



Book Review

Porkopolis: American animality, standardized life, and the factory farm

By Alex Blanchette

Duke University Press, 2020: 298 pages

Review by Stephanie Rutherford*

At the beginning of the pandemic in April 2020, then-President Donald Trump signed an executive order naming slaughterhouses and meat-packing plants as “critical infrastructure” essential to American life. The meat industry in both Canada and the US had emerged as a source of heightened COVID transmission, where workers labouring in close proximity as part of fast-moving disassembly lines faced increased exposure to the virus. Facilities were forced to close, leading to fears of a compromised food chain, and soaring prices for poultry, beef, and pork. Noting the importance of American access to protein, Trump’s move authorized the meat industry to remain open, despite the risk to workers’ (and their families’) lives.

Since Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle*, we have known that slaughterhouse work is unsafe and sometimes lethal. Exposé as an approach has animated a variety of activist, journalistic, and academic studies. The fact that these workers are usually racialized and often recent immigrants with few options has made their endangerment more politically acceptable. Tracing these horrific injustices has been, and continues to be, important work.

But there is yet another story to tell, and it is the one that anthropologist Alex Blanchette charts in a significant and beautifully crafted book. *Porkopolis* demonstrates, in often poignant and sometimes harrowing detail, how pig life and death is indeed a central node—or a critical infrastructure—of industrial capitalism. There is little space outside of the industrial pig; hogs are invisibly enmeshed in our everyday lives. The industry’s efforts to use *all* of the pig means that no part of it is economically unaccounted for, from its birth to its rendering. From pet food and gel capsules to paper money and surgical sutures, pig bodies produce an astonishing 1,100 commodities (2020, pp. 204 & 212). Put simply, our lives are made in and through what

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Blanchette calls “American animality”, even if we don’t always know this is the case. As such, Blanchette claims that rather than being exceptional sites of violence, factory farms are *completely unexceptional*, fitting as they do into “regular, ongoing processes of industrialization in other places and industries” (2020, p. 27).

This is not the only way in which Blanchette unsettles what we think we know about factory farms. Through careful ethnography of “Dover Foods” in the Midwest town of “Dixon”, Blanchette asks us to see how an entire town can be reorganized around animal life. But the author also points to a much deeper remaking. Across the five parts and 10 chapters plus an epilogue, *Porkopolis* demonstrates that “[m]odern meat, as the model is unfolding in the United States, revolves around remaking the lives and labor of human beings to make them amenable to capitalist animality” (2020, p. 4). For instance, Chapter 2 focuses on how biosecurity protocols have begun to structure human sociality, dictating who can live and socialize with whom so as not to pass porcine pathogens across the live (birthing and raising) and plant (killing and processing) sides. Chapter 4 explores how workers have to become increasingly attuned to the specificity of individual pigs as they engage in the (sex) work of sow insemination. And Chapter 8 examines how workers’ bodies are medically assessed by a Dover-sponsored clinic as (un)suitable for different kinds of work across the industrial pig’s life and death cycle. As Blanchette asserts, like the industrial pig, those who work with them are also thought of “as distinct and segmentable physiologies” (2020, p. 181). The claim that Blanchette reiterates is that humans are reshaped—bodily and affectively—in their making of animal capital.

In a particularly effective example of the imbrication of human and porcine life, Blanchette examines how the industry has reached such extremes of fecundity that sows no longer have enough teats to suckle their enormous litters. The industrial pig, as a species, is becoming “systematically runt” (2020, p. 141). As a result, much of the labour on the live side is devoted—with practices of empathy and care—to making these runts live so that they can eventually be slaughtered. These “hyperprolific sows” (2020, p. 139) draw human workers into intimate animal orbits in new ways; as Blanchette writes, “The biology of the industrial pig is not contiguous with its body. It requires expanding arrays of labor to survive” (2020, p. 124). And yet, Blanchette is careful to note that while it is the desire of Dover Foods “to directly own and engineer every stage of the pig’s life-and-death cycle” in order to make them “unendingly more uniform over time” (2020, pp. 15 & 17), this goal remains elusive. Pigs and people evade these totalizing moves.

Not everyone will love this book, not least because Blanchette eschews pat and easy answers to our entanglement with industrial animal life. However, those who is interested in the intersections among political economy, food politics, and labour studies will find it extremely valuable. Toward the end of the book, Blanchette notes that the problem is not just with these specific places, but with the capitalist system that generates them. So, Blanchette asserts, we cannot simply give up meat; we have to commit ourselves to a more radical and uncertain politics.

The author proposes is “a positive politics of inefficiency” (2020, p. 236) in which aspects of animal and human lives can remain nonfungible and outside commodification. It was here that I longed for a more sustained engagement with the political possibilities and ethical practices of human and animal refusal: what might this mean and how might we affect this refusal? But it seems to me that this is too much to ask of an already complex and accomplished book.

Blanchette successfully offers an ethnography of the industrial pig, and has shown us how deeply invested we are in porcine life and death. I contend it is up to us to craft new practices of care between humans and pigs beyond their commodification.

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