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The Critical in Critical Animal Studies

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At a meeting in late November 2011, the faculty board for the Faculty for Humanities and Theology at Lund University convened to consider establishing a new course at the Department of Communication and Media. The course was aimed at providing a multidisciplinary introduction to the field of critical animal studies that, according to the learning outcomes of the syllabus, would allow students to “analyse and critically review norms and structures organising human-animal relations in contemporary Western society” and “critically assess the ethical, cultural and social consequences of human-animal relations.”

At the meeting, the board members reviewed the administrative details of the syllabus and scrutinised the course description, learning outcomes, and the literature list. Establishing courses like this one, which challenges the status-quo in society as well as in university education is often a lengthy and arduous process. It typically involves rewriting course descriptions and learning outcomes to make them less “radical” in the critique of existing conditions. In the case with the course in critical animal studies, the board raised objections as well. Surprisingly, however, these did not concern the course’s ambitions to review how human perceptions of other animals as lesser beings impact them or the assessment of the often mortal consequences of human treatment of animals. Neither did it concern the literature list, with titles such as “Defending Agitation and the ALF” and “The War Against Animals.” Instead, the Faculty board’s objection was with the word “critical,” an objection that in the feedback was phrased as a question: “All university education is supposed to be critical and let students engage in critical thinking, so why is the course called critical animal studies and not just ‘animal studies?’” The

suggestion from the faculty board was to remove the “critical” and just let the course be called “Animals in Society, Culture and the Media,” or as one of the board members put it in a conversation, “something with animals and media.”

The critical in critical animal studies is, however, key. It is what has made the course into a space where animal rights activists can participate and critically discuss their experiences of challenging social and cultural norms and getting involved in activism such as direct action for their animal advocacy. It is what has turned the students’ assignments into useful sources of knowledge for animal rights organisations. It is what has made the course into more than just a course, but a network and a platform for action for animals. The critical in critical animal studies is what makes it into what it is, and in the end, the board’s objection to the use of the word “critical” in the title was not a decisive one. With a few administrative edits to the syllabus, the course passed the faculty board and was established. And the critical was kept in the course title and in the course.

In the spring of 2012, a few months after the events described above, the course Critical Animal Studies; Animals in Society, Culture and the Media was launched at the Department of Communication and Media at Lund University. Since then, the course blossomed as the first initiative of its kind in Sweden, introducing the field of critical animal studies (CAS) to the country as well as pioneering the scholarly and critical discussion of our relationship with animals in the Nordic region. Throughout its over ten years in offering, the module has reached a wide audience of local and international students, inspiring further engagement with animal issues beyond the boundaries of country and classroom. In addition, offered as a free-standing course for undergraduates, it is accessible with only basic eligibility for higher education studies (i.e., completed upper secondary education), and it can also be included as part of a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree.

Within the Swedish education system, as is the prevalent case around the world, animal-related issues in the social sciences and humanities have often been addressed in a broader, non-critical way. With this academic context in mind, the inception of this course rested on a dual critical basis: Firstly, it laid an explicit critical theory foundation, where entrenched norms in society (such as meat consumption) are interrogated, and work for social change is viewed as an integral part of the theory, rather than “outside” theory. Secondly, the course included an intent to take an “animal standpoint” perspective when analysing societal issues. It encouraged students to engage in dialogue, critique, and actively work towards

altering the situation and experiences of non-human animals in human societies. While taking the standpoint of human or non-human “others” might not even be possible in practical reality, the notion of the animal standpoint can form a pedagogical starting point. It prompts students to reflect on the impact that various human actions and social arrangements may actually have on the animals affected by them. Consequently, transforming the classroom into a key intervention point in the project towards realising animal liberation.

