Animal Studies Journal

Volume 6 | Number 2 Article 15

2017

[Review] Dinesh Wadiwel. The War Against Animals

Philip Armstrong
University of Canterbury

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj

Part of the Art and Design Commons, Australian Studies Commons, Creative Writing Commons, Digital Humanities Commons, Education Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Film and Media Studies Commons, Fine Arts Commons, Philosophy Commons, Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons, and the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Armstrong, Philip, [Review] Dinesh Wadiwel. The War Against Animals, *Animal Studies Journal*, 6(2), 2017, 237-247.
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol6/iss2/15

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

[Review] Dinesh Wadiwel. The War Against Animals

Abstract
Are humans at war with nonhuman animals, either literally or metaphorically? What might it mean for human-animal studies – and for human-animal relations – to say so? Responding to these questions with considerable eloquence and by drawing upon a wide range of references – including 19thcentury theories of war, Continental theory, actor-network theory, and animal rights philosophy – Dinesh Wadiwel produces an argument that surprises, provokes and enlightens.

This journal article is available in Animal Studies Journal: https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol6/iss2/15

[Review]
Dinesh Wadiwel. The War Against Animals.
Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015. xii, 302pp.

Philip Armstrong
University of Canterbury

Abstract: *Are humans at war with nonhuman animals, either literally or metaphorically? What might it mean for human-animal studies – and for human-animal relations – to say so? Responding to these questions with considerable eloquence and by drawing upon a wide range of references – including 19th-century theories of war, Continental theory, actor-network theory, and animal rights philosophy – Dinesh Wadiwel produces an argument that surprises, provokes and enlightens.*

The thesis of Dinesh Wadiwel's *The War Against Animals* is its title. That is to say, a major aim of the book is to persuade the reader that humans' relationship to animals, for the most part, really does constitute an actual state of war. By eloquently spelling out how this claim can be justified, Wadiwel offers a variety of new and incisive ways of thinking about the politics of human-animal relations. My experience of reading the book was that, from an original position of some scepticism (*but it's only a war metaphorically speaking*), I soon became convinced of the material and literal accuracy of the claim.

In the first place, Wadiwel suggests there is no other word, in English at least, that describes more accurately a relationship that is 'primarily hostile', that is more often than not 'combative or at least focused upon producing harm and death', and that entails such 'a monstrous deployment of violence and extermination' (Wadiwel, 5, 6). It seems difficult to disagree with this, once we consider the extent to which modern societies structure humans' relationship to animals as one of absolute domination, in ways that are almost always enacted violently or guaranteed by the possibility of violence. The evidentiary examples are everywhere: the slaughter of agricultural animals, the hunting of wild animals, the culling of managed wildlife, lethal 'control' of pest species, the 'sacrifice' of laboratory animals, the 'euthanasia' of unwanted companion animals (including the undesirable offspring of pedigree breeds), and so on and on.

Of course, the claim requires some rethinking of how the idea of 'war' should be understood. Drawing on the nineteenth-century Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz' treatise *On War*, Wadiwel conceives it as 'a phenomenon of mass or corporate organised violence that aims at total domination' rather than, more narrowly, as 'an engagement that is intentionally fought between two armed combative (human) opponents' (Wadiwel, 16-17). And surely this too must be conceded. Even if we confine the definition to human populations, there is no doubt that wars have throughout history been fought between violent aggressors and non-combatant populations: total war, collateral damage, collective punishment, blanket bombing, siege, and genocide – not to mention both terrorism and the 'war on terror' – are all forms of mass belligerence conducted in this fashion.

The first advantage of Wadiwel's deployment of the notion of war is that it demands recognition of the overwhelming role of violent domination in humans' relationships with animals. In this respect, speaking of a 'war against animals' functions as a technique of

defamiliarisation: a way to provoke us into perceiving in revealingly unfamiliar ways those common human-animal engagements that we too often take for granted – even (or especially) those that seem harmless. Because the modern campaign of human mass violence towards animals is so pervasive, and such a fundamental aspect of the very structure of modern society; because our food production, our inhabitation of the environment, our medical and pharmaceutical systems, and even our philosophical conceptualisations of our own being all rest upon this campaign, it has become normalised and naturalised. Indeed, 'violence towards animals is configured as non violence, and … forms of violence are rendered as *beneficient*' (Wadiwel, 18). Hence, for example, the limitation of the kind of animal welfare intervention that aims to deliver the animal to slaughter more quickly, and with less distress or possibility of resistance. The most 'humane', supposedly peaceful, forms of slaughter are the quickest, the most frictionless; they are those forms of slaughter that allow least possibility for animals to struggle – which also, of course, happens to make them the most economically advantageous for the industries that carry them out. For this reason, argues Wadiwel, "we must look for war precisely where it is discursively coded as "peace"' (18).

