

Battlefields, Slaughterhouses & the Opposition to Both

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a review of

Constructing Ecoterrorism: Capitalism, Speciesism & Animal Rights by John Sorensen. Fernwood Publishing 2016

Anarchist and vegetarian Leo Tolstoy stated in his essay, "What I believe," that "as long as there are slaughterhouses, there will always be battlefields."

The quote, though often simply taken as a condemnation of violence against both humans and non-human animals, also ties the state, capitalism, and the rights of animals together in the way many animal rights activists do today.

In his statement, Tolstoy recognizes the two interconnected systems of the state and capitalism as the driving forces behind battlefields and slaughterhouses, with battlefields brought about by the state protecting its interests and slaughterhouses caused by capitalism's profit motives.

In *Constructing Ecoterrorism: Capitalism, Speciesism & Animal Rights*, John Sorensen analyzes the connections between these systems regarding their outlook and subsequent destruction of the environment and animals for the sake of profit. Capitalism, seeking profit from animal goods, is protected by the state's police and laws, and justifies its exploitation of animals through the ideology of speciesism—the assumption of human superiority with moral right over other species.

The result is a tenacious triangle of interconnected institutions, each supporting the other to maintain the dominant paradigm of capitalism. Referring to this as the animal-industrial complex, Sorensen argues that it is this complex of institutions and systems which brands environmental and animal rights activists, who, at worst, commit only infrequent acts of property destruction, as violent terrorists to be fought with the same ferocity as Islamic terrorist groups following 9/11.

However, animal rights are not a fringe topic and Sorensen asserts that most Americans support many of the goals of activists despite that they often run contrary to the goals of capitalism. As a result, those who fight against environmental and animal exploitation are decried as anti-progress, irrational, overly emotional, and dangerous to the safety of the public.

Though environmental activism is clearly not what most people would consider terrorism, the term has purposely been made flexible in order to bend to the needs of the state and capitalism. With a rise in vegetarianism, veganism, concern about the environment, and empathy towards non-human animals, the construct of ecoterrorism is erected as a means of defending the animal-industrial complex and demonizing compassion.

Sorensen's argument provides a detailed analysis of the terrorism label being used as an excuse to intimidate and crack down on anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist action, just as it has been wielded against the left and anarchists during the Red Scare and recently antifascists during the protests of last summer. Though not explicitly anarchist, Sorensen's book provides an analysis particularly relevant in anarchist circles.

As enemies of the dominant system, anarchists have always been targeted as terrorists. It is not they, however, but the state, capitalism, and other hierarchies that commit genocide, ecocide, and other atrocities. Structures of power seek to label as terrorists, people who act out of compassion for other humans, animals, and the environment, while portraying the killing of 58 billion animals for food annually as a necessary and even morally sound practice.

Perhaps the strongest aspect of Sorensen's argument is his recognition of the interconnectedness of these hierarchical structures and their support of each other. Sorensen asserts that it is the confluence of these structures that allows for predominantly nonviolent environmentalists to be branded as terrorists and ecocide to be considered progress. Capitalism demands the exploitation of animals and ecosystems for profit, the state defends capitalism with militaries, police, and prisons, and both capitalism and the state wield speciesism to justify maintaining the slaughterhouses.

Under capitalism, everything that can be used for profit is a resource and those who threaten resources are terrorists. Ever since anarchists first became a threat to existing hierarchies, they have been labeled as such. For the majority of people, anarchists are seen as mindless bomb-throwers, arsonists waiting to set the nearest thing ablaze, threats to democracy, or individualistic violent criminals. Anarchists are not seen as gardeners, community-builders, book fair organizers, people who distribute food, or pacifists—labels far harder to categorize as terroristic but that are more accurate descriptors of anarchism.

Power structures have done an impressive job of demonizing anarchism. However, anarchists and others who fight against environmental and animal exploitation are not terrorists, but rather people who see what capitalism designates as a resource as a friend, an equal, a gift, or sublime.

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