

The Unhappy Marriage of Feminism and Veganism

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This paper will argue that, in a manner parallel to Hartmann's description of the relationship between Marxism and Feminism, the marriage between feminism and veganism has also been unhappy. This paper will argue that this is due to feminism dominating over veganism. I will begin by discussing historical criticisms of unions between feminism and Marxism. From here, Adams unification of veganism and feminism will be introduced. After this, it will be argued that attempts by Adams to marry veganism and feminism have led to a diminished and centralised view of animals as victims. Furthermore, I will explain why it is that this type of 'marriage' was bound to fail from the beginning.

1 Introduction

The women's rights movement and animal rights movements have a long history of overlap, as identified by Carol J Adams in *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*.¹ In her book, Adams documents the history of vegetarian feminism from the 19th century to today. Adams also posits the argument that the dominant ideological frameworks which normalise the exploitation of women and non-human animals² are one and the same.

Taking inspiration from Hartmann's *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*,³ which argues that approaches synthesising Marxism and Feminism have been unsuccessful because the Marxist component of the analysis has predominated over the feminist component, I will argue that the marriage of feminism and veganism⁴ has also been unhappy due to feminism dominating over veganism. This paper will first briefly summarize the section of Hartmann's analysis which is crucial to my argument. I will then criticize Adams' formulation of feminist veganism for de-centering animals. Finally, I will attempt to explain why the vegan component has inevitably been subordinated to the feminist component due to the context in which Adams' work was written.

2 Hartmann's Criticism of Zaretsky

Eli Zaretsky⁵ argues that when women do housework they are in fact working for the benefit of capital. They are performing the unpaid labour of social reproduction that is necessary for the maintenance of the workforce, and in doing

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1. Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition* (Bloomsbury, 2015).

2. Hereafter referred to as animals

3. Heidi I. Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a more Progressive Union," *Capital and Class* 3, no. 2 (July 1979): 6-7.

4. Hereafter 'veganism' shall refer specifically to ethical veganism, rather than broader dietary veganism

5. Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, The Family, and Personal Life* (Pluto Press, 1974).

so are creating the conditions necessary for the extraction of surplus value from wage labourers (their husbands). For Zaretsky, the oppression of women consists of their exclusion from the class of wage-labourers and capital's exploitation of their reproductive labour.

Hartmann criticises Zaretsky for only considering the relationship between women and capital, and not addressing the relationship between men and women directly. Hartmann argues that this disregards the fact that women doing housework are working for their husbands, and so therefore their husbands are in a position of power over them. This is true even if the husbands are themselves oppressed as workers due to their relationship to capital.

Through his Marxist lens Zaretsky can see that women are oppressed by capital, but he cannot see that they are oppressed by their husbands. Therefore Zaretsky has tried and failed to explain away patriarchy through a purely class oriented economic analysis, and so has made feminism subordinate to Marxism in his analysis.

3 The Sexual Politics of Meat and the Absent Referent

In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Adams argues that there is a link between the oppression of women and the oppression of animals. A key theoretical device employed by Adams is the structure of the absent referent, which she borrows from semiotics. Adams explains the concept, as it relates to the consumption of animal bodies, thusly:

Through butchering, animals become absent referents. Animals in name and body are made absent as animals for meat to exist. Animals' lives precede and enable the existence of meat. If animals are alive they cannot be meat. Thus a dead body replaces the live animal. Without animals there would be no meat eating, yet they are absent from the act of eating meat because they have been transformed into food.⁶

Adams believes that this linguistic structure is used to make the violence behind the eating of animals socially permissible.⁷ Adams argues that not only farmed animals, but also women, are marginalised through the structure of the absent referent.⁸ She claims that the way that female bodies are objectified and metaphorically deconstructed into constituent parts (e.g. breasts, legs) parallels the way that animals are killed and physically dismembered to become the uncountable substance known as "meat".

Adams considers pornography to be intrinsically violent and linked with rape culture, and makes a pun of the multiple meanings of the word "consume", drawing a connection between the consumption of pornography and the consumption of animals.⁹

Carrie Hamilton takes issue with Adams anti-sex-work, anti-pornography stance and contends that the comparison between the sexualisation of female bodies and the violent dismemberment of animals fails on two accounts.¹⁰ Firstly, it erases the agency of sex workers. Adams' text equates sex work with sexual abuse. Moreover, she does not draw on the perspectives of sex workers within her work, despite its focus on sex work. Secondly, the comparison does not adequately account for the differences between violence against women and violence against animals. Adams trivialises how extreme violence against animals is by comparing it to the violence which is supposedly implicit in sexualised images. Hamilton says that the connection drawn by Adams is "theoretically weak and evidentially wanting".¹¹

Within Adams' analysis feminism is completely dominant. She names the structure oppressing animals as patriarchy. She does not describe any ideological or socioeconomic structure specific to animal exploitation, such as speciesism or carnism. Therefore the book presents the oppression of animals as merely an extension of the oppression of women rather than an entity in its own right.