The work of Michel Foucault constitutes a major theoretical influence upon Wadiwel's conceptualisation of war as a fundamental structure of modern society. In a series of lectures published in English under the title *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault suggests that war is 'the motor behind institutions and order'; that 'a battlefront runs through the whole of society, continually and permanently, [so that] [w]e are all inevitably someone's adversary' (Foucault, 50-1; qtd in Wadiwel, 19). While Foucault himself shows little or no interest in human-animal relations, the reformulation of his previous ideas about sovereignty in the light of this later emphasis on constitutive and endemic social warfare, whereby he comes to perceive sovereignty as 'founded upon a continuing victory in war', proves highly applicable to human-animal relations (Wadiwel, 19). Here, then, is the next twist in Wadiwel's defamiliarising but persuasive reconceptualization of war, which thus becomes 'almost perfectly internalised as a mode of sovereignty which bends the will of animals to our own' (24).

For Wadiwel, ethical and moral-philosophical approaches to animal suffering (Peter Singer's utilitarianism, for example, or Tom Regan's Kantian perspective) fall short precisely because they fail to interrogate with sufficient thoroughness this internalisation of human sovereignty over animals. 'Once we assume we have a right of dominion, then it would seem

that ethics is forced to attend to questions of how we use this dominion; that is, how we use animals, rather than whether we should use them in the first place' (22). Wadiwel treats with suitable scorn the kind of 'lifeboat case' thought-experiment to which analytic philosophers are so attached. Imagine a dog and four humans in a lifeboat, says Regan, which only has room for four beings in total: would not the inevitable choice be to throw the dog overboard? As Wadiwel points out, it is only our belief in the pre-existing sovereignty of humans over animals that confers on humans the right, responsibility, and capacity to make such calculations in the first place, or to imagine ourselves doing so. The dog has therefore, as it were, been thrown off the boat before it was even launched – indeed, before it was built. 'The challenge', Wadiwel insists, 'is to identify and unpick sovereignty in the first instance, rather than attempt to construct an ethics after sovereignty has organised hierarchical divisions' (55). Moral-philosophical approaches are incapable of interrogating this pre-existing condition of sovereignty, he suggests, because the questions arising from human-animal relationships are primarily political rather than moral ones.

The first section of *War Against Animals*, which focuses on biopower, begins by outlining the notion, drawn from Giorgio Agamben and Carl Schmitt, that sovereign power can be understood as constituting itself, in a primary and fundamental way, by means of its ability to carry out lawfully the very acts it forbids in principle: for example the killing of humans (during war or by means of capital punishment), or their incarceration without trial or redress (again, during war or other states of emergency). In other words, 'sovereignty's definitive power lies in its ability to constitute *exception*' (Wadiwel, 72). By transferring these insights to the domain of human-animal relations, Wadiwel offers a new way to make sense of the starkest contradictions in modernity's legal and political regulation of human-animal relations. How else to account for that way in which modern legislatures regulate in favour of animals' welfare with greater stridency than at any time in history, *at the very same time* that they legitimise and protect the industries that carry out the largest-scale and most intrusive exploitation of animals ever undertaken? To take my own country for example: the Parliament of Aotearoa New Zealand has passed some of the most progressive animal welfare laws in the world, which include provisions that recognise animal sentience, prohibit invasive research on apes, and require that animals in human care must be provided not only with the basic necessities of life but also the 'opportunity to display normal patterns of behaviour' (MPI, section 4). Yet simultaneously the

same legislature passed new codes that permitted the continued use of farrowing crates for pigs, battery cages for layer hens, and a raft of other practices that blatantly contravene the requirements of the Act, not least the mandated provision of opportunities to express 'normal patterns of behaviour'. This was possible because agriculture, laboratory experimentation, animal breeding, and so on – that is, those practices that comprise the majority of human-animal interactions occurring at any given time – were recognised by the law as permitted exceptions to the principles of animal welfare. These kinds of 'exceptionary spaces' operate in just the way that, during times of war, the state can suspend some of the very democratic rights of its own citizens that it has otherwise been set up to guarantee (Wadiwel, 82-3). Moreover, it is not simply that such explicit and extreme contradictions are licensed by sovereign power: according to Wadiwel they actually embody the very techniques – the creation of states of exception, and the exercise of legal violence – by which sovereign power enacts itself as such.

