

Book Information

Title

Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation

Creator

Sunaura Taylor

Format

Print book

Version

Published copy

Publication date

2017

Length

260 p.

Audience

Academic

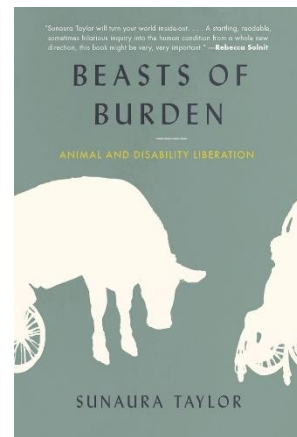
Summary

This book challenges the binaries separating human and animal, disabled and nondisabled, and the ways disability rights are put in conflict with animal rights.

Reviewer Information

Jessica Schomberg

Minnesota State University, Mankato



Critical Review

Taylor is a disability activist, animal advocate, and writer. In this book, she challenges the binaries separating human and animal, disabled and nondisabled, and the ways disability rights are put in conflict with animal rights. The book is organized into five parts: Epiphanies, Crippling Animal Ethics, I Am an Animal, All Natural, and Interdependence. Throughout the book she uses her own experiences as well as references to disability theorists including Ellen Samuels, Alison Kafer, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomas. She explains how she came to connect the way both disabled humans and livestock animals are hidden from public view and pushed to the margins. The last half of the book focuses on the harms of meat production, and she concludes by articulating the need to develop care relationships across species and ability.

While in many ways I share the ideological perspectives of the author, I am used to disability theorists taking a more embodied approach to the topic. This is hard to explain, but I am used to disabled writers prompting me to feel things in my body as well as making me think. I love highly academic texts with reams of citations, so it really surprised me to conclude this book wishing the author had spent more time talking with people and less time citing sources. Talking with people in open conversations may have helped with the other major problem I had: Taylor provided only lip service to how “veganism as a diet is not as easy for some as it is for others” (p. 203) as well as “legacies of Western domination” (p. 201). Food-related disabilities and food colonialism are really complicated topics. As in other areas where she talked about the care needs of disabled people, she seemed to focus on her idealized future rather than the realities of actual people.

I'm a disabled person who grew up in agricultural communities. I've been aware of the horrors of industrial farming since I was a kid. This is one reason I spent 25 years attempting plant-based diets – I kept trying for vegan, but then had to cycle through pescatarian and lacto-ovo vegetarian diets because my body really struggled without animal proteins, even before it decided that it wanted to be allergic to most forms of plant protein. As an adult, I've informed myself about critiques of industrial farming, small scale and “family” farming, the organics movement, etc. I'm not an expert, but I have enough knowledge to be able to recognize some of the weaknesses of Taylor's arguments here. One major one is her apparent lack of knowledge of the racist history of farming practices in the U.S. and her apparent unwillingness to take seriously the fact that not everyone lives on land suitable for crop production. Not to mention how her approach parallels colonialist practices of demeaning Indigenous peoples' food cultures.

But back to the main points related to disability and animal rights. I care for two cats. Cats are obligate carnivores; they cannot live without animal protein. I, because of one of my disabilities, also cannot live without animal protein. If we take seriously the idea that humans are not superior to non-human animals, why would we judge human meat consumption with less kindness than we judge cats? Why make so much of the argument rest on eliminating livestock production and meat consumption rather than, for example, working to expand the Animal Welfare Act (The Humane Society of the United States, 2024), addressing the ecological devastation caused by car culture (Bolotnikova, 2023), urban sprawl (Wookey, 2022), or billionaires existing (Paddison, 2021)? She does acknowledge that there may be some things that people can do other than being vegan, but it's presented as an afterthought.

Overall, I was excited about what this book could have been. Taylor is well respected in disability spaces. Reviews of the book are generally positive. But for me, the approach she took resembles the eco-ableism of the anti-straw activists (Vize, 2022) enough to make me hesitant to recommend it.

References

- Bolotnikova, M. (2023, September 12). How cars ruin wild animals' lives. *Vox*.
<https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/23868483/cars-roads-roadkill-crossing-goldfarb-national-parks>
- The Humane Society of the United States. (2024, September 6). *How the Animal Welfare Act has evolved over the decades and what still needs to be done*.
<https://www.humanesociety.org/news/animalwelfareact>
- Paddison, L. (2021, October 27). How the rich are driving climate change. *BBC*.
<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20211025-climate-how-to-make-the-rich-pay-for-their-carbon-emissions>
- Vize, S. (2022, January 6). The inherent ableism of single-use plastic straw bans. *Femestella*.
<https://www.femestella.com/single-use-plastic-straw-bans-eco-ableism/>
- Wookey, O. A. (2022). Human-wildlife coexistence in the urban domain: Promoting welfare through effective management, responsibility and the recognition of mutual interest. In A. Vitale & S. Pollo (Eds.), *Human/animal relationships in transformation: Scientific, moral and legal perspectives* (pp. 317–338). Springer International Publishing.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-85277-1_15

In sum, this book is

Recommended with reservations

If you like this, you'll also like

Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha