Lecture 2: Feminism and Non-human animals

Women and Non-human animals – 3 approaches
1) argue women are not like animals, affirm rationality, “like men and unlike animals” – Wollstonecraft up to contemporary liberal feminists
2) challenge view, dominant in patriarchy that nature, and therefore unreason, is bad, to be overcome or dominated
   - feminism needs to engage with status of animals – reject narrow liberal feminism concerned with rights and opportunities for women, rather radical feminism and accompanying analysis of oppression and its interconnected nature
   “…we believe that women, as themselves victims of objectification and exploitation, must not abandon other victims of such treatment in their rush to be accepted as ‘persons’ entitled to equal rights” (Adams 1995, 7)
3) feminist theory has nothing to do with animals
   a. assertion made implicitly by failing to engage with any animal issues
   b. focusing on animals draws attention away from the more pressing problems of violence against women, poverty, health crises


Sexual Politics of Meat
“What is ‘the sexual politics of meat’? It is an attitude and action that animalizes women and sexualizes and feminizes animals…It is also “the assumption that men need meat, have the right to meat, and that meat eating is a male activity associated with virility” (SPM 4)

- Meat eating as (male) privilege
- Vegetarian men thought effeminate – “meat-and-potatoes men are our stereotypical strong and hearty, rough and ready, able males. […] One’s maleness is reassured by the food one eats.” (SPM 58)

- hierarchy of food linked to gender hierarchy
  o meat is the preferred food, and it is linked to male identity
  o ‘meat of the matter, meaty question, beef up, flesh it out – is to improve it ; vs. ‘vegetable’ – passive, to vegetate is to lead a passive existence

Absent Referent

“Behind every meal of meat is an absence: the death of the animal whose place the meat takes. The ‘absent referent’ is that which separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product. The function of the absent referent is to keep our ‘meat’ separated from any idea that she or he was once an animal, to keep the ‘moo’ or ‘cluck’ or ‘baa’ away from the meat, to keep something from being seen as having been someone. Once the existence of meat is disconnected from the existence of an animal who was killed to become that ‘meat’, meat becomes unanchored by its original referent (the animal), becoming instead a free-floating image, used often to reflect women’s status as well as animals’. Animals are the
absent referent in the act of meat eating; they also become the absent referent in images of women butchered, fragmented, or consumable” (SPM 13)

- Animals become absent referents through butchering
  - 3 ways they become absent:
    o Literally – they are literally absent because they are dead
    o Definitional – we change our language when we talk of them – don’t talk about baby animals, but veal, or lamb, meat
    o Metaphorical – “Animals become metaphors for describing people’s experiences…the meaning of the absent referent derives from its application or reference to something else” (67)
      ▪ Eg. rape victim says “I felt like a piece of meat”

Women and Animals: Overlapping but Absent Referents

- “Sexual violence and meat eating, which appear to be discrete forms of violence, find a point of intersection in the absent referent.”
  o Eg. bondage equipment of pornography – chains, cattle prods, nooses, dog collars suggest the control of animals – “Thus, when women are victims of violence, the treatment of animals is recalled” → butchering of women
  o Erotic overtones in images of animal slaughter – Ursula Hamdress – image refers to something absent – body of a female human → rape of animals
- “The interaction between physical oppression and the dependence on metaphors that rely on the absent referent indicates that we distance ourselves from whatever is different by equating it with something we have already objectified” (SPM 69)

“Feeling like a piece of meat”
- “…feminists have used violence against animals as metaphor, literalizing and feminizing the metaphor. […] Despite this dependence on the imagery of butchering, radical feminist discourse has failed to integrate the literal oppression of animals into our analysis of patriarchal cultural or to acknowledge the strong historical alliance between feminism and vegetarianism. Whereas women may feel like pieces of meat, and be treated like pieces of meat – emotionally butchered and physically battered – animals actually are made into pieces of meat” (SPM 72)

Careful with metaphors:
“Metaphoric borrowing that depends on violation yet fails to protest the originating violence does not acknowledge interlocking oppressions. Our goal is to resist the violence that separates matter from spirit, to eliminate the structure that creates absent referents” (SPM 90)

*Language*
- Our language is not only male-centered, it is also human-centered
  o We assume ‘male’ means human male, we assume ‘animal’ does not mean humans
  o Words like ‘mutton’, ‘veal’ rather than sheep and cows - change non-human animals into meat terms (veal, chicken, beef, horse meat)
- Muting – vegetarians dismissed as sentimental “The characterization of the objection to animals killed for food as feminine or ‘womanish’ because of its perceived ‘emotional’ tone contributes to its muting through its association with women who are also muted in a patriarchal culture” (109)

Trivializing and disempowerment

“How could I spend my time writing when so many people were illiterate? How could I discuss food choices when so many people needed any food whatsoever? How could I discuss violence against animals when women victimized by male violence needed shelter? In silencing myself I adhered to that foundational text of meat, the relative unimportance of vegetarianism. By my own silencing, I endorsed the dominant discourse that I was seeking to deconstruct. It is past time for us to consider the sexual politics of meat for they are not separate from other pressing issues of our time” (SPM 31)

Reading