6. Adams, 66.

7. Adams, 69

8. Adams, 67-69

9. Adams, 88

10. Carrie Hamilton, "Sex, Work, Meat: The Feminist Politics of Veganism," *Feminist Review* 114, no. 1 (January 2016): 112-129.

11. Hamilton, 1.

Adams only analyses animals' relationship to patriarchy, without analysing their relationship to humans (including women). This is analogous to how Zaretsky only analysed the relationship of proletarian women to capital, without analysing their relationship to proletarian men. So just as Zaretsky did not consider the material interests that proletarian men have in upholding the system of patriarchy, Adams does not consider the material interests that women (as humans) have in upholding the system of animal exploitation.

Where Adams does analyse the relationship between women and animals she is discussing a particular minority: vegetarians. The book records the ideas of first wave feminists who adopted a sort of vegetarian cultural feminism. Those feminists believed that a non-violent stance toward both humans and animals is an essential quality of women. Correspondingly, they also believed that men have an inherent disposition to violence.¹²

Unfortunately sections of the book document these arguments and beliefs without evaluating them. The claims about masculine violence and feminine pacifism were made by western feminists and vegetarians with a limited understanding of other cultures, and an outmoded understanding of sex and gender. Universalising, essentialist claims such as these are not compatible with a historical materialist understanding of patriarchy.

The lack of criticism of these viewpoints leads to it appearing that the book endorses the idea of a natural kinship between women and animals. This runs counter to the obvious fact that the vast majority of women (as with all humans) are invested in animal exploitation both ideologically and economically. Women; as members of animal farming communities; as consumers of meat, eggs and dairy; and as wearers of leather, wool and fur; are the direct benefactors of animal exploitation.

It could be argued that women ultimately do not benefit from animal exploitation, because (in Adams view) the commodification of animals in turn undermines women's rights and bodily autonomy. Nonetheless, it must be seen that non-vegan women directly benefit from animal exploitation. This exactly parallels Hartmann's point about proletarian men's power within patriarchal capitalism:

In the long run this may be 'false consciousness', since the majority of men could benefit from the abolition of hierarchy within the patriarchy. But in the short run this amounts to control over other people's labor, control which men are unwilling to relinquish voluntarily.¹³

4 The Failure of the Arguments from Female Exploitation

We will now turn to the least academic and most commonly used family of arguments which connect veganism to feminism. These arguments will be most illustrative in understanding why the marriage of feminism and veganism has been unhappy. They are employed by mainstream animal advocacy organisations like PETA¹⁴ and Viva¹⁵ and an argument of this kind is also implicit in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. The argument is as follows.

The Argument From Female Exploitation:

- **P1.** Feminists oppose females being oppressed on the basis of their sex.
- **P2.** Within animal agriculture, females are oppressed on the basis of their sex¹⁶

12. Adams, chapter 7.

13. Hartmann, 6-7

14. Tara DiMaio, "International Women's Day: Why You Can't Be a Cheese-Eating Feminist," 2021, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://www.peta.org/blog/feminist-womens-day-go-vegan/>.

15. Justine Butler, "Do Feminists Drink Dairy?," 2021, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://viva.org.uk/health/health-articles/do-feminists-drink-dairy/>.

16. An example: cows in the dairy industry and hens in the egg industry have their reproductive systems exploited. They are selectively bred to overproduce milk/eggs at the cost of their health. Furthermore, female animals in various forms of animal agriculture are sexually assaulted by humans to force them to become pregnant.

- C1. Feminists should oppose animal agriculture
- C2. Feminists should be vegan.

While this argument may or may not be effective in practice, it is theoretically lacking. The argument has a premise that feminists by definition opposes exploitation of females, or oppose systems where females are exploited more severely than males.

However, within a speciesist domain of discourse, when a non-vegan feminist says a statement like "all mothers deserve rights", they are making a statement only about human mothers. Therefore arguments from female exploitation often rely on an ambiguity of definition in words such as female, mother, oppression etc, where the speciesist is employing a narrower definition, and will not necessarily change their position merely because their words have been re-interpreted by an anti-speciesist.

If a feminist opposes all exploitation of all females, there doesn't seem to be any reason that they should not also oppose all exploitation of all males. In this case there is no reason for the argument to be particular to feminists or particular to female animals, and it seems to be fairly contentless. It boils down to "if exploitation of animals is wrong then exploitation of animals is wrong." The only content in the argument then is the description of certain industry practices. The non-vegan feminist can dismiss the argument by simply saying that they don't believe animals deserve rights, or any such equivalent argument.

