Book Review of *A Rat is a Pig is a Dog is a Boy*, by Wesley J. Smith. Encounter Books, 2010.

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Wesley J. Smith’s book is a misleading, bad-faith compendium of anti-animal rights propaganda, based on a single idea: human exceptionalism. Smith is a “Senior Fellow” at the Seattle-based Discovery Institute, a right-wing Christian organization founded by Bruce Chapman, former deputy assistant to President Ronald Reagan. The Institute promotes both capitalist ideology and an anti-science agenda through its promotion of the “intelligent design” movement and opposition to the teaching of evolution in schools. Funding is provided by wealthy evangelical Christians and its board of directors includes Howard Ahmanson Jr., a prominent figure in the Christian Reconstructionist movement, which seeks to establish a totalitarian, neofascist theocracy which would criminalize abortion and homosexuality and dismantle the welfare state. Other “Senior Fellows” are aligned with Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church.

Smith’s main theme is that humans are special, the idea of animal rights is fundamentally anti-human and that we should continue abusing and exploiting animals because we profit from these actions. He argues that recognizing any form of animal rights will cost us something, such as the pleasure we obtain from wearing leather shoes or eating a steak, so we should not do it. In other words, we should continue to exploit animals no matter how great the cost to them and how trivial the pleasures to ourselves. Smith’s argument is a crude and vulgar one, based on selfishness. Not surprisingly, it is touted as a masterpiece by those who profit from the exploitation of animals.

Given that the Fur Commission is a member of the Discovery Institute, it is unsurprising that Smith endorses this particular industry but he also supports trophy hunting, zoos, vivisection and factory farming. Indeed, Smith defends every use of animals and in his view, any human pleasure, no matter how trivial, justifies the infliction of cruelty and death to animals. Certainly, most would object to the unethical nature of this position if it concerned other humans and Smith’s claim that such savage exploitation is rendered acceptable simply because the victims are of other species is unconvincing. No doubt, owners of human slaves voiced similar arguments when their interests were
threatened by the abolitionist movement. Such appeals now strike us as anachronistic and vulgar although Smith is not alone in thinking that they are somehow serious when the victims are animals. Nevertheless, the idea that it is acceptable to inflict suffering and death on others is acceptable as long as we get something out of it is a very crude one and few are as willing to be as blatantly, or perhaps, as honestly, selfish as Smith is. Most prefer to disguise their exploitation of others with claims of necessity or even benevolence. Of course, there is some equivocation. Like most who exploit animals, Smith includes ritual professions of concern for their welfare, suggesting that animals should not be harmed “needlessly” and endorsing the work of celebrity slaughterhouse-designer Temple Grandin, who claims that her innovations make killing more humane. Although humane slaughter is clearly an oxymoron, it has been seized upon eagerly by animal-exploiters who present this as simply one more manifestation of their love for animals.

Even leaving aside the horrors inflicted on other animals and keeping only to Smith’s criterion of self-interest, there are many flaws in his position. The possibility that it might be beneficial to human health to give up a diet based on animal products is never even acknowledged, let alone seriously considered, despite a growing body of scientific evidence that links these products to serious problems, including cancer, heart attacks, stroke, diabetes, obesity and others. For example, both the American Cancer Society and the American Institute for Cancer Research have pointed out the link between meat and cancer. Similarly, Smith ignores the serious environmental problems caused by industrial animal production, including widespread pollution of air, soil and water and contribution to global warming, conditions that will create serious problems for humans. Of course, while some right-wing Christians denounce environmental threats such as global warming as a hoax, others are unconcerned about environmental degradation and eagerly embrace it as part of a supernatural plan and a sign of imminent apocalypse.

Like most who attempt to demonize the idea of animal rights, Smith focuses almost exclusively on direct actions, despite the fact that these constitute only a small portion of the efforts made by animal advocates. Most animal advocates engage in legal actions such as letter-writing, signing petitions, handing out leaflets, organizing vegan pot-lucks, taking part in protest marches, public education and so on. Most direct actions carried out by activists that Smith would characterize as “terrorists” involve the rescue of animals from situations in which they are to be maimed and killed; normally, one would consider it noble and praiseworthy to rescue others from harm. Other activists have engaged in undercover operations to expose the institutionalized cruelties of the factory farming and vivisection industries. Only a very small number of activists have engaged
in intimidation of those who abuse and exploit animals, yet Smith emphasizes these actions and he criticizes other animal advocates for not condemning them. (In fact, groups such as the HSUS have gone as far as to offer a reward for information leading to the conviction of those who planted a bomb at the home of a UCLA vivisector. However, even this is insufficient for Smith because he says the reward was not large enough.)

Even when Smith does discuss the legal activities of animal advocates he simply dismisses all of these as propaganda. He strikes a horrified tone when he warns that animal advocates are trying to influence children, characterizing this as a nefarious and underhanded plot to subvert innocent youth, much like those perpetrated by communists, marijuana peddlers or rock musicians. Yet Smith considers the far more pervasive and powerful propaganda distributed by animal exploitation industries and targeted towards children to be completely acceptable.

Smith distorts the fundamental idea of animal rights, presenting this as “the belief that it is wrong to treat human beings differently from animals.” His intent is to convey the impression that “humans will be treated like animals,” the perennial complaint of all humans who feel that they have been wronged, raised in protest against situations that range from minor inconveniences to actual atrocities. Smith does not cite any sources for his claim that this is the “common belief that unites the disparate animal rights/liberation philosophical approaches,” unsurprisingly, since none of these approaches actually maintain this position. Since humans and other animals all have various different needs, it is quite appropriate to treat them differently. What animal advocates argue is that the interests of humans and other animals should be given equal consideration.

Smith’s arguments are selective and misleading. He defends factory farming on the grounds that this provides humans with cheap meat. Smith ignores the increased costs in health care spending associated with unhealthy meat-centred diets and the environmental costs of meat production. The global meat system creates human suffering in other ways. In Latin America, vast areas of rainforest are destroyed to produce soy for use in animal feed. Along with the destruction of habitat for animals and the loss of biodiversity from deforestation, there is also the eviction of rural communities, creating landlessness and poverty and destroying indigenous cultures. For example, in Paraguay, one of the world’s major producers of soy, transnational corporations are eager to take advantage of government corruption, cheap land, lack of environmental protection, low taxes on agricultural exports. Almost all of the soy produced in Paraguay is genetically-modified and requires the extensive use of chemicals and pesticides. Tens of millions of litres of pesticides are sprayed each year, polluting the soil and water and poisoning wildlife, domesticated animals and humans.
Although indigenous communities resist the invasion of their land and oppose the spraying of pesticides, the police and paramilitary groups respond with violence, burning fields of food crops, bulldozing houses and beating and shooting people. Activists disappear and are assassinated. This violent repression has forced thousands of small farmers into city slums. These are among the hidden costs of the “cheap meat” Smith praises.

Smith also ignores the cruelties inherent in raising animals for food, endorsing factory farming because this keeps animals “safer and healthier.” This falsifies the situation in which many factory-farmed animals suffer diseases and wounds from overcrowding in filthy conditions; epidemics are only checked by massive dosing of antibiotics and the fact that many animals are killed after only a few weeks of life. Factory farming is the perfect mechanism to produce pandemics of new viruses against which we have little defence. Although healthy animals in clean environments can resist viruses, the animals crowded into factory farms are stressed, with weakened immune systems, confined in filthy conditions, living in their own waste and can only be kept alive through massive dosings of drugs. Some bacteria evolve to survive these drugs, transforming into super-viruses that are immune to the antibiotics that are the only defences humans have against them so we are engineering a global health disaster for ourselves. This is why the American Public Health Association called for a moratorium on factory farming.

Smith also rejects the idea that animals suffer in these conditions because they “cannot know what they are missing.” Whether or not animals can imagine their lives under conditions in which they would be able to make their own decisions and move freely in nature is beside the point: they undoubtedly suffer under confinement, locked in pens where they cannot turn around or kept in total darkness for most of their lives.

In addition to endorsing the commercial exploitation of animals in general, Smith also defends some specific practices. For example, he praises the mulesing of Merino sheep, widely practiced in Australia as means of preventing myiasis, or flystrike, the infestation by parasitic fly larvae that feed on flesh. In this process, shearers cut off strips of wrinkly skin from the sheep's buttocks, leaving a smooth surface which is less susceptible. Smith says the Australian wool industry is “under threat of international boycott because of a method of protecting sheep against a terrible maggot infestation.” As he does with other animal exploitation industries, Smith presents the wool industry as selflessly acting in the interests of these animals and depicts animal rights groups as trying to obstruct the benevolent operations of these industries. However, the industry’s goal is not to “protect sheep” but rather to protect their investments. Animal welfare plays no role in the wool...
industry and the problem of maggot infestation is one that was largely created by the industry, which selectively bred these sheep for more wrinkly skin, which is believed to produce more wool, and now confines huge numbers of them in confined spaces. Having created this problem, the industry then attempts to control the resulting problems (of profit loss, not sheep discomfort) by slicing off hunks of the animals’ flesh, typically without anaesthetics or painkillers. Furthermore, mulesing is just one of several painful procedures inflicted on these animals: their ears and tails are mutilated and males are castrated. When the sheep no longer produce enough wool, they are sold to slaughter. Many are crammed onto ships and sent to the Middle East and North Africa. Millions do not survive the voyage: some starve to death while others die of exposure on the open decks. Those who do reach their destination are herded roughly into non-regulated slaughterhouses where their throats are cut while they are fully conscious.

Smith defends the exploitation of animals on the basis of what he calls human exceptionalism. The same idea is taken up by other conservative Christian bioethicists such as Margaret Somerville, McGill University law professor and director of its Centre for Medicine, Ethics and Law. Essentially, they use circular reasoning to argue that humans are special because they are human and thus are entitled to special treatment. They oppose better protection and treatment of animals, whether by extending rights or personhood, because they claim this would endanger human rights. However, there is no reason why recognizing the intrinsic value of animals and protecting them from harm would necessarily lead to a lessening of respect for other humans. In any case, extending personhood to non-white humans and women may have caused a diminution of the privileges of slave-owners or men but we do not regard that a reason to rescind these advances in human rights just as there is no valid ethical reason to oppose animal rights.

This idea of human exceptionalism is nothing new but merely a restatement of what has been a central organizing principle of Western civilization, the belief that humans are completely different from and superior to all the rest of nature. It is the arrogant and deluded assertion that humans are distinct from the rest of nature and from other animals and it has served as the rationale for the ruthless exploitation of other forms of life. While Darwinism asserted the continuity of various forms of life, human exceptionalists reject this and maintain strong resistance to recognizing similarities with other beings. Essentially, human exceptionalism is merely a reassertion of speciesism and operates as a rationalization for the exercise of power without remorse.
Notes

1 Wesley J. Smith, *A Rat is a Pig is a Dog is a Boy* (Encounter Books, 2010), 6.
2 Ibid., 206
3 Ibid., 207
4 Ibid., 7