

Monster Farm: Parameters of Life in the Plantationocene

Bob Kuřík

From time to time,¹ I wonder what and how the master of critique George Orwell would write if he lived now, soon after the turn of the 21st century? What allegorical satire would he create if his *Animal Farm* were to remain implicated, albeit in some contemporary attire? Writing an updated *Animal Farm 2* would certainly be a challenge, but perhaps not in the way it would seem at first sight. While Stalinism, the totalitarian state and revolutionary dictatorships which were originally under criticism are largely a thing of the past, this does not mean that today there is nothing to write about in regard to political regimes, especially for a radical socialist like Orwell. Thus, the problem would not be in working with the subject matter. Much more insidious would be to work with the template itself; that is to say, with an actually existing form of an animal farm, which would place obstacles difficult to overcome in the path of the author's creative work and allegorical imagination. What exactly do I mean?

Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* during World War II and it was first published in August 1945 (Orwell 1945), just two years before the new Act on Agriculture came into force in the UK, granting farmers subsidies to introduce new technologies into farming. It is this law that is sometimes associated with the beginning of the era of intensive agriculture, the growth and expansion of which was so extensive in the second half of the twentieth century that so-called factory farming dominated many other farming practices. Orwell, at that time, set his story on a small-scale, family farm, where Farmer Jones and his wife raised a variety of animals, ranging from pigs, goats, cows, hens and sheep to cats, dogs, ravens, horses and donkeys. It is precisely this diversity of species that the author was able to exploit in a creative way, because it provided him with the means of comprehensively portraying the dynamics of different parts of a criticized totalitarian system, from leaders to security forces, the media, workers and sages. The contemporary Orwell, on the other hand, would face the template of the industrial farm. But how could he portray anything on the basis of a single-species environment in which he would have only one actor-species of animal to work with? Indeed, even the most sinister of regimes, seeking to produce a standardized and one-dimensional human, as Orwell pointed out in his novel, *1984* (Orwell 1949), needs several types of character for its drama.

But let's leave Orwell to Orwell. Industrial farming does not have to be a good basis for allegorical novels about political ideologies in order to tell us something about the contemporary world. Animals from farms can be something different than allegorical personifications serving only as bridges to stories of others. Intensive farming and the entire animal-industrial complex, in themselves, content an important story, as they constitute an example of one of the key problems we face today, in the Anthropocene, i.e. in the time of decisive and geologically evident influence of modern man on planet Earth. The problem is the making of plantation monocultures.

The Plantationocene

The Anthropocene is most often associated with the industrial revolution and the advent of modernity, in which the coal-consumption-demanding factory adjusted to machine-dependent mass production, became the model for the organization of work, space and society.. Yet American

¹ Díky Vojtovi Peckovi, Míše Kuříkové a Tereze Stöckelové za podnětné připomínky ke starším verzím textu.

anthropologist Sidney Mintz showed in the mid-1980s that one could actually see the plantation system to be the model for and driver of the factory. (Mintz 1985) Studying the historical globalization of cane sugar production and consumption, Mintz revealed that it was on the plantations born in the Caribbean during early 16th century colonialism, that the initial methods of factory organization were forged – be it the intimate connection between monoculture/product and demanding and precarious work performed by slaves, workers or immigrants; emphasis on increasing efficiency and productivity linked, inter alia, to the implementation of technological and mechanical innovations; the temporal and spatial organization of work, within which concrete steps are tied together in causal relations; discipline and accuracy; or mass production of one product in as large a quantity as possible. It is this combination of field and factory that is at the heart of the agro-industrial plantation system adopted by modern factories.

Thanks to the above, we might even wonder if the onset of the Anthropocene already arrived with colonialism in the 16th century, i.e. two centuries earlier than most often mentioned. In October 2014, social and natural scientists associated with the multiannual AURA project (Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene) came up with a new term, the Plantationocene, in order to capture, in Donna Haraway's words, "the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations." (Haraway 2016, p. 206)

The gradual transformation of the Earth into a plantation did not end with colonialism or the slave trade. On the contrary, it still persists and proliferates today, as can be seen in intensive agriculture; in the transformation of multi-species communities into monocultures, like those of spruce or rapeseed here in the Czech Republic; in the unprecedented growth of African palm plantations and their associated worlds, which Michael Taussig (Taussig 2018) dealt with in a fascinating, magical-ethnographic way; or in the globalized animal-industrial complex. After all, the greatest immediate threat to the Amazonian forests today is not the increase in global temperature, but the agro-industrial lobby in South America, which needs more and more space for its plantations and farms. The planet's monoculturalization leads not only to the disappearance of Earth's diversity of life to such an extent that the Anthropocene is linked to the so-called Sixth extinction, but also to the unprecedented control of life forms that exist in monocultures. What exactly does this control of life mean?