If the argument is however saying that animal agriculture is bad because it treats females worse than males, then this seems to be a contingent empirical matter that opens up an irrelevant discussion. Assuming that this were true, would animal agriculture then become acceptable if the conditions of males were worsened to become equal with females? Or conversely if the treatment of females was "improved" to the level of the treatment of males? Male chicks are suffocated to death or ground up alive on their first day of life. Male dairy calves used for veal are kidnapped from their mothers, trapped in small crates and then killed at just a few months old. Males in various forms of animal agriculture are sexually manipulated by humans just as females are.

Perhaps the argument from female exploitation is supposed to be convincing because the supposed worse treatment of female animals relative to male animals then causes or reinforces to a worse treatment of human women relative to human men. This line of reasoning returns to anthropocentrism and throws away the moral consideration of animals as the premise for veganism. Therefore it cannot defend animals from sex-blind exploitation and killing.

The reason why humans treat male and female farmed animals differently is not because females are viewed as less morally important than males. Neither male nor female animals are treated with moral importance – they are treated as commodities. Measures which supposedly account for animal welfare are made as business decisions. They either directly lower the cost of production of animal products, or they increase profitability by increasing the marketability of goods through special labelling.¹⁷ This causes a problem for those who are trying to argue that there is an ideological link between our treatment of female animals and our treatment of women.

So why do these activists and groups focus particularly on the sexual and reproductive aspects of animal exploitation? I believe that the real weight of this argument is simply that it brings up a lesser known but extremely egregious aspect animals exploitation. It seems inconsistent to hold that killing and imprisoning an animal is acceptable but sexually violating them is not. However, the discussion of sexual violation is a more visceral example because it is an aspect of animal exploitation that many people do not know about and most people are not desensitised to. We all know that meat is a body part of an animal who was killed.

Therefore my criticisms of the argument do not really undermine its point. The function of the argument is merely to point out, or to remind one of, the realities of animal agriculture — to dereference the absent referent. I hypothesise that many syntheses of veganism and feminism function in this manner.

17. Gary L. Francoine, *Rain Without Thunder: The Ideology of the Animal Rights Movement* (Temple University Press, 1996).

5 Why has the Marriage *Really* Failed?

I will now suspend charitability and attempt to provide a pragmatic explanation as to why works in the vein of *The Sexual Politics of Meat* are created, and why they decenter animals. I hypothesise that the motivation behind these syntheses is to attempt to tie animal rights to a larger movement in order to recruit more vegans. Animal rights activists may believe that those who already fight other forms of oppression are likely to be amenable to the cause of animal rights. Within this context the animal rights theorist must explain the relevance of animal oppression to the feminist theorist, rather than the other way round. This leads to an explanation of the oppression of animals oppression couched in terms of the oppression of women. Therefore it is inevitable that feminism ends up as the dominant frame within the synthesis.

The problem with this approach, from the animal rights perspective, is that non-vegan feminists can criticise the synthesis solely by disputing the strength of connection between the two forms of oppression. Therefore they can debunk a work of this kind without ever addressing the vegan's central question: whether the killing and enslavement of animals for food, clothing etc. is morally justified. The end result is a conversation which is around animals, rather than about animals. For the vegan, violation of animal rights would be wrong even if it did not affect marginalised humans whatsoever. Despite this, activists following Adams' line have tied their advocacy to the existence of a causal link between these different forms of oppression.

For the feminist activist, they have a lot to lose from endorsing veganism and animal rights. Firstly, to become vegan requires changing one's lifestyle. Adams recalls¹⁸ how she heard that some feminists at the Modern Language Association refused to read *The Sexual Politics Of Meat* because they did not want to stop eating animal bodies. Becoming vegan means one must not just change what they eat and wear, but one must also admit that they have participated in an atrocity up until the point of change, making it a doubly bitter pill.

Like the theologian confronted with alien intelligence, or the physicist confronted with Boltzmann brains, the critical theorist confronted with animals as subjects must relitigate the base assumptions of their analysis. The sheer number of animals exploited by humans demands that we reorient our understanding of the "typical observer" of our society. Animals are exploited in such extreme ways, and largely for reasons as trivial as taste pleasure. The fact that even within justice movements this exploitation is largely ignored and/or justified casts non-vegan critical theory in a concerning new light.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, I have shown that Adams' attempt to marry veganism and feminism has made the feminist lens of analysis dominant, leading to a poor explanation of the material and ideological systems of animal exploitation, and a decentering of animals as victims. I have also explained why I believe that this marriage was bound to be founded on an unequal footing. I follow Hartmann's lead in stressing that any future approach to synthesising the two movements should follow a materialist methodology. However it must avoid being reductive in the sense of explaining, or explaining away, one mode of oppression in terms of another. Generating such a synthesis will require ongoing work in the expanding field of animal studies.

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