As a first foray into the field of critical animal studies, the course explores the shifting roles and positions of non-human animals in today’s complex societies. Its goal is to provide students with analytical tools to critically assess norms and structures organising human-animal relations while also delving into the ethical, cultural, and social consequences of these. The course builds on the multidisciplinary of CAS with lectures and seminars centred on five themes to foreground the different aspects and dimensions that inform human-animal relations in contemporary society. The first theme introduces the field of CAS, highlighting its distinctive approach that pays critical attention to the multiple and complex ways in which humans relate to other animals. The following theme, called Social constructions, positions, and representations of animals, deepens the focus on animals as social constructions in modern society and the paradoxes these social constructions contain, as well as the power of different stereotypes that influence the way humans think of and act towards animals. It also examines how animal exploitation is situated in broader power structures, analysing as well how language can perpetuate different oppressions. The third theme, Intersectional oppression, language, and power, introduces concepts to analyse the interlocking manifestations of power over non-human animals and humans lacking privileges of whiteness and masculinity. In the fourth theme Agency, anthropocentrism, and the suffering of others, theoretical perspectives on non-human agency are introduced, as well as a focus on different areas of animal use and abuse and on the institutionalised violence toward animals in the food and science industries, education, zoos, hunting, and pet-keeping. The fifth and final theme, Animals and social change: communication and action, focuses on different methods of working for animal liberation. The role of compassion in animal politics is a key issue here, as is the importance of sensitivity to the suffering of others.

The course’s thematic organisation was crafted with a dual purpose: to create conditions for knowledge development and to gradually introduce the potential

of CAS theory to a diverse range of students. This approach begins by laying a solid foundation of key concepts and perspectives in the field of CAS. From there, it guides students toward the exploration of more complex and potentially controversial topics, such as the food industry and animal slaughter. The intention is to aid the transition between course themes. For instance, after discussing how social constructions of animals are produced in society, it becomes possible for students to widen their analytic repertoire when looking at institutions such as animal agribusiness or animal biotechnology. The concluding theme is intended to instil hope that change is possible and inspire students into action and activism for animals both inside and outside of an academic context.

As mentioned previously, due to the few admission requirements Critical Animal Studies; Animals in Society, Culture and the Media is amongst the most accessible university courses in Sweden. This was an important aspect in the design of the course since we wanted to make it possible for students with diverse backgrounds, from students with little to no academic experience to those who are formally pursuing a university degree, to be able to join and engage with the course. Thus, also drawing a pool of activists and non-activists to the classroom. In this way, even when there may still be gaps in accessibility for all, we wished to create a dynamic learning environment where a variety of different experiences could meet and inspire class discussions and group work. To accommodate disciplinary and cultural diversity in student backgrounds, we also work with a range of different teaching methods based on students active participation in learning, to supplement the traditional teacher-focused lecture style. For example, the students are invited to keep a reflexive journal that they fill out during the ten weeks of the course to encourage them to focus on their own learning process and, in preparation for their final written assignments (the course paper), the students provide constructive feedback on each others' work-in-progress. The lectures and seminars also include different learning activities such as analyses of media content, group presentations and small preparatory assignments that activates students' previous knowledge that may affect their relationship with other animals. This has allowed us to collectively address the present state of affairs with new and unexpected elements, thereby opening up a space in which the project of animal liberation is not only a matter of discussion, but also within the realm of possibility.

Since 2012, the course has been successfully completed by hundreds of students, with both activists and researchers involved in the roles of either lecturers or stu-

dents. As a result, the course eventually grew into a platform for further exchanges within the university which in February 2016 formally became known as the Lund University Critical Animal Studies Network. The forming of the network has been pivotal for increasing the visibility of the research area in a Swedish context and beyond. Over the past years, the network has hosted visiting scholars and graduate students from across the world and been involved in organising research seminars and an international conference. In addition, with the involvement of more scholars, the open-access journal *Politics and Animals* was launched in 2015.

The year 2022 marked the 10-year anniversary of the course. This milestone brought forth a dialogue and reflection over the course's history, as well as of its future prospects. We feel fortunate that what started as a one-course offering driven by an idea could turn into a decade-long project of education and emancipation for animals. A realisation quickly took place upon this occasion: although the classroom constitutes a key space for CAS intervention, its discussion and debates do not need to be confined to it.

With this in mind, the teachers involved in the course now wish to showcase the types of discussions we have seen taking shape throughout a decade and acknowledge the great intellectual work of our students, teachers, and supporters. After all, the course was launched with the idea of spreading CAS to a broader public, and this book is yet another part of that endeavour. This is, at the same time, aligned with an overall goal in CAS of tending bridges between academia and activism. The present volume is a compilation of texts from current and previous teachers, invited lecturers, and students who have agreed to share their course papers. We aim for the anthology to showcase the diversity of the course and the CAS field more generally and to communicate complex matters in an accessible way.