If Wadiwel's first chapter, by concentrating on sovereignty, risks characterising the biopolitical violence exercised over animals as an invariably centralised or monolithic form of power, the chapters that follow mitigate that risk. Chapter Two does so by concentrating on the notion of governmentality – the means by which sovereign power is put into practice across 'a complex field of action' and through 'autonomous systems that do not rely on a centralised control apparatus' (Wadiwel, 101). In this sense, again, the war against animals cannot be understood as resembling a conventional war directed by one 'high command' against another. 'War, in this case, operates through diffused systems of government that sequence and scale technologies of violence and control to achieve a comprehensive life and death management of non human animals, securing maximal human utility' (101). Chapters Three and Four draw on the theories of Roberto Esposito, in combination with Lockean and Marxist thought, to analyse the relationship between sovereignty, biopower and property, examining the intimate complicity between capitalism and the war on animals, which collaborate to produce a 'violent form of conversion of the lives of animals into value within a human exchange system', so that 'property and commodity cohabit as artefacts of war' (Wadiwel, 147).

The process of commodification is according to Wadiwel 'inherently violent' since it involves the forced reduction of entities of all kinds into abstract (monetary) values in order that they can be exchanged. When I first read this I thought it a misappropriation of the word *violent*, since giving an object monetary value, although certainly a process of abstraction, does not

necessarily involve violence. But then I thought (even leaving aside the treatment of animals as resources and commodities) about the scale of the destruction of material entities – minerals, trees, land-forms, waterways, oceans, atmospheres – that capitalism has engineered, and about the acceleration of this destruction within an economic system that now depends on rapid obsolescence and throwaway consumption. Conceding the violent character of such reckless overproduction and overconsumption becomes even more unavoidable, as Wadiwel points out, when we think of the 'industrialised production of animals for food', which 'occurs through a coerced imposition of death in exchange of life in order to realise value' (165). I am reminded in this context of Thoreau's suggestion in *Walden* (1854) that the true cost of a thing 'is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run' (Thoreau, 40). The farming of animals for food, at least via industrial means, depends precisely upon the refusal to count the cost fully in Thoreau's terms. It requires, as Wadiwel puts it, an absolute disregard for 'what[ever] sort of life the animal may hold, what[ever] potential this life may possess, what[ever] sort of value the animal's own life may have for itself' (165).

Wadiwel's characterisation of modern human-animal relations as a war, then, seems to me immediately compelling as long as he is discussing the scale and viciousness of the many forms of systemic violence characteristic of industrial slaughter and agriculture, or the kinds of legitimised torture and incarceration carried out in laboratories by scientists of Harry Harlow's type. But he takes on a more difficult challenge when he turns to the kinds of companion-animal practices beloved of many (though of course not all) animal advocates, especially pet-keeping.

The basis for Wadiwel's critique of companion animal relationships has been prepared by his analysis of property. In law, as proponents of animal rights and liberation often point out, companion animals are subject to ownership, a situation that obviously entails a form of epistemic violence and thus enables various kinds of material violence. Wadiwel argues that these property rights over animals also enable the war on animals to be privatised. Chapter Six begins with a summary of familiar regulations governing dog ownership: such measures involve 'compulsory body modification, regimes of surveillance, and controls over movement and bodily function', and they 'allow for the categorisation of certain dogs, with reproductive controls and death for some dogs a certain outcome of this regime' (203). 'The fact that arbitrary controls and discriminatory provisions [of this kind] are tolerable', writes Wadiwel,

'… presupposes that they merely confirm a truth – a right of domination' (203): in other words, they operate according to the mode of exception characteristic of the state of war. However they also, of course, privatise these particular forms of dominion, so that the enactment of such forms of violence is given over to – indeed required of – private citizens.

