

**Reconsidering *Zoë* and *Bios*:
A Brief Comment on Nathan Snaza's "(Im)possible Witness"
and Kathy Guillermo's "Response"**

Richard Kahn
UCLA

In his essay, "(Im)possible Witness: Viewing PETA's 'Holocaust on Your Plate'," included in Volume 2, Issue 1 of this journal, Nathan Snaza draws upon Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical theory of life as genocidal concentration camp to better understand PETA's controversial campaign about the Holocaust's relevance to the speciescidal factory farm.¹ Snaza makes a number of salient and critical points and it is not my intention here to review the full range of his piece. Neither do I seek to suggest that the piece is deficient in its task or conception. Agamben is one of a handful of highly influential philosophers on the global scene, and his theory of post-Auschwitz applications of State power makes for a compelling link as Snaza asks us to think about the commercialized mass-murder of industrial farming and PETA's spectacular campaign against it.

As the essay explains, Agamben's work highlights how the rise of political concepts such as the sovereignty associated with the modern nation state and the corresponding notion of rights have a dark side which its logic cannot overcome. For Agamben, inclusion within the sphere of rights and the creation of democratic vistas has always come at the cost of the exclusion of others who are then included within a political terrain as non-citizens and whose very life and death is subject to the whims of totalitarian State power. As Snaza alludes, Agamben traces this process to the roots of democracy in Athens, where land-holding males could become cultural subjects of a life because of their difference from women, children, slaves, non-Athenians, animals, and plants who were excluded from this realm. Culture, designated by the Greek term *bios*, was opposed to nature, known as *zoë*, and there was (as Aristotle theorized) a continuum between them to which Athenian non-citizens were relegated as natural beings within the domain of culture.² This is what Agamben (and Snaza) refer to when they speak of the ethical problem of *zoë* as the object of the biopolitical.

Of course, this amounts to a philosophical genealogy of what is more commonly described as "dehumanization," and so it is Agamben's thesis that Western democracies cannot ever "humanize" the planet in the way that Bush and Blair claim they seek to do, because their very humanity comes at the cost of the type of dehumanization that girds social domination and oppression generally, and occasionally manifests as the horror of an Auschwitz, Guantanamo Bay, or Abu Ghraib prison camp wherein people are politically reduced to "animals." Again, Agamben's major concern is that imperialist globalization and war is making the whole world a sort of camp such as these. However, Snaza is right to addend the concern that if it is wrong to de-humanize in this manner, it is correspondingly wrong to de-animalize non-human animals by making them over into mere objects for cultural exploitation. When Snaza argues that non-human animals can have a politics (a point which needs clarification), I take it that he means exactly this:

that, as *zoë*, they have lifeworlds of their own that could and should be free to exist beyond the political categories society has extended over them.

Thus, via Agamben, Snaza questions PETA's ultimate aim and is cynical about the project of working for the legal rights of non-human (and one presumes—human) animals, a strategy which would only further enmesh them in misconceived Western political frameworks. Instead, he envisions a new politics that will seek to liberate *zoë* and uncompromisingly prevent its further encampment. In his mind, this means resisting capitalist market forces that have made the State “impotent” and so he calls for counter-cultural practices such as veganism, solidarity with liberators, and various forms of direct and indirect action against corporations.

Responding to Snaza in Volume 2, Issue 2, PETA's Kathy Guillermo makes the startling claim that the ultimate aim of PETA is “apolitical” and does not have to do with the extension of rights to animals, as Snaza suggests.³ Utilizing the language of “*bios*” and “*zoë*,” she states that “we seek an evolution in the societal view of animals from *zoë* to *bios*, that is, the elevation of our concept of animals as beings who merely live to beings who share with humans ‘the form or manner of living peculiar to a single individual or a group.’” In other words, PETA is attempting to transform the Western worldview that objectifies non-human animals towards the recognition of them as being subjects of a life in the like manner of human beings.

Guillermo's response requires correction, however. To suggest that PETA's ultimate aim is apolitical and does not have to do with working for animal rights is to my mind both false and misleading. PETA's own mission statement self-identifies it as “the largest animal rights organization in the world.”⁴ While “animal rights” is increasingly used to describe all manner of pro-animal philosophies, from welfare-based reformism to revolutionary liberationism, and so one might attribute a more colloquial sense to PETA's use of the term, their mission statement clarifies that this is not the case. Asserting that, “PETA is dedicated to establishing and protecting the rights of all animals,” their statement makes it plain that Snaza is correct in describing their main objective as the extension of a liberal sense of rights to non-human animals. Further, that PETA describes its work as involving “legislation” only serves to underline that the protective rights which they seek are in fact the very rights that Agamben and Snaza have called into question.

