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Book review: Gonzalo Villanueva, *A Transnational History of the Australian Animal Movement*

Review author: Marie Leth-Espensen

Gonzalo Villanueva, 2018, *A Transnational History of the Australian Animal Movement, 1970-2015*. Basingstoke: Palgrave macmillan (284pp., hardcover, 84.99€)

In *A Transnational History of the Australian Animal Movement*, Gonzalo Villanueva covers the important events that led to the addition of an entirely new issue to the political agenda, transforming the conditions of nonhuman animals into a matter of public concern. Grounded in transnational history, social movement studies, and the emerging field of critical animal studies, *A Transnational History of the Australian Animal Movement* is an exceptionally well-researched book that offers a detailed account of the innovative methods and protest techniques put into work by Australian activists.

Given the 45 year timespan the research seeks to cover, the first chapters on the formative years of the movement might initially seem to spend a disproportionate amount of time dwelling on single individuals and episodes. This is explained by the fact that for the people who became engaged with the subject in the 1970s, there were no established groups or institutions to guide them nor any existing environment to become encouraged by.

Villanueva argues that in a climate of widespread negligence regarding the suffering caused by the intensification of the agricultural industry in the post war decades, the formation of the animal movement stands out as a remarkable event in the history of social movements. With surprising speed, the issue of animal rights spread around the globe, groups and networks were established, and innovative methods were employed to target the animal industry.

A Transnational History of the Australian Animal Movement is structured into nine chapters, beginning with a brief chapter situating this research in relation to previous studies as well as introducing the key analytical concepts in social movements studies, which the author seeks to, in his word, forge (p. 12).

In the second chapter of the book, Villanueva describes the background for the influential book titled *Animal Liberation*, authored by Australian moral philosopher Peter Singer in 1975. After visiting Oxford University in 1970 Singer was introduced to the issues concerning the conditions of animals in modern factory farming, which he made a lifelong commitment to studying.

Villanueva deals with how intellectuals came to play a central role in the animal rights movement, with Singer being the most renowned among a group of prominent intellectuals named the Oxford Group.

In Chapter Three the focus is on a group of dedicated individuals who, after familiarizing themselves with the work of Singer, starts to take action and form networks and alliances between new and old animal rights groups. For the Australian animal movement², the existing environmental and conservational groups played a significant role by sharing their experience and knowledge. Also, local and interpersonal relations play an important part in the formation of the new groups.

Interestingly for today's debate, in which animal rights activists explicitly distance themselves from animal welfarist ideologies that normalize nonhuman animal exploitation, Villanueva notes how in the early days of the new animal movement, the Australian activists made no division between animal welfare and animal rights. This stands in contrast to a much more polarized climate among British animal rights organizers (p. 61).

A Transnational History of the Australian Animal Movement goes on to document the dedication of activists and their efforts to influence the political system so as to reform animal agriculture. In spite of the movement's achievements, which include the establishment of two advisory bodies (the AWAC and AECC), a Senate Committee, codes of practices and the development of free-range eggs, Australian activists soon realized that these promising results meant little actual improvement for the animals. The failure of attempts at political reform continue to be a cause of apathy among supporters of animal rights. Reform remains a point of debate over which are the optimal methods by which the movement can to achieve its goals.

The fifth chapter concerns the uses of disruptive and innovative forms of direct action inspired by the Animal Liberation Front in Great Britain and the United States, which in the Australian case was directed towards stopping the widespread practice of duck shooting in the wetlands. Alongside the disruptive strategies of property damage and animal rescues, activists sought to involve the political system and launched legal confrontations, and were quite successful in capturing public attention.

Another type of disruptive activism was introduced by Pam Clarke. By means of civil disobedience, Clarke performed powerful, symbolic actions to free battery hens, becoming a source of inspiration for later activist groups in the use of undercover investigation to seek legal prosecution (p. 132).

Chapter Six covers the influential Australian-invented protest technique of trespassing in spaces of animal exploitation, and documenting the action while providing the animals with aid. This is known as open rescue. These actions rest on the philosophy of animal rescue, non-violence, publicity, and civil disobedience. Between 1993 and 2000, open rescue led to the rescue of 561 nonhuman animals in Australia, and led to a New South Wales ban on chaining pigs by the neck by tethers (p. 158-59).

² In the book Villanueva uses the term "animal movement."

The amateur video of the spectacle of open rescues became a powerful way of revealing animal cruelty, reaching the television news. Villanueva claims this represents the importance of the *politics of sight* for the animal movement. Alongside the description of how this new strategy was adopted, Chapter Six also tells the story of increasing state repression through the use of fines, conviction and jail.

The following section of the book looks at how Australian animal activists formed transnational networks in order to target rapidly growing livestock export that led Australia to gain a dominant world position in the industry by 1986-87 (p. 187). An example of what Villanueva characterizes as “international sites of contention” (p. 196), livestock export both touches upon domestic and international politics.

Initially, the animal movement in Australia joined forces with workers’ unions to protest the growing export trade around the late 1970s. A later cycle of protest against livestock exports appeared in 2003, when Animals Australia, with Lynn White at the forefront, initiated the use of transnational investigative campaigns by forming partnerships with animal groups located abroad. Documenting the horrific conditions of animals during transport and slaughter shifted public opinion in the direction of banning the trade. This leads Villanueva to reflect on the role of new and old media and the innovations and future potentials of transnational investigative campaigning.

A Transnational History of the Australian Animal Movement concludes with a discussion on the role of lifestyle politics, which continues to dominate the animal movement of today. In the early years of the movement, adopting a vegetarian or vegan diet was an implicit message, even if prominent figures had always considered ethical vegetarianism or veganism integral to the cause of animal rights (p. 228). In the 1990s and the 2000s, lifestyle activism became central to the global animal rights movement as a way to seek change by making the personal political. Villanueva remarks that this change has led individual moral integrity to become central to the cause. However, this influence can also be traced back to a central source of inspiration from the very beginning of the movement’s history, namely Peter Singer’s practical ethics.

Finally, Villanueva addresses the question of how to interpret the legacy of the animal movement, avoiding both minimalist and maximalist approaches that bear the risk of either overemphasizing or undermining the movement’s results (p. 246). Rather than attempting an evaluation of the movement’s success or failure, Villanueva pursues an analysis of “the intended or unintended consequences of activism” that have influenced, changed and pluralized Australian politics (p. 246).

In *A Transnational History of the Australian Animal Movement*, Villanueva takes the reader through manifold methods and protest techniques that have been applied to advocate for social change for nonhuman animals on the Australian continent. The book adds important empirical knowledge to concepts

such as contentious politics, the politics of sight and transnational investigative campaigning - all worthy candidates for future enquiry.

Given the ambitious objectives of the book, it comes as no surprise that some aspects of the movement are left unexamined. More specifically, in light of its commitment to social movement studies, *A Transnational History of the Australian Animal Movement* would have benefitted from further attention to the communicative and symbolic features of the campaigns as well as the activist groups' specific mobilization strategies.

The strength of this book is Villanueva's ability to select and highlight significant episodes and lay them out for others to interpret and explore further. For the animal movement itself and scholars with interest in social change, this book provides useful background knowledge for in depth discussions of the animal rights movement's unique ability to inspire social change.

About the review author

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