Having thereby established grounds for considering modern companion animal relationships within the broader 'war against animals', Wadiwel goes on to confront probably the most currently influential challenge to his paradigm. This is the strain of theory and analysis, best exemplified by the work of Donna Haraway, especially in *When Species Meet* (2008), which insists that human-animal relations of all kinds should be thought of as spaces of inescapably complex interchange, in which humans and nonhumans alike exercise agency, share suffering, and collaborate as co-labourers, playmates, and 'messmates', mutually shaping each other as well as the outcomes of their 'entanglements'. Thus, for instance, Haraway refers to her own participation, along with her dog, in agility training, as an 'historically located, multispecies, subject-changing encounter in a contact zone fraught with power, knowledge and technique, moral questions – and the chance for joint, cross-species intervention that is simultaneously work and play' (Haraway, 205; cited in Wadiwel, 2017). Later in the same book, and elsewhere, she also uses the same rhetoric to describe much more lethal kinds of encounter, including hunting, laboratory experimentation, animal breeding, meat-eating, and animal agriculture. Wadiwel concedes that 'Haraway's project poses a challenge to the framework I have so far advanced in this book' (212), since imagining animals as co-workers would seem to entail the suspension or abandonment of a model of top-down domination or violent subjugation. Yet Wadiwel's project, in turn, poses a challenge to Haraway. As he notes, questions of violence are seldom addressed by Haraway, which can only constitute a shortcoming if we wish to account in any meaningful way for animals' own experiences of (for example) intensive farming, slaughter, blood-sports, commercial breeding, invasive experimentation, or indeed the forced operations and euthanasias that pet-owners inflict on their companions. Wadiwel, while he recognises the value of Haraway's emphasis on relationality and exchange in human-animal interactions, insists that questions of domination and violence must be re-inserted into such accounts. To analyse any given instance of co-production (whether in a slaughterhouse, a vet clinic, or a dog-agility course) 'we must understand this exchange and 'labour' precisely through the prism of violence'. At the same time '[r]esistance[,]

too, must be understood; the [animal] "worker" in this case must be conceptualised as a resistive agent, and their productivity understood in context with this resistance against processes of violence' (Wadiwel, 213-14).

I find Wadiwel's call for a renewed attention to the specific forms taken by domination, resistance, violence, and asymmetry in human-animal interactions especially compelling in this context, not least because of the very pervasive influence upon human-animal studies of Haraway's work, and that of other actor-network-style theorists. In my view (Wadiwel himself does not say this), this influence too often results in a surrender to analytical vagueness and political quietism. Too much work is being produced in the field currently (again, in my opinion) that seems content to cite Haraway's rhetorical celebrations of inter-relational complexity – such as her claim that 'we are in a knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down' (Haraway, 42; cited in Wadiwel, 206) – as if such formulations fulfil the requirements of a proper analysis of human-animal relations. Shouldn't our analytical responsibility be to *untangle* such 'knots' (etymologically, that's actually what *analysis* means), or at least to trace the interlacing threads that make them up, and to identify what kinds of power, privilege, subjugation, and violence are bound up in them? Conceiving of every human-animal interchange as merely another instance of 'reciprocating complexity' risks portraying them as equal, harmless, and therefore undeserving of or invulnerable to challenge.

To refocus attention on the violence and asymmetry of human-animal interactions does not, of course, render impossible the recognition of reciprocal relationality – it sharpens it. Indeed, as Wadiwel points out, it is precisely the continued agency of animals, their ongoing responsiveness to human interventions, that motivates and mobilises our war against them. In a vivid and powerful passage, Wadiwel writes:

> [a] chicken struggles against a human operator, as it is thrust into the poultry shackle; a hooked tuna fish, gasping, wrests its body violently on the deck of a ship; a cow hesitates before being prodded to enter the kill chute; a hog turns away as the captive bolt pistol misses.... [T]he incentive within industrialised food production will be to nullify this resistance in order to realise the full value of death: any acts of creativity or resistance by animals that delay, compromise, or ineffectively congeal value become a threat to system efficiency. (167)

The systems of domination Wadiwel describes are engaged in 'continual adaptation and reworking' with the aim of 'most effectively captur[ing] the agency, escape and vitality of animals and simultaneously maximis[ing] human use value' (16). For Wadiwel, human-animal studies therefore has the responsibility to undertake the crucial task of finding new ways of 'to conceptualise how we understand the "truth" of animal resistance, and how intense production systems work actively to mitigate and silence this political agency' (296).