The content spans many areas, but some recurring themes can be discerned, according to which the chapters have been organised. Acknowledging the course's placement at the Department of Communication and Media, the first group of texts are critical analyses of media content. In the opening contribution, María R. Carreras and Laura Fernández offer an overview of central concepts in CAS and media analysis and discuss hegemonic media representations of nonhuman animals. The following two chapters dive into specific cases of media representations of animals. Based on a critical discourse analysis of the media coverage of the killing of a police dog, Diesel, during the November 2015 attacks in Paris, Frank

Schreier and Lu Zheng demonstrate how prevailing discourses concerning terrorism and service dogs come to legitimise violence and the use of dogs for the purpose of law enforcement. Gina Song Lopez (Chih-Lan Song) employs the case of the Japanese manga/anime series *One Piece* to analyse how fictional depictions of gender, animality, and meat eating ultimately are underlined by real-world structures. Her chapter foregrounds how popular media might further influence matters of consumption, perceptions, and behaviours which have implications for animal lives.

The following set of texts deals with activism for animals. Eva Haifa Giraud shares her experience of teaching as a guest lecturer on the course, reflecting on the potentials of adopting critical pedagogical methods focused on learning from activism based on a study of anti-McDonalds activism in the UK. J. Kovanen presents an anarchist critique of civil disobedience as a tactic or method to achieve animal liberation since it is based on a problematic “logic of submission” that runs counter to the movement’s liberating goals. Naja Yndal-Olsen gives nuances to the classical welfarism-abolitionism divide in animal rights activism through a case study of a campaign against the production of a fast-growing chicken breed. She investigates how activists make sense of and navigate strategic tensions in practice. Closing off this section, Lena Lindström offers a personal account based on experiences from animal shelters and sanctuaries for previously exploited animals, reflecting on the pitfalls of idealising sanctuaries.

In the third section centering on art, we are proud to include critical discussions on art and original art contributions. The first is a compilation of poetry, paintings, and photos by Linnea Ryshke, stemming from weekly visits to a nearby zoo. In the form of a personal reflection and ‘imagined’ conversation with a cow, documentarist Kristina Meiton engages the reader, and potential audience, in her effort to challenge species hierarchies and her own human gaze with the purpose of representing cows as individuals. Eva-Marie Lindahl writes about the professed “love” for animals of artist Rosa Bonheur, taking on forms that seem far removed from actual love. Finally, Julia Lindemalm presents photos from organic and conventional pig farms along with a process diary describing the emotionally taxing process of acquiring them.

Finally, we present a section dealing with specific areas of animal use, from farmed animals, to vivisection and pet keeping. Daniel Burgos-Nyström examines the case of fish involved in aquaculture and their increased reframing as ‘blue

foods' under a sustainability agenda. His contribution provides a timely cautionary note to avoid perpetuating the invisibilisation of animal others in global climate efforts. Astrid Totté traces anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism in her family's interactions with the dog Luke and discusses how anthropomorphic practices can serve functions of both love and domination. Charlotte Lim discusses the intersection of gender-based and speciesist violence in the egg industry. Lim further adopts a critical intersectional and feminist analysis to interrogate how bringing down harmful power structures require acknowledging the interconnectedness of feminist and vegan commitments. In the final piece of the compilation, Núria Almiron gives an overview of the vivisection industrial complex and its lobbying power. Her chapter sheds light on the capacity of the vivisection industrial complex to shape public narratives, opinions and policies that promote and justify animal experimentation.

Reimagining Species Relations, featuring Linnéa Ryshke's captivating artwork on the cover, hints at the emergence of something yet to be fully realised. It aims to inspire to unsettle current norms and actively shape a multispecies future founded on mutual respect for all sentient beings. We extend our sincere gratitude to all the contributors to this anthology and to the course at large. May this publication serve as a seed for a more compassionate world for each and every sentient being, nurturing empathy across species boundaries.