Parameters of Intensively Farmed Life: Simplification and Enforcement

It was Michel Foucault who showed that modernity, in the 18th and 19th centuries, was established in social practice in parallel with life as a biological process entering the sphere of governmentality. (Foucault 1999) In other words, he correlated modern power with the proliferation of biopower and biopolitics aiming at regulating and controlling the biological life of the population as a whole and of each individual through newly established sciences such as epidemiology, statistics, but also eugenics, new procedures like vaccination and new categories such as natality, mortality or life expectancy. When humans are alive and healthy for a longer period of time, he is also prolonging his productive age, and productivity was paramount to the modern organization of industry.

Since biological life has always been and is constitutive of other species besides humans, the bioregulatory mechanisms of control have spread to non-human spheres of modernity in which they have acquired their own logic and dynamics. And if plantation systems existed, as I say above, at the birth of modern organization of nature and production, as part of which they remain key today, then it is not surprising that these mechanisms have been growing and continue to grow

enormously. In industrial-based farming, two interconnected processes are taking place: the simplification of life and the enforcement of life.

As individual participants of the AURA project, gathered around Anna Tsing and Nils Bubandt, have repeatedly shown and emphasized in recent years, all eukaryotic life is cultivated through complicated and fragile, multi-species interlocking of animals, plants, fungi and inorganic materials, in complex ecosystems. (Tsing et al. 2017) Nevertheless, these complicated and complex networks interfere with a modern organization of space and production as it cannot process them. In fact, modern administration needs to cut particular life forms out from complex braids, in order to operate with them on the one hand individually and thus in isolated units, but on the other hand within a mass grid and geometric arrangement of hundreds of such units, and thus orderly and replaceably. Such a procedure, as Foucault has shown through, among others, the example of panoptical architecture and practice in modern prisons, enables both the individual body and the collective body to be controlled, organized and directed towards the desired goals. (Foucault 2000)

It is in intensive livestock farms that the modern process of cutting out, disconnecting or simplifying life takes on monstrous dimensions. Disconnection from multi-species complexes has become *condicio sine qua non* here. It takes place systematically, in a controlled manner and on several levels.

Animals in industrial farms have almost no opportunity to interact with other species because they are organized with hundreds or thousands of their breed, in premises designed with simple but effective systems of walls, gates, fences and/or cages. Writing here about the lack of interaction with otherness, I am not just referring to the loss of Orwellian farm biodiversity, but also to disconnection from one's own microbes. Animal bodies are preventively and routinely doped with antibiotics to control infection, while the halls are regularly, thoroughly disinfected to avoid contact with microorganisms. In addition, in many cases the industrial animal does not come into contact with the environment, landscape or climate either, as it is kept inside the halls under standardized and unchanging conditions. The cutting off of an extremely strong bond also occurs between the parent and its offspring, which, as Lucie Žeková (2013) has shown, is particularly painful. What is more, the animal is disconnected from its own body; not only from the aforementioned microbiotic world and the dynamics of its own immunity, but also from the possibilities of movement, as these are limited by the material organization of the intensive farming space. Last but not least, the animals are cut off from hormonal processes. These are transformed by several industrial superpowers, headed by the US (but it is not the case in the EU), by the use of growth and genetically modified hormones, which accelerate the development of required parts. Finally, the industrial animal is disconnected from the phylogeny of its own species. It is fully subordinate to bioregulatory breeding mechanisms, those close relatives of the ill reputed eugenics. It was breeding that proved to be crucial for the enormous boom in intensive farming, because it allowed the classification, distinction and above all simplification of life, to just a few dozen types of breed, a necessary step for standardizing the supply and demand of livestock production and developing the global market.

Simplification, cutting off, disconnection and isolation of life in a materially enclosed and modernly organized space leads, among other things, to the animal becoming completely invisible and inaudible. If I return to Orwell in this context, it is likely that had it been today he would in the first place never have arrived at the idea of criticizing anything allegorically through the depiction of an animal farm. In the 1940s, he was inspired to use an animal farm image when, as a casual passerby, he saw a young boy whipping a draft horse on a narrow path every time the horse strayed from it. It is very difficult to meet a living animal from industrial farms today, if not packed into the back of a truck when being transported from farm to slaughterhouse. Instead of live

animals, Orwell today could meet their graphic portrayals in public spaces on promotional materials and farm logos. We had better not think about what he would write if his template were a depiction of farmed animals as cute and smiling characters who couldn't wait to be slaughtered or even slaughter themselves. Material isolation and simplification of life conceals and at the same time completes semiotic domination.

Why should animals actually live such a simplified life? Because of meat, milk and eggs: because of the animal commodity. Modern man has reduced the intensively farmed animal to one purpose of existence - to give products while itself being a product; to be a working slave and at the same time a production tool. Plantations transform life in such a way that, in the words of Anna Tsing, they "create assets for future investments." (Tsing 2017, p. 51, 52) All other circumstances of life that are incomprehensible or incommensurable in this one-dimensional teleology, become expendable, and thus cut off and simplified. In other words, they become an unnecessary cost in the central logic of profit calculation. The animal is transformed into an organic machine that is conducted to maximize productivity within this logic, both in the body of the individual and in the sense of factory farming as a whole.

