

## On Biopolitics and the Animal Turn: An Interview with Cary Wolfe

Gabriel Giorgi | New York University

**Gabriel Giorgi:** So Cary, maybe we could start talking about the bill passed by the Spanish Parliament in 2008 granting rights to the chimpanzees and gorillas, and apes. I think this is a case that illustrates some of your concerns about animal rights. Can you talk about a about that?

**Cary Wolfe:** Yeah. My interest in that bill—and of course there's a similar bill in front of the US Congress more or less continually, and with other governments—but my interest in it is, on the one hand, it's a monumental step forward historically for recognizing the not just ethical but now legal status of some nonhuman creatures, granted, on a very traditional model. So on the one hand, my feeling about that is: that's a great thing and it's long overdue. But part of the reason that I use a bio political framework to talk about this in the new book is that, from a bio political standpoint, you can see how, at one and the same time, it may be a historic advance but it's also actually really a kind of racial tokenism. Because what the bio political framework allows you to see is how these kinds of, not just racial but indeed species designations, are constantly used to cover over a more fundamental operation, which is the sort of declaration of those who belong to our community based on some kind of zoological or biological marker. And so, the interesting thing to me, and one of the things I am attracted to in bio political thought is actually this ambivalence that allows you to draw out, from the same political act, it allows you to draw out very, very different kinds of consequences. So, on the one hand, it's fantastic. On the other hand, it's actually a continuation of a kind of racial logic now being extended across species boundaries that we know from bio political thought is a very dangerous way to think about membership in a political community. And so it's that ambivalence that I'm trying to draw out in the new book.

**GG:** In some ways your discussion of animal rights, bringing in bio politics, also bringsto the fore the question of rights, the problem of rights vis-a-vis the political, no? Is that what is at stake here?

**CW:** Yeah, yeah, I would say—we talked about this last night in the lecture and then in the Q&A. I would say the same things about right discourse. You know, on the one hand, I think the philosophical and theoretical case has been made for how rights discourse is problematic. Derrida has made that point, Cora Diamond has made that point, a lot of people have made that point about rights discourse generally, on the one hand. And that's a theoretical problem. But on the other hand, one has to step back and say: well, it is easy for me sitting here, you know, as a White middle-class, you know, straight academic in North America, pointing out all the theoretical problems about rights discourse, when, in specific political settings, rights discourse has different stakes for different people, and it plays out in very different ways. And for many people it's really the one thing they have to gain a kind of enfranchisement. And so, part of my

relationship to ethical and political discourse—and this is, I think familiar to people who work in poststructuralist theory, generally—is again about this ambivalence that, on the one hand, it's possible to present a theoretical picture of rights discourse to show how rights discourse is problematic, but that's within a very specific political, sociological, historical, ideological, institutional, academic setting. So does that give me the right to walk into a community and say, 'The one card you have to play for political enfranchisement, you're going to have to give it up, 'cause back here in New York we decided, oh, no, that's a bogus theoretical discourse'? So to me, what politics is, is actually navigating that difference. And there's no formula. We know this from—I mean, I know it from working in poststructuralist thought—there's no formula before the moment of that encounter for how you navigate that difference. But to me that's actually what politics is, is the fact that there is no ground that allows you universalize or totalize that sort of response.

**GG:** Exactly, rights as a kind of not new face but changing face of politics itself, no? the discourse, the rights discourse.

**CW:** Yeah, I mean, it's a different concept of politics. My training as a student was really in Marxism and pragmatism. So I worked with, you know, Fredric Jameson, Frank Lentricchia and Terry Eagleton and people like this. And actually what pushed me into a different kind of political discourse and different concept of the political was realizing that that sort of theoretical framework didn't have a lot to say about these kinds of complicated issues around the status of nonhuman beings, or around ecological and environmental issues. I mean, there was some of that discourse around, a lot of it coming out of the anti-nuclear movement and in some sort of Green/Marxism/Rudolf Barrow, people like that. But by and large, there was really not an adequate theoretical discourse to address these kinds of questions, and to do it you just end up having a different concept of politics.

