

Massimo Filippi

**Not in Your Name**

**Interview with Michael Hardt**

1. Let's start from the end of *Empire*: in the last few lines of the book you refer to Francesco di Assisi and say that “his ancient legend could be useful to illuminate the future life of the communist militancy”. You then state that this is the case because Francesco was able to oppose a “joyful life” to the “misery of power”, a joyful life which included “nature and animals” along with exploited humans. Does this mean that the communist militant cannot leave the animals aside?

MH: The communist project must always involve an expansive notion of the common, of what we share together – and really of how to conceive the “we” as not only the object of oppression but also, and more importantly, the subject of struggle. That is one remarkable aspect of Francesco's vision: he recognizes a seamless communion that extends beyond the bounds of the human to include all of nature. I'm attracted by that vision.

2. Your thought could be viewed as an “explosive mixture” of marxism and spinozism. Despite this neither Marx nor Spinoza were tender toward animals, and Marx also toward nature. So, what happened in your creative philosophical lab to bring you to agree with Viveiros de Castro that we need “to develop social relationships between humans and non humans”?

MH: I'm not sure that one must cast aside Spinoza as you suggest here. Spinoza provides a powerful and challenging perspective when he claims that there is no human nature separate from nature as a whole: human nature is not with respect to the order of nature, he says, an “imperium in imperio” (Ethics, book 3, preface). Humans, other animals, the earth, and all else obey the same basic laws. Spinoza's dictum thus criticizes those who view humans above nature but it equally challenges those who see humans as below nature – that is, those who consider the natural world as the ideal from which humans have strayed. (This is the argument of a beautiful new book by Hasana Sharp, Spinoza and the Politics of

Renaturalization.) I find this ontological perspective, which considers humans, animals, and the earth all part of the same natural order, to be very rich for the discussion you are proposing.

But that doesn't yet answer your question, and I like your notion of a philosophical lab. I came to consider the need to develop social relationships between humans and non-humans just by trying to work through these philosophical and political problems, and by reading authors like Viveiros de Castro. I'm trying to learn. I think it's as simple as that.

3. A large part of *Commonwealth* is devoted to rethink the notion of love, thought as love of alterity, as an ontological act that produces new subjectivities, new worlds, new social relations. And a figure of this love is the one described by Deleuze and Guattari between a wasp and an orchid. Again, animals and nature. It seems that we cannot think the subversive act of love without considering them at least as metaphors. Do you agree? And are they just metaphors?

Yes, exactly. If we are to make the concept of love useful in politics it must be thought not as a process of unification with those like you (in the way white supremacists love white people) or even love as a process of merging in unity, becoming the same (as in most conceptions of the couple and the family). No, love must be understood as a logic of profound alterity, as a play of differences that creates new assemblages. And the alterity bridged by the connection between the wasp and the orchid is certainly what Deleuze and Guattari find inspiring in that image.

This isn't yet, of course, anything like a political strategy or program, but thinking of love in this way does seem to me a solid foundation to work from.

4. There is a current of thought that believes that human oppression on other humans is made possible through the invention of the category of "The Animal" which, as a sort of negative standard, always permits slipping of "unwanted" humans into the category that allows them to be oppressed and killed. Would you agree with this view and to the fact that rethinking the animals, or the power of animal bodies, could be a way to oppose to the "republic of property"?

It is certainly true that animality has functioned as a negative standard for ideologies of oppression in race, gender, and class terms. Throughout modernity (and earlier) the metaphors linking the woman, the non-white, and the worker to animals has served as a justification for subordination. There are wonderful feminist studies that come to mind of the history of European philosophy that trace the identification of man with reason and woman with the body, the passions, and hence animality. Such work has also been done regarding colonized and racialized subjects as well as workers.

You are suggesting a different strategy than that of these studies (at least those that I have in mind). They generally insist that the subordinated subject (woman, non-white, worker, etc) is fully human (capable of reason and so forth) and thus should not be identified with the animal. You are proposing, if I understand right, a strategy that instead attacks the presupposition that the status of animality justifies subordination.

That's an interesting proposition. I can see useful effects of reframing the problem in this way.

5. In *Commonwealth*, you state “Bodies must resist to be able to exist”. Do you think that animals can resist to human oppression? Do they in some ways oppose to our power on them? And more importantly, are we trained not to see their acts of resistance and disobedience or they simply do not have the possibility to react/resist under the sort of oppression we impose to them? In other words, animals react but we cannot see and interpret their political resistance (silence, bodily gestures, immobility, etc. which are also forms of human resistance), or they do not react at all? And in this case, is this just a sign of the disproportion of power or an ontological impossibility? Can we view animals as massacred beings that continue to resist and thus to exist?

MH: This is one of the most difficult obstacles – a conceptual, political, and practical obstacle. Yes, all animals disobey, resist, and fight back, sometimes in ways that are effective and sometimes in ways that are ineffective. The obstacle, though, is how can such resistance be articulated effectively with human forms of resistance – or even with the resistance of other animals of the same or other species.

Here is a major challenge that we should be able to put together with Spinoza's ontological challenge that I mentioned earlier. Whereas Spinoza's challenge is to recognize the basic ontological continuity of nature, here we must appreciate profound differences. One danger, for instance, is to anthropomorphize and treat animals as if they were human, and thus to believe that you really know their thoughts, fears, and desires.

I am reminded of Deleuze's response regarding the animal at the beginning of the ABCdaire, the filmed interview with Claire Parnet. He says that he detests people you think they have a human relationship with animals – a familiar or, really, familial relationship. Your dog or your cat is party of the family. Instead Deleuze insists that if we are really to relate to animals we must try to create an animal relationship rather than a human one with them. I take that to mean that we must recognize profoundly the nonhumanity of animals and thus the chasm, the gap that divides us. We must find a way to construct a relation in nonhuman terms. That's quite a challenge.

