

2021

**[Review] Jason Hannan, editor. Meatsplaining: The Animal Agriculture Industry and the Rhetoric of Denial. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2020. 334 pp.**

Alex Lockwood  
*University of Sunderland*

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



Part of the [Agricultural and Resource Economics Commons](#), [Art and Design Commons](#), [Art Practice Commons](#), [Australian Studies Commons](#), [Communication Commons](#), [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Legal Studies Commons](#), [Linguistics Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), [Public Health Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), [Sociology Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Lockwood, Alex, [Review] Jason Hannan, editor. Meatsplaining: The Animal Agriculture Industry and the Rhetoric of Denial. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2020. 334 pp., *Animal Studies Journal*, 10(2), 2021, 235-239.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol10/iss2/15>

---

**[Review] Jason Hannan, editor. *Meatsplaining: The Animal Agriculture Industry and the Rhetoric of Denial*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2020. 334 pp.**

**Abstract**

Animal Studies Journal 2021 10(2): [Review] Jason Hannan, editor. *Meatsplaining: The Animal Agriculture Industry and the Rhetoric of Denial*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2020. 334 pp.

[Review] Jason Hannan, editor. *Meatsplaining: The Animal Agriculture Industry and the Rhetoric of Denial*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2020. 334 pp.

---

**Alex Lockwood**

Sunderland University

It is good to be reminded that denial is a rhetoric. On many fronts – political, social and scientific – progressive consensus gathers to undermine crumbling neoliberal arguments for business-as-usual relating to the environment, trade, development, biodiversity, and democracy. For those intent on shoring up the status quo, denial has become a, if not *the*, key rhetorical strategy to delay just transitions to improved systems. This is perhaps most apparent in the ecological sphere of climate denial; but the deployment of rhetorical denial has a long history in the exploitation and abuse of other animals too. (Of course, they overlap significantly: the climate science denying right-wing thinktank, the Institute of Economic Affairs, based in London, UK, was originally established in 1955 by an intensive chicken-farming businessman to keep political interference and regulation out of his battery sheds.)

*Meatsplaining: The Animal Agriculture Industry and the Rhetoric of Denial*, is a welcome and opportune collection of essays that takes a forensic look at the ways denial as a rhetoric operates. Its deployment is to maintain the rights of corporate interests to abuse and exploit nonhuman animals. It does this through a number of strategies working at different levels: legislative, corporate, mediated, social; as well as tapping into both conscious and unconscious beliefs and values. The authors in this collection break down these areas by using a range of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, exploring different fields including PR, communications, advertising, legislation, activism, trade and development materials, and Aboriginal myths and legends, to contribute a wide-ranging analysis for other animal studies scholars to further build upon.

The aim of this book, writes editor Jason Hannan, is to help academics, activists, and students to dismantle the ‘massive and powerful ideology machine, composed of think-tanks and lobby groups that sow public confusion and doubt’. It is these groups, established to protect neoliberal interests, that employ ‘the reactionary rhetoric of denial’. This rhetoric, along with billions of dollars in their war chest, has been mobilized against what Hannan identifies as the ‘threefold threat’ emerging to challenge the animal-industrial complex. These are moral, environmentalist, and biomedical: greater awareness of the sentience and suffering of animals; climate breakdown; and the rise of health-based veganism. All are existential threats for the ‘meat lobby’ and its exploitative practices. So, like any savvy business in a capitalist global state, the animal agriculture concern defends its access to profits by attempting to delegitimize the threats posed by message and messenger.

Enter denial, a tried and tested strategy from the playbooks of Big Tobacco and Big Oil, to confuse, delay, and obfuscate. As Hannan writes in the introduction, the myriad examples of denial are not ‘individual and isolated cases’ but ‘form a genre of rhetoric that’s part of a much larger and deeply entrenched system. That system has a name: capitalism’. Big Agriculture’s aim is to make us doubt our moral compasses; to question ourselves; to reinforce capitalist models. A rhetoric of denial dilutes and demeans the messages threatening their industries, even when based on overwhelming evidence and consensus. Meatsplaining, after all, owes its symbolism to Rebecca Solnit’s term mansplaining, a ‘silencing mechanism’ that ‘delineates discursive boundaries’ and that ‘establishes who possesses and who lacks credibility to speak’. In our case, who gets to speak ‘about what happens in animal farms and slaughterhouses. It defines what constitutes the normal’.

For Hannan, meatsplaining is a form of rhetoric aligned with ‘the logic of the marketplace’ that ‘colonises our thinking, our perceptions, our values, our emotions, our basic structure of expectations.’ Basing his conceptions in a Marxist reading of animals as fetishized commodities, Hannan argues, in eloquent, articulate and enjoyable prose, the ways capitalists corrode our perceptions and emotions through the ‘universal acid of exchange value’. Meatsplaining, through its rhetoric that centres denialist tropes (but do not stop there; any tactic will do if it works in the lobby), is at heart an ‘industry’ rhetoric. Yet it also works on an

individual level, mirroring in many ways the focus on individual change processes pursued by many vegan and advocate organisations. Mansplaining in its most insidious form, like gaslighting, is a narrative that divides a person from their morals, using the wedge of doubt. No wonder the animal-industrial complex is willing to adopt and further pervert this abuse in the form of meatsplaining, because ‘to a bourgeois liberal who obsessively clings to the idea of private property, the animal liberation movement thus represents a grave existential threat. Animal liberation challenges the assumptions on which the entire liberal worldview and political economic order are based’.