**GG:** Going back to bio politics, is it also true that bio politics—and you mentioned this yesterday, bio politics did not make so much room for nonhuman animals, no? The question of animals in bio politics, especially in Foucault—you know, Agamben is a different story, Esposito talked about it, but in Foucault the animal is almost invisible.

**CW:** That's right. I mean, one thing I'm trying to do in the new book, and really in all of my more recent work, is I'm really trying to push all of these thinkers past what they did with their own thought. And so this is true of Derrida, this is true of Luhmann in systems theory. So for example, in Derrida's work and in Luhmann's work in systems theory, they never took the step of connecting their theory of meaning—as irritability, as recursivity and so on—of connecting that with a vast body of zoological and biological knowledge about nonhuman communication in a way that people like Gregory Bateson and other people working on. And I think it's not that they weren't interested. It is just, you know, they had a lot going on and they weren't going to read that material, right, but it was there to be done. The same thing with bio political thought. I think, actually I don't think any of these people were interested in animals. I don't think Agamben is, I

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don't think Foucault is, I don't think Esposito is. And yet, it's sort of obvious in a way that the whole discourse and status of animality is something that begs to be pushed beyond its status as just a problem for human beings, as a sort of an internal problem. And so, you know, as Donna Haraway and other people have pointed out, Foucault kind of stops at the water's edge of species. Agamben I think, despite all the talk about animality, also stops. Esposito, I think stops in a different way. So that work to me, when I started working on political thought, it was obvious that that work needed to be done, and a next step needed to be taken. And that's what I'm trying to do with the new book: just to see, to see if it'll help us make sense of the kind of ambivalences that we started talking about around the resolution for great apes; to try to draw that out, and to see to what extent bio political thought can help us understand this kind of schizophrenic situation we're in with nonhuman creatures.

**GG:** Exactly, and you talked about—this I think these are some of the brilliant aspects of your talk yesterday, about how the distinction between Bios and Zoe has been redrawn—the traditional understanding of bio politics, qualified life, and the human; and Zoe as unqualified. But for animals you said this has been remapped, completely remapped. And it should be reconsidered and rethought.

**CW:** Yes, it's been completely redrawn, and to me the useful thing is: you have not one distinction—human versus animal, but two distinctions. So the human-animal distinction and the Bio-Zoe distinction are constantly in this relationship of transposition; overlapping in different ways and crossing in different ways, depending on the specific political situation. And what's interesting to me, and I talked about this last night, what's interesting to me is that you see how actually the Bio-Zoe distinction is not isomorphic with the human-animal distinction. So what we have now, as I was arguing last night, what we have now, is clearly, seems to me, the Bio-Zoe distinction applies within the domain of domesticated animals. So, on the one hand, you have animals and factory farming, who're an example of bare life if there ever was one, and, on the other hand, you have companion animals who have access to quality of food, health care, insurance, all sorts of things that are inaccessible to millions and millions and millions of the world's human population. So the Bio-Zoe distinction enables you to see that the issue really never was human versus animal. Human versus animal was a discursive way of covering over the Bio-Zoe distinction and how the Bio-Zoe distinction moves across species lines. So for me, this is a far more useful sort of theoretical tool for trying to make sense of the kind of schizophrenic situation we have right now, unless you stay for the moment in the industrialized northern countries with how animals are treated. And then when you move into other settings, then obviously that transposition is going to be different in different places.

**GG:** It is interesting that Argentina and Brazil, now, their governments, are making very significant investments in animal cloning, with the goal of transforming these countries into the main exporters of products derived from cloned animals. It is, again, another remapping of Bios and Zoe in the context of a neo developmentalist economies. So this is also global, I would say.

