

SR: First of all, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with Direct Action Everywhere.

JS: Thanks for asking me.

SR: In your book, *The Postmodern Prince: Critical Theory, Left Strategy and the Making of a New Political Subject*, you discuss the philosophical and social transition from prioritizing the development of a “common language of politics” (as advocated by Marx, Engels and others) to the current “deconstruction of discourse” prevailing in various social movements today—including the AR movement.

Would you care to elaborate on how such deconstruction challenges the progress of the AR movement, from your perspective?

JS: The problem is not so much deconstruction, as such, but what became known as the “postmodern turn” in scholarship in the humanities under the influence of French poststructuralist philosophers like Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, and so on. There are insights to be gotten out of some of these theorists (though some more than others). The trouble is, ***poststructuralism is an exceedingly poor basis for formulating a substantive politics of any kind.*** First, because poststructuralists want to distance themselves from humanism and Marxism, they are positively *averse* to normativity. That is, they equivocate on important values, particularly in the realm of ethics, e.g. eschewing language of *liberation* or *oppression* (because their theory of language and power essentially implicates all of us in complex discourses rather than in responsibilities).

Postmodernist critical animal studies scholars insist that we all have “blood on our hands”—which is both true and beside the point, because such statements obscure the sociological dimensions of power—and analyze which groups have more of it than others, and why. Some such theorists even warn us not to use the language of “animal rights” at all—objecting, on recondite theoretical grounds, that in talking about “rights” we end up reproducing “humanism” and the repressive apparatus of the State. Others, like Donna Haraway, essentially defend the instrumental domination, use and killing of other animals. (Incidentally, Haraway has been invited to give the keynote address at animal studies conferences, where she has attacked vegans and veganism.)

In addition to this fuzziness or equivocation around values, ***poststructuralism occludes social phenomena, muddying the waters of theory by imposing abstract metaphysical concepts on empirical reality***—e.g., “biopolitics,” “cyborgs,” “hybrids,” “memes,” “differance,” “actants,” “bodies that matter,” etc. These terms bear about them the aura of *de nouveau*, the New, “the cool.” They shine and have the allure of newly minted knowledge *commodities*—discursive coinage that bestows upon its bearer an aura of respectability and sophistication, within an economic structure of scarcity within the university system: scarce jobs, and even scarcer intellectual courage.

The responsibility of theory is in fact not to *complicate* our understanding of the world—which is already complicated and confusing enough—but to *simplify* it, to make it *easier* to

grasp its essential or underlying features. Theory should not make the world more complicated than it already is.

There is a vogue in Critical Animal Studies (CAS) for throwing around Michel Foucault's concept of *biopower* at seemingly every opportunity. *Biopower* is used within CAS to describe what is in essence the further the integration of nonhuman beings into the apparatus of capitalist production. I cannot help wondering just what that term really "buys" us. Humans have after all been manipulating nonhuman biology to suit our ends for literally thousands of years. One may certainly argue that the level of violence and violation being visited upon nonhuman animals represents a *qualitative* break—and intensification—of past patterns of animal exploitation and exterminationism. However, it is unclear why or in what sense such intensification can be said to represent "biopower."

While "biopower" is not entirely a useless concept, I think it should be used much more sparingly than it now is, and certainly not at the expense of far more robust categories of social and political critique—ones that would highlight property relations, gender dominance, and so on. One way to tell whether a concept is indispensable or not is to try living without it for a while. On the one hand, the jargon of "biopower," to take the example above, is trying to get at something important, which is the *quantitative and qualitative* reduction of animal beings to "stuff," pure objectivity and information, particularly in genetics and bioengineering. Can we describe what is being done to nonhuman animals today without reaching for Foucault's "biopower?" I think we can; we can say that nonhuman beings are being integrated into the apparatus of technocapitalism in ways that violate their ontological and psychic integrity in heretofore unthought-of and impossible ways.

When the "first wave" abolitionists of the 18th and 19th centuries organized against the breeding, manipulation, control, and killing of human beings, a practice which had gone on for many centuries, they did not reach for hi-falutin concepts or jargon to describe what was going on—like the synthetic a priori of Immanuel Kant, or Hegel's "world-spirit." Instead, they used terms that were direct, intuitively graspable, and concrete. They used language that helped people on the fence about slavery to grasp the nature of the problem, and they spoke concretely of slave traders, auction blocks, and race prejudice, of violence and murder. They also drew a crystal clear distinction between unfreedom and injustice, on one side, and liberation, justice, and equality, on the other. Today, even the elemental distinction between a condition of oppression and a condition of freedom is considered bad taste in some theory circles.

Finally, there is a tendency in some arenas of animal studies to blur quite crucial ontological distinctions. That is, we find poststructuralist theorists suggesting that plants and bacteria vitiate or undermine animal rights claims, because bacteria are no different from animals, or that to posit ethical distinctions between plants and animals is "speciesist." A colleague informs me that at one animal studies conference he attended, another participant told him that referring to "cats" as though they were distinct kinds of beings was "colonizing" and "speciesist," because there was no such thing as species. Unfortunately, a further problem with the intrusion of these seemingly abstruse theoretical

points into animal rights discourse is that they only serve to widen the already sizable gap between theory and practice, between scholarship and activism.

All of this may seem like quibbling over language. But how we talk about and represent the world through language matters very much. Language furnishes us with the rooms we dwell in. Unfortunately, in insidious ways, our work as intellectuals and scholars seems to be mirroring and reproducing the dominant structures and institutions of society, particularly capitalism. It's no accident that poststructuralism has come to exert such a strong influence on our movements, because it coincides in many ways with the logic of capital, which among other things tries to eliminate ethical values.