By the end of Chapters Six and Seven, then, I was quite convinced that Wadiwel's insistent attentiveness to violence and domination offers a necessary (and even urgent) corrective to the common emphasis on 'reciprocating complexity'. But the next and final chapter made me think that the reverse is also true. Because this final chapter happens to focus on two literary texts with which I am very familiar –*Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moby-Dick* (1851) – I was able to notice problems with Wadiwel's analysis that arose precisely because of an under-emphasis on the unceasing dialectics of co-relationality that can be discerned in these texts, operating *simultaneously and in conjunction with* regimes of violence and domination. Discussing Defoe's novel, Wadiwel relies on Jacques Derrida's assertion that Crusoe's 'long discussions[s] [with] so many beasts' comprise 'a theatre of solitary sovereignty, of the assertion of mastery' (Derrida, 28; qtd in Wadiwel, 259). This is accurate, as far as it goes, but it's not the whole story. Derrida – as philosophers often will – misses the literary dimension of the novel, the means by which Defoe shows us, beyond and against the perceptions of his unreliable narrator Crusoe, that this solitary, sovereign mastery is never complete; that it is, on the contrary, perpetually anxious, artificial, dependent, and contingent. Defoe shows this precisely by narrating all the ways in which the beasts on the island resist, surprise, win over, or escape Crusoe: the feral cat who marches away from him when she pleases, the parrot who devastates Crusoe's sense of sovereign self-sufficiency when he unexpectedly speaks Crusoe's name, the kid goat he can't bring himself to slaughter because he's grown too attached to her.

The same problem recurs when Wadiwel turns to *Moby-Dick*. Without doubt, the concept of a 'war against animals' applies amply to nineteenth-century whaling, and to Ahab's conflict with the White Whale in particular. In fact the repeated inference that Moby-Dick might be a knowing and deliberate combatant – against whalers, if not against Ahab specifically – suggests the narrative might conform more to the traditional model of warfare, as a deliberate hostility between two sovereign entities, than to the wider pattern of the 'war against animals'.

Yet Wadiwel's reading of the novel, like Derrida's take on Crusoe, overemphasises the force of both Ahab's sovereignty and the sovereignty that Ahab (along with Ishmael, the novel's narrator) ascribes to the White Whale. While the intimation that the *agon* between Ahab and Moby-Dick represents a mutual violent clash between sovereign subjects does indeed pervade the novel, Melville systematically disrupts and undermines that very perception. He does so by interpolating, throughout the narrative, a series of chapters that focus on nonhuman elements – from tools of the whaleman's trade to parts of the whale's body ('The Line', 'The Sperm Whale's Head', 'The Battering-Ram', 'The Tail', 'Ahab's Leg', 'The Forge', 'The Life-Buoy') – each of which turns out to play a vital agentive part in the climactic events: the head of the whale, used as a battering-ram, sinks the ship; the tail destroys the whaleboats; the re-forged harpoon pierces the whale's body; the line catches around Ahab's neck and drags him to his death; Queequeg's coffin provides the 'life-buoy' that allows Ishmael to survive and tell the tale. In other words, Melville portrays the overall engagement as a network of agencies that co-produce the outcome, rather than a single combat between sovereign entities, while never failing to observe the surges of violence and power that saturate events. Recognising these elements would have enabled Wadiwel to round out his argument with an analysis that illustrated the way in which his emphasis on vectors of domination and violence has the capacity to combine with, and enrich, the kind of co-relational model advanced by Haraway and other advocates of actor-network approaches.

The War against Animals is a timely, necessary, and creatively provocative book – one that deserves to become a touchstone for human-animal studies researchers from all disciplinary backgrounds. Of course no overarching theory has all the answers, and it is no discredit to Wadiwel that at moments his argument demonstrates a need for the insights provided by other perspectives – especially in order to account more fully for the non-violent, non-hostile feelings and relationships that co-exist with the forms of sovereignty, violence, and dominion that this book so devastatingly diagnoses. After all, even the grimmest of wars cannot utterly extinguish the possibilities for generosity between combatants, or for resistant collaboration and conscientious objection.

Works Cited

Derrida, Jacques. *The Beast and the Sovereign Vol. 2*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Foucault, Michel. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76.* Penguin, 2004.

Haraway, Donna. *When Species Meet*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

MPI (Ministry for Primary Industries). *Animal Welfare Act*. New Zealand Government, 1999.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. Folio, 1980.