That is why such a life is enforced (Haraway and Wolfe 2016) and not put to death, sacrificed, left to be or not lived. It is for this reason that such a life is sustained, actively managed and slaughtered at a precisely calculated time rather than killed or murdered. In an ideal scenario, death is postponed until profitability reaches its peak. And then it is enforced, just like the life leading up to it.

Whoever wants to dominate the sustenance of life must control its reproduction and thus its source. Therefore, total biotechnological control of the reproduction of life composes the basis of enforcement. The reproduction, of course, is intended to be fully subordinated to modern hierarchical organization, not only because of the making of some products, such as milk or veal, but also so that the animal factory can produce optimally, according to clearly calculable criteria and thus *en masse*. Insemination is a complex process which involves, in addition to the eggs of animals from intensive farms and sperm purchased from breeding stations, calculations of financial savings, health risks, spatial constraints, state and legal regulations, administrative work, material quality improvement and, last but not least, the calculation of certified assistance, whether in the form of veterinary knowledge or in zootechnical practice.

It is the interplay of these two central processes of farming life, simplification and enforcement that support and structure industrial farming. The animal's life is completely transformed by modern farming conditions, not only with regard to social aspects or those relating to the ecosystem, but also in evolutionary, biological and genetic spheres. On the one hand, life is cut off from multi-species interlocking, and on the other it is forced and manipulated on multi-layered but unidirectional levels, into interaction with a single species: modern man. Rather than talking of the life of an animal being changed, it is more accurate to say that such a life is made from scratch, and yet there are minor forms of resistance: from the unrest accompanying the separation of the mother from her offspring, via cannibalism and self-harm, which reduce profits, to mass licking of disinfected walls, which, as an unwelcome form of collective activity, disturbs the modern order of obedient bodies organized individually in space.

As can be seen, the Orwellian farm of diverse animals has been replaced, in just seven decades, by a contemporary farm or rather by breeding of monocultural monsters. In the Plantationocene or the Anthropocene, modern man has become the creator of a number of such mutants and hybrids. And as such, he has more boldly than shyly put himself in the position of God.

The Dangers of the Modern Monster

Plantation systems embody the modern dream of a simplified and mass produced life because, according to this, only life stripped of complex multi-species entanglements, ambiguity and complexity is easily controllable, profitable and redirectable towards elected goals. However, monocultural life is the life of modern monsters, and as such it becomes a threat. Modernity cannot process monsters, though, which Bruno Latour noted when he showed that modern man, in his pursuit of purification of categories, spheres, specializations, lives and ontological boundaries, is often unable even to register the constant new blends (hybrids) it produces, let alone to deal with them. (Latour 2003)

As has already been said, animals from intensive farms from part of these modern mutants. They are plantation monsters whose life has been simplified and massified through hauling into a multi-level relation with single species of modern man, and as such they have pervaded a number of contemporary issues of the Anthropocene, or, better, the Plantationocene: from the effects of global warming, to which farms make a major contribution, via the Sixth extinction or overpopulation of human and his/her appetite followed by the excessive growth of industrial farms, to the world's pandemic diseases, which industrial animals and modern humans are predisposed to or the generation of unknown and deadly superbacteria resistant to antibiotics.

We live in a world of plantations, monocultures and industrial farms which turn The Earth full of complicated and impassable crossroads of biodiversity and complex and regenerative ecosystems, into a transparent, ordered and easily passable space consisting of several major and unidirectional corridors of gigantic proportions and hierarchical arrangement. In such a world, a few sparks are enough to let all fire break loose, and plenty are enough for us to not even to have noticed that we have already been burning for a long time.

Sources

FOUCAULT, Michel. *Discipline and Punish (Dohlížet a trestat)*. Prague: Dauphin, 2000.

HARAWAY, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in Chthulucene*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2016.

HARAWAY, Donna J. and WOLFE, Cary. *Companions in Conversation*. In HARAWAY, Donna J. *Manifestly Haraway*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, page 231.

LATOURE, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern (Nikdy sme neboli moderní)*. Bratislava: Kalligram, 2003.

MINTZ, Sydney. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1985.

ORWELL, George. *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1945.

ORWELL, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1949.

TAUSSIG, Michael. *Palma Africana*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018.

TSING, Anna L. *A Threat to Holocene Resurgence is a Threat to Livability*. In BRIGHTMAN, Marc and LEWIS, Jerome. *The Anthropology of Sustainability: Beyond Development and Progress*. London: Palgrave, 2017, pages 51–65.

TSING, Anna L., SWANSON, Heather A., GAL, Elaine and BUBANDT, Nils (eds.). *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

ŽEKOVÁ, Lucie. *To Talk About Alice or The Example of Bomorfization (Mluvit o Alici aneb ukázkový příklad bomorfizace)*. In STÖCKELOVÁ, Tereza and ABU GHOSH, Yasar *Ethnography:*

Improvisation in Theory and Field Practice (Etnografie: improvizace v teorii a terénní praxi).
Prague: SLON, 2013, pages 36–51.