But we need to go even one step further to address your question about resistance and, in effect, political struggle. Remember the prohibition, which was developed at least since the 1960s in feminist, anti-racist, and postcolonial struggles: do not pretend to speak in the name of others. Here is an exemplary moment. In the early 1960s SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), which was organizing black voting registration in the Southeastern United States, called on white students in the North to come join the struggle and thousands did so. At a certain point, though, Stokely Carmichael, a leader of SNCC, proposed that all should struggle against their own oppression, not just try to contribute to the struggles of others. Several of the white women who had joined SNCC took Carmichael's advice and returned to New York to start the first radical feminist collectives. That history, of course, is much more complicated, but its general outlines illustrate what I think has become a widely-accepted maxim: for the articulation of diverse struggles for liberation and for struggling together with others, but against any claims to struggle in the name of others or for others.

Well, given that political framework, what would it mean for humans to struggle with animals but not to speak or struggle in their name? Do you think my analogy is a valid basis for thinking through this – bringing the prohibition against speaking in the name of others

and the desire to articulate struggles of liberation to the species boundary between humans and other animals?

6. In the same book, you also state that “The biopolitical event is always a queer event, an subversive event of subjectivization that abolishes dominant and normative identities”. Are accepting to be animals, liberating animals and animality, becoming animal, biopolitical events? Becoming animal could be viewed as the sort of transformation which would enable us to overcome the threshold toward a new political anthropology?
7. Compared for instance to Butler and even more to Agamben, you view biopolitics more as an unprecedented way of liberation rather than a mere system of oppression. Nevertheless, you state that “in the biopolitical production life is put at work and is produced” Don’t you think that this life is (our and non human) *animal life*? And that the term “zoopolitics” would reflect in the best way the present combination of bio- and necropolitics, to quote Mbembe, which necessarily includes animal lives and the way we treat animals?
8. Indignation, as stated by Spinoza, is the material on which revolt and rebellion are built upon. Today, many people are indignant about the way animals are treated. Do you believe that antispeciesism, veganism, and animal rights movement, once “cleaned” from the influence of the middleclass, academic and liberal environment from which they moved their first steps, could become an integral and irremissible part of the “revolution in life and of life”, of the “revolutionary biopolitics”, against the sovereignty of bio-capitalism? If “revolution is for the monsters”, how much of such monsters is made up by animals and animality? Indeed, you state that “revolution moves like a millepede”....

I think that the projects you cite – antispeciesism, veganism, and animal rights movements – are important and just, but I don’t see them as revolutionary because of the limit I mentioned earlier, the limit of speaking and acting politically on behalf of or in the name of others.

An Israeli friend of mine argues in favor of the boycott movement against Israel, and she insists it is not just about Palestinian rights but also about a fundamental right for Israelis: the right not to be a perpetrator. Israelis should not militate on behalf of the Palestinians and certainly should not pretend to speak for the Palestinians. Instead Israelis need to free themselves from the shackles that their own state and society impose on them, that is, the shackles of being the perpetrators of systematic and structural violence against Israeli Arabs, Palestinians in the occupied territories, and Palestinians in the diaspora. (And then, of course, Israelis can join the Palestinian struggle.)

Well, the dignity and justice of antispeciesism, veganism, and animal rights movements operates according to similar principles, it seems to me. Humans need to insist on their right not to be perpetrators with respect to other animals and other beings – but not pretend to speak or act in the place of others. That is not revolutionary but it is a position of dignity.

9. You view metropolis as a site where the likelihood of subversive encounters with alterity is multiplied dramatically. On the other hand, you also state that contemporary metropolis are “pathological” in the sense that hierarchical divisions that characterize them block the possibility of joyful encounters. What is sure is that we cannot encounter animals in an highly urbanized environment. Is this lack part of the ambivalence of the metropolis?

We do recognize the hierarchies of the metropolis, as you say, but we also see it as the site of rebellion and, potentially, of joy. But really the forms of interaction, communication, and antagonism that we see in the city also exist today in rural life. It would interesting to reflect on the divide between town and country today, a theme that was so well developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but need to be rethought today.

Your question, though, is really about the encounters between humans and other animals, and you are certainly right that human-animal encounters are limited in highly urbanized environments. But isn't that a good thing? In other words, it might be better for humans to encounter animals in a variety of ways, but isn't it better for animals not to encounter humans? But here again I run into the obstacle of reasoning political on behalf of others.

10. In conclusion, are animals part of the (flesh of the) multitude (the poorest among the poor) or are they just something that is part of the human commonwealth (meat that we should fairly share)? How should we think “an ecology of the commonwealth”, an ecology of nature and society, of the human and non human worlds, which, as you state, “are interdependent”?

I'm attracted as you are by a notion of the common that extends equally to human and nonhuman worlds. But I realize that each time I respond to you I run into the obstacle of how to think politically the difference between the human and the nonhuman. I am conscious that each time I try to think that difference I resort to the principles that have been developed in relations to differences

among humans, such as race, gender, and class differences. The most important of these principles for me in this discussion is the mandate not to speak in the name of others or pretend to be able to act politically for them. Men can't liberate women and whites can't liberate people of color. They can, of course, insist on their own rights not to be perpetrators and, furthermore, they can participate in feminist and anti-racist movements. But that's where I run into the obstacle. Animal liberation is generally conceived as humans acting to free animals. It is very hard to conceive humans participating in an animal-led animal liberation movement. What would that look like? Does it already exist?

The next step in our conversation might require us to explore whether the principles of political action developed in relation to differences among humans apply to politics regarding differences between humans and nonhumans. Or perhaps political principles have to be rethought in this context. But we'll have to leave that discussion for another time.