Establishment and Reinforcement of Hierarchy through Animal Agriculture

David Nibert


It is fitting that David Nibert’s Animal Oppression and Human Violence: Domesecration, Capitalism, and Global Conflict (2013) emerged alongside a plethora of books including Thomas Piketty’s Capital in the Twenty-First Century (2014) and films like Jacob Kornbluth’s Inequality for All (2013), that unite historical and contemporary evidence regarding the social sources of inequality and its consequences. Nibert’s Animal Oppression and Human Violence adds to this increasingly urgent contemporary conversation by arguing that essential sources of historical forms of inequality, organized violence, and contemporary geo-political instability stem from what he terms “domesecration”: “…the systematic practice of violence in which social animals are enslaved and biologically manipulated, resulting in their objectification, subordination, and oppression” (Nibert, 2013, p. 12).

Nibert argues that the historical development of societies organized around the possession and consumption of specific mammalian herbivores—primarily cattle, horses, pigs, sheep and goats—have directly facilitated inequalities and violence within and between societies engaged in domesecration (a point emphasized by Nibert’s refusal to utilize existing terms like domestication or “meat” and “leather” that conceal these exploitative realities). Beginning with a historical synopsis of the expansion of pastoralist societies and their conquests of “plant-based” societies, Nibert emphasizes the historical constants of pastoral societies’ continual warfare by pastoralists against each other and sedentary agrarian societies in the unending quest for controlling and/or retaining more animals and the resources necessary to maintain these structures (primarily grazing land and water, and a subjugated human population for necessary labor). Extending his thesis from Animal Rights/Human Rights (2002), Nibert argues that domesecration inevitably promotes a political system in which some form of oligarchic hierarchy is established and the symbolic and ideological legitimacy of this system of human and animal exploitation is
reinforced, as exemplified by the Mongol empire created by Chinggis/Genghis Khan and those nomadic, mounted armies.

Nibert contends that a similar pattern of expansion, conquest and the dominance or displacement of opposition (both humans and indigenous animals) emerges with ranching, as practiced by the Romans and the subsequent evolution of feudalism with its critical emphasis on the retention of land. Nibert argues that the expansion of ranching is central to the Spanish and Portuguese colonization of South and Central America, and also explains why, without the presence of large, domesecrated animals like cows and horses, warfare in the pre-Columbian world was not of the scale and scope found in Europe. Following independence, Nibert argues that the expansion of ranching in central and South America determined which groups would ascend to power within these newly established countries, but also drove the repression of both Native populations and peasants. Nibert contends that similar patterns existed during European expansion into sub-Saharan Africa, Australia and New Zealand, expressing the capacity for domesecration to drive similar social, economic and ideological patterns despite the differing powers involved in the specific endeavors.

In the United States, Nibert argues that the expansion of ranching was a critical factor to the development of a powerful southern economy and, along with slavery, precipitated a relentless drive westward for more land for ranching or to raise food for domesecrated animals. The expansion of ranching allowed for the emergence of the “ranch barons” and the armed conflicts between wealthy ranchers and smaller ranchers, as well as the creation of animal-based industries of scale and scope, creating the industrialized slaughter and sale of meat, wool and leather—industries favorably impacted by domestic and international wars.

These elite-driven practices of the mass production and consumption of animal-based products are amplified when the emerging fields of public relations and advertising are harnessed to instill societal expectations of the normalcy and desirability of a continuous diet of meat and other animal products in the American diet, generating the “hamburger culture.” Nibert argues that both American foreign policy and international development increasingly encouraged the expansion of “hamburger culture” through the production of beef in Central and South America—practices that encouraged these regimes (often with covert American military support) to expand ranches and drive human and wildlife out of areas that could be transmuted exclusively into land for ranching.