The book proposes that the study of rhetoric, denial, delay and aggressive obfuscation by the ‘meat lobby’ is a valid component of any (perhaps every) critical animal studies scholar’s methodology. As such, academics from a wide variety of fields, sociology to anthropology, political science to philosophy, and of course communication and media studies, will benefit from engaging with this book. As will activists looking to tell stories, frame narratives, and counter-lobby the lobbyists either in the halls of legislature or on the streets. There is much to gain from this collection in terms of tactics, strategies, and critique.

The book is separated into four sections. These look at: i) the rhetoric of the neoliberal animal-industrial complex and their justifications and obfuscations to ensure the continued exploitation of farm(ed) animals; ii) policy, trade and development, particularly how the ‘meat lobby’ shapes American, EU, and Australian attitudes toward animals; iii) how vegans are represented; and iv) forms of resistance and strategies of disruption.

There are some standout chapters that offer comprehensive analyses of their subject matter, which outline rhetorical strategies and counter strategies, and offer original insight as well as novelty of source material. Norrie Ross Singer’s opening chapter ‘Pink slime is good for you?’ analysing the irruption of media and public attention around the industry’s ‘lean finely textured beef’ (which looks like pink slime) and the industry’s aggressive legal, communications and narrative responses, is exemplary in its critique of the incident. Singer’s elucidation of scholarly methodology and rhetorical counterstrategies is clear and precise. The chapter’s scope, authority and acute analysis are an excellent start to this collection.

Kelsey Speakman's exploration of Canadian beef marketing, and Barbara Willard's analysis of the making and breaking of symbolic legitimacy in the Dietary Guidelines of Americans, should not be missed for thinking they will only benefit Canadian or American scholars. Both chapters offer deep and detailed dives into their subject, offering methodological approaches and theoretical discussions applicable to other instances of what is, after all, a global 'meat lobby' flexing its rhetorical power in PR and communications campaigns. Indeed, these three chapters (including Singer's) are rich with the detailed workings of specific elements of the rhetoric of denial, such as symbolic legitimacy, moral dichotomisation, metaphor (e.g. sustainability-as-war), valorization, and deployment of master narratives, to name just some.

There are also excellent chapters that offer close readings of either media, legislative, or social media texts. Daniel Lees Fryer dissects just 12 seconds of an egg promotional video to draw out interesting questions of how communities (online and offline) coalesce around messaging that exploits animals; many of these themes are found in Saara Kupsala's analysis of a blog marketing campaign on broiler production in Finland – although for future research blog material could be supplemented with more social media analysis. Similarly with Lisa Barca's chapter looking at anti-vegan rhetoric in the US media, the analysis is thorough, yet I would have liked to see its limited subject matter (three articles) expanded and supported with perhaps a quantitative base.

Núria Almiron's chapter on the EU meat lobby and its attempts to meatsplain away the climate emergency is forensic and unforgiving in its skewering of the neoliberal 'denial machine'. Almiron draws on the concept of the logic of the 'merchants of doubt' (from Oreskes and Conway's analysis of climate scepticism) in an excellent, deeply detailed and data-driven chapter. Similarly, Eliza Waters and Gonzalo Villanueva tackle discourses of development in the Australian meat industry with piercing acuity, while C. Vail Fletcher and Alexa M. Dare offer an inspiring insight into the 'entanglements' of human and nonhuman relations to re-world our relationships with the hope of greater interspecies solidarity. Their analysis highlights the meat lobby's efforts to emphasise the divide between species in their narratives, reinscribing through rhetoric and denial the flimsy demarcation between species of all kinds, even as it is undermined by evidence to the contrary. Drawing on Haraway, Marxist theory, and narrative 'storying',

their chapter engages with the Asian dog meat trade. However, readers would do well to read this chapter alongside critiques of Haraway and entanglement, such as those offered by Eva Giraud (*What Comes After Entanglement?* Duke University Press, 2019), which offer a more forceful politics and ethics of action for those wanting to put such theories into effective practice.

Finally, both Anita Krajnc's chapter on the Save Movement and Margaret Robinson's on veganism and Mi'kmaq legends, contemporary aboriginality and the changing nature of traditional cultural worldviews, are insightful and practical. They offer lessons for how to deploy this theoretical work challenging the rhetoric of denial in real world actions.

There are ways in which the collection could benefit its readers further. The collection is uneven, with some chapters stronger than others. There is a small amount of repetition between chapters, which doesn't matter so much when one is exploring the themes separately, but that detracts from the accumulative power of the book. Some more careful curating of the interrelations between chapters would have been welcome. There is also space for further consideration of methodological, theoretical, and applied outcomes from the insights gathered here. But perhaps that is for the next collection. Hannan's introduction and afterword do a fine job in presenting, summarising and moving the conversation towards such outcomes. Indeed, the book is well worth it for editor Hannan's evocative, storytelling prose alone. Altogether the collection is well-timed, and, as Hannan notes, 'just the start of a much larger and ongoing collective project of bringing one of the most powerful and ubiquitous forms of industry rhetoric under systematic critical scrutiny'. I look forward to volume two, with many of the excellent insights in this collection taken further, contributing to our shared ambition to end forever the exploitation of animals.