Additionally, as I (and Snaza) have described, it is central to Agamben's theory that there cannot be a meaningful conception and actualization of *bios*—such as Guillermo says PETA seeks for non-human animals—without according them the legal status of rights, and this inclusion would then also require the further socially-included exclusion of some other order of being. Even if this classification of life were none other than plants, or fungi, the political effects would be disastrous, if Agamben is correct. For not only would that further legitimate the socio-historical exploitation of nature and the earth, but it would allow for the political logic of encampment to grow radically unchecked. Hypothetically, then, the politics of the camp could be legitimately extended into the colonization and domination of space even as non-human animals received

unprecedented cultural and political recognition. Thus, there are problems in simply working to evolve a view of non-human animals as *bios* instead of *zoë*, as it potentially advances a progressive cultural and political viewpoint towards non-human animals while legitimating a political structure that progressives should oppose.

Though always controversial as an organization, PETA's defense and practice of the euthanasia of some animals is of special importance in this context.⁵ It is not my intention here to question their policy on this matter, but rather to note that the decision to "put animals to sleep" is through and through the sort of biopolitics that makes of *zoë* its object that Agamben feels cannot be allowed to stand. It is this ability to work for the rights of animals, while also retaining the power to withdraw those rights in order to fashion their death that makes Snaza nervous.

If Agamben and Snaza are correct that there is something odious about the political history and logic of rights, however, I do not believe that a new political order is required that demands an idiom of concepts and practice that is wholly incommensurable with the present. I cannot agree with Snaza when he declares, "abandoning the concept of rights seems to be an utterly pragmatic move in the current moment." The modern history of rights, its many downfalls and shortcomings duly noted, has provided important openings for counter-hegemonic movements to oppose and transform the political system. It has served as a technology for developing greater equality and demanding forms of justice. Further, the fight for rights—be they human or non-human animal—has already made considerable headway across a wide variety of social and cultural institutions and has built up considerable force that would be lost if a more radical move to an entirely new language and objective was substituted. In this sense, to speak of pragmatics would demand the continuation of the language and political goal of "rights," even when we know that it is in some key ways wrong.

Though Snaza's essay appears at times to figure the new politics that he imagines as an attempt to radically separate *bios* (and hence biopolitics) from *zoë* in the attempt to protect the latter, I would argue that, as with Agamben, he should ultimately not stand for a separation of the two life orders, but rather the true re-uniting of them through the political and cultural reclamation of inclusively-excluded Others. This move to reconstruct the nature of both *bios* and *zoë* would likewise be pointedly different than PETA's teleological project of moving the identification of non-human animals from a place of *zoë* to one of *bios*. Instead, it will require the increased practice of our collective utopian imagination, in conjunction with an unflinching liberatory political will, to overcome the human/animal and culture/nature dichotomy that presently clouds our lives as a pervasive ideology. Standing together, then, *bios* and *zoë* are unsettling. They are challenges to us which provide us with the need to experiment and reach for untapped (or forgotten) social possibilities as we re-imagine what it is to be both human and animal in our relations.

Needless to say, if we are to better realize the form of a reconstructed animal liberation politics and culture as sketched briefly here, a greater push to jam and limit the global market economy that dulls the ethical imagination with spectacular nullities will also be

required. Further, this certainly will lead to an interrogation of “rights” as the political tools and rhetoric born of market-based governments. But the emergent reconsideration of *bios* and *zoë* need not move completely away from the project of rights as it attempts to fashion another world, though neither should a call for rights be heralded uncritically, as is done when they are defended as naturally inalienable. Rather, the “interspecies alliance politics”⁶ of the future must explore, in all its complexity, how the demand for a strong sense of rights can be used strategically to bolster the liberation movement against capitalist speciesism and its resulting smelly underbellies of institutionalized genocide and zoöcide. A moment may come, whether through our diligence or luck, that the defense of rights can be superseded as politically practicable, but it is hard to envision how the present relationship between *bios* and *zoë* can allow for their complete disavowal now. We must yet earn the right to release life from being subjected to the rule of rights, and as thinkers/activists such as Agamben, Snaza, and Guillermo all signify, it is this struggle perhaps that is at the very center of the contemporary moment’s concern.

Notes

¹ For Snaza’s essay, see <http://www.cala-online.org/Journal/Issue2/Impossible%20Witness.htm>.

² See Richard Kahn, *forthcoming*, *Toward a Critique of Paideia and Humanitas: (Mis)Education and the Global Ecological Crisis*. In I.G. Ze’ev and K. Roth (Eds.), *Challenges to Education in a Global World*, New York: Peter Lang.

³ For Guillermo’s response, see http://www.cala-online.org/Journal/Issue3/Response_Letter_Snaza.htm.

⁴ For PETA’s mission statement, see <http://www.peta.org/about/>.

⁵ On PETA and euthanasia, see http://www.peta.org/mc/factsheet_display.asp?ID=38.

⁶ See <http://www.drstevebest.org/papers/vegenvani/commonnatures.htm>.