PART FOUR

FORWARD THINKING
Social theory is littered with grand meta-theories which seek to reduce the complexities of social life to something simple and, ultimately, explainable. Social life however is, in reality, messy and often refuses to conform to this idealized view. Take, for example, our relationships with other animals. We eat them, wear them, love them, live with them, abuse them, consider them family members, deify them, and much more. Moreover, any individual in any one lifetime may do any, or all, of these with one, or many, animals. Our relationships with other animals often defy categorization (as does much of social life) yet for the most part we seek to explain and understand these relationships with recourse to traditional social theories, now centuries old and having their roots in entirely different social systems, which maintain that we can, and should, neatly categorize social life. As social theory (and sociology in particular) attempts to come to grips with ‘the animal question’ it is finding that a direct corollary of this is the need to revisit ‘the social question’ as our current conceptions of animals are based on a belief in the social-natural divide. Moreover it is precisely this divide which maintains current oppressive animal practices.

Within modernity, culture is cast as firm opposite, as ‘Other,’ to nature. This “ideological fiction” (Haraway 1992, 13) is then embedded in such a way that it becomes the taken-for-granted base of an epistemologically realist science which reiterates the ‘truth’ of these beliefs axiomatically. These ‘truths’ are not limited to the justification of human domination of other species but also include those of women and people of color. Furthermore this oppression of Others is often inextricably interwoven. For example, Marjorie Spiegel (1988) documents how, historically, African Americans were ‘dehumanized’ in order to justify their continued slavery. This was