

Book Review: 20th Anniversary Edition of *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, by Carol J. Adams (published by Continuum, New York and London, 2010)

Reviewer:

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Carol J. Adams first published *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* in 1990. Adams' thesis of this book is that women and animals are connected as "absent referents" in masculinist culture; the animal from whom flesh is taken is rendered absent in the concept of meat. Our denial of the once-living animal is assisted, Adams argues, by our language, which turns "baby calf" into "veal" and "pig" into "ham." In addition, the violence inherent in the slaughter of animals for meat has been conveniently hidden -- for example, slaughterhouses, often located in towns and cities prior to the twentieth century have been relocated to the countryside. For Adams, feminist critical theory is undoubtedly associated with the non-consumption of animals; it is founded on a rejection of meat culture that produces and reinforces derogatory and exploitative representations and attitudes toward both animals and women, as well as other marginalized groups within Western culture. Adams expands her analysis of the intersections among racism, (hetero)sexism, and speciesism in *The Pornography of Meat* (Continuum, 2003), an exposé of the myriad ways in which images of women and animals produced in meat advertising and popular culture are linked to pornography, as well as physical and sexual violence.

To Adams, it is a given that compassion toward animals does not stop with companion species (those animals who live with us and share our lives) but should be extended to all nonhuman species, and in particular to those creatures Western culture constructs as "naturally" expendable and forgettable: the billions of cows, sheep, goats, pigs, ducks, chickens and other animals merely considered "utility stock." Her pioneering and provocative work on meat-eating and misogyny has produced heated debates among feminists about gender and the practices of meat-eating and vegetarianism. It has also challenged – and shifted – the mindsets of many. When I was five I stopped eating chicken meat once I realized what happened to the hens who were my backyard friends. It took me a while longer to make the connection between living animals and other meats, finally becoming a vegetarian at age 11. But it was not for several years later, when I was both a feminist and a vegetarian, that I read Adam's *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. Engaging with this book was a transformative experience – it helped me understand the links between various forms of marginalization and oppression, and the ways in which aspects of humanism and feminism, that I had intuitively felt were lacking, actually fed into and reinforced a system of domination over and abuse of other beings. For many feminists who are already vegetarian, this book provides the stepping stone to becoming vegan – to committing to an ethical lifestyle which, to the best of one's ability, avoids complicity in practices involving the suffering or exploitation of human and nonhuman animals.

Twenty years since *The Sexual Politics of Meat* first hit book shelves, a third edition was published in 2010 (a 10th anniversary edition was published in 2000). One poignant aspect of the new edition that greets a reader familiar with the 1990 version is the massive increase in numbers of slaughtered animals Adams now includes in her opening dedication. Twenty years ago she devoted this book to the memory of “six billion each year, 16 million each day, 700,000 per hour, 11,500 per minute;” by 2010 the count is staggering: “31.1 billion per year, 85.2 million each day, 3.5 million each hour, 59,170 each minute”. Read this latest edition, and you will understand why the numbers have increased and what else has changed along with this intensive killing.

Adams does not mince words (nor does she shy away from graphic imagery), and this book – as well as *The Pornography of Meat* – may leave some readers feeling provoked, disturbed, and uncomfortable. It is important, however, to make the vital leap Adams asks of us – from human-centered (or woman-centered) politics to a more inclusive engagement with, and consideration of, other species on the planet. Adams shows us that to progress effectively feminist beliefs in, and practice of, ethical, non-violent and compassionate relationships with others, we need to understand that human exceptionalism is fundamentally short-sighted and unethical. She urges us to examine thoroughly the assumptions we have about the human/animal divide, about concepts of "animality" and "humanity," as well as "masculinity and femininity," and the ways in which these commonly held

binary configurations intersect, not just in theory but in everyday life. It is no coincidence that female animals comprise the majority of farmed animals in the world, or that the reproductive systems of these cows and hens are the focus of intensive exploitation in the dairy and egg industries; nor is it any coincidence that the vast majority of low-paid workers employed in chicken slaughterhouses are women and immigrants.

For more than twenty years now, Carol J. Adams has exposed the hidden facts about human domination over other species – what goes on behind the scenes before we purchase sanitized plastic-wrapped chicken breasts and thighs – and she has demonstrated the inseparable relationship of meat culture to other forms of domination and exploitation. Thankfully, the feminist-vegetarian critical theory Adams advanced continues to gain traction and impact on feminist studies – and human-animal studies – in the most powerful and positive ways.