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**CW:** No, it is, and the interesting thing about the bio political frame is it enables you to draw out a different understanding of the desirability or not these kinds of practices. So one example that I talk about in the book, and sometimes when I am speaking on this material, is the example of synthetic meat, or in vitro meat. Now as you may know, PETA, the animal rights group, has, I think it's a \$1 million reward or something for anybody that can develop a commercially viable form of in vitro meat. Now they can create it and they can do it in the lab, but they can't really make a form that's commercially viable. So from a traditional animal-rights standpoint, there is no problem with in vitro meat. In vitro meat holds all the promise of relieving the suffering of millions and millions, in fact billions, of sentient creatures. So there is no political ambivalence or ethical ambivalence about it. But from a bio political standpoint, in vitro meat is a much more complicated affair, because it's actually an extension of the sort of manipulation of, and control of, and commodification of, and private ownership of life at heretofore historically unknown sort of capillary micrological levels. So, you know, a benefit of using bio political framework is, again, it makes you realize how—and this, I think is the fundament—what I'm attracted to in Foucault's thought—is that I think that the fundamental sort of ground tone of Foucault's thought is precisely this ambivalence. I think Foucault draws our attention to how almost all of these things, at one and the same moment, involve both power and resistance, both positive and negative balances. And, again, politics is navigating that ambivalence, for which he agrees with Derrida, I think, and with poststructuralist law generally, for which there is no formula. It's what Derrida called the undecidability. It has to be confronted in any pragmatic political configuration.

**GG:** Cary, what types of projects or intervention—from politics, from activism, or from culture—can you think of in terms of disrupting this, redrawing of this Bio-Zoe schizophrenia that you mentioned? What type of intervention do you think it would be productive in this context?

**CW:** You know, it's for the very reasons we were just talking about; I think it's a little hard to generalize from one sort of site to the next. But for me a lot of it actually is going on in art and art practices. So if you think about—and I'm partly sensitive to this because my partner is an artist and she works on animal-related material. But if you look at, you know, something like Critical Art Ensemble and the kind of work that they are doing, I think there's a sort of robust body of work now in art. And they would be one example, the artist Eduardo Kac at the Chicago Art Institute would be an example, Oren Catts who runs the SymbioticA program in Western Australia would be another example. But there's now, I think, an entire body of art that's interested in confronting the problem of the increasing commodification, and private ownership, and patenting of life in ways that are directly part of the fabric as you were talking about earlier with South America of, you know, of kind of a neoliberal globalization that I think artists, in a way, are better at drawing attention to than people in academic discourse. Probably because they just have, there's a way in which they have a broader audience, and there's a kind of a way of generating a spectacle about it, with Critical Art Ensemble, to get the kind of attention. We were just talking about the Yes Men before the interview. And I think the Yes Men are part of this movement as well. So to me, it's true that there is an established academic discourse. But I think when you get out of a sort of rarefied, academic-theoretical discourse, I think a lot of

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it actually is going on in art. Now, in the United States and North America, there is also the whole sort of locavore movement and the interest in food, and food ways; and people trying to reclaim diet and food ways from factory farming and agrobusinesses and so on so forth. But as we know, that gets very complicated vis-à-vis questions of the status of nonhuman creatures. So there's a lot of head butting between sort of animal-rights people, on the one hand, and sort of sustainability and locavore people on the other hand, like Michael Pollan, who would say 'well, it's, you know, it's okay to kill any pigs or cows as long as it's done in a small family farm and it's done in a way that's ecologically sustainable.' And the animal rights people would say 'well, hang on a second, you're still ceding to yourself the sovereign right to declare this life killable but not murderable.' And I think that's a productive disagreement between those two orientations. So that's another place I think those conversations are happening.

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**Cary Wolfe** is the author of *The Limits of American Literary Ideology in Pound and Emerson*, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture, no. 69 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); *Critical Environments: Postmodern Theory and the Pragmatics of the "Outside,"* Theory Out of Bounds Series, no. 13 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), and *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and the Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), among other books and articles. He was nominated for the James Russell Lowell Prize, Modern Language Association, 2004. Wolfe currently teaches English at Rice University in Texas.

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