack, but rather creates a lack filled by the continuous and necessary relationship with the sphere of other animals, machines¹ and the sacred. This relationship is what we call *culture*, which is not set *against* nature (as reduced to matter and *res extensa*), but is profoundly symbiotic with it in linguistic, operational, and conceptual terms: “We can therefore claim that culture is not a ‘crutch’ used to compensate for the lacks or flaws of human nature, but is like falling in love: namely, it is the construction of a hybrid, expressive space which connects us to the other and associates the thought of ourselves as separated from our partner to a feeling of lack” (Marchesini 2014, 131).

A self-aware anti-speciesism, thus, rejects any form of Ludditism or romantic naturalism. Rather sciences “able to give us some descriptive and explanatory frameworks that are increasingly less anthropocentric” (Marchesini 2014, 64) and knowledge – even in technological terms – are for antispeciesism a means of contamination with animal otherness, of anthropo-decentrism, of common liberation (of every animal, us included) from the sphere of some needs to which other animals have been functional for centuries. The hope is to reach, slowly but steadily, the goal expressed in the interview presented at the end of the book. In his answers to Eleonora Adorni, Marchesini says that the aim is to “see the animal as a companion and not as an exploitable machine” (Marchesini 2014, 167). This itinerary is based on the post-humanist principles that question “a) The ontological exclusivity of the human. b) The pretension to take human features as the term of comparison or measure of non-human entities. c) The idea that the human subsumes the characters of the world. d) The autarkic vision of the anthropoietic process” (Marchesini 2014, 144). Overcoming these claims, exclusions and hierarchies means preserving the human from his

¹ “Each technology is like a virus entering the human cell, namely its predicates, and modifying it by re-organising its functions-structures, namely its predicates” (Marchesini 2014, 108). “If, conversely, we question the patient, obsequious obedience to *techne*, suspending the anthropocentric conception of ancillary nature. we realise that the instrument is a bad servant and, contrary to what we might believe, it heavily impacts on the definition of its goals, as it shows new horizons into which we can project ourselves” (Marchesini 2014, 111).

own autopoietic dreams, which are ready to turn into the nightmare of the inadvertent destruction of his own identity, along with the difference. “*De facto*, whoever dismisses the importance of otherness, stresses species solipsism, or exalts anthropocentrism seriously endangers human future” (Marchesini 2014, 143).

It is confirmed, thus, that speciesism is an anthropological and hermeneutic question, and for this reason it is also animal: “The speciesist core does not consist, if not as a temporary geography of discussion, of animal predicates but rather of the way in which the human being thinks of himself” (Marchesini 2014, 90). In this way, one can glimpse one of the most intimate, albeit hidden, elements of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, whose meaning and anti-speciesist implications are clear: this notion states the overcoming of any hierarchic separation between the human and animality, which the former is and will always be. “The animal that we are and are not is more certain than our cogito, experiments life and is able to find its sources of happiness; it is a body that expresses, in a Dionysian way, a will within the impotence that challenges the laws of thermodynamics and transforms resources into endowments, laws into spaces of freedom, and time into an internal universe to be infinitely filled” (Marchesini 2014, 55).

REFERENCES

- Horkheimer, Max. 1978. *Dawn & decline: notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969*, translated by Michael Shaw. New York: Seabury Press.
- Marchesini, Roberto. 2014. *Contro i diritti degli animali? Proposta per un antispecismo postumanista*. Casal Monferrato: Sonda.