



February 2023

You've Got to Be Carefully Taught

Contribution to GTI Forum [Solidarity with Animals](#)

Nandita Bajaj

This was yet another piercingly honest [exposé](#) of our human supremacist worldview by Dr. Crist. As Crist points out, human supremacy exists as a background assumption that gives us permission to use, abuse, torture, and kill animals for food, clothing, entertainment, experimentation, and so much more, as we deem fit.

Here I take you through a brief journey into our educational system, one with which I am most familiar, having taught high school for a decade. Our socialization on ways in which to interact with animals often begins in early childhood education. Programs such as hatching classroom projects are very popular in elementary schools because they take advantage of the natural sense of curiosity that children have about living beings, in order to teach them about their biology, life cycles, and habitats. For these programs to run, fertile chicken eggs are taken away from their mothers through commercial hatcheries and sold to schools. Young children are then given complete ownership of these eggs. They are responsible for managing the incubation, brooding, and hatching of the eggs, and literally watch the birth of a baby chick occur under their full authority. "Accidents" in the form of egg breakage, failure to hatch due to improper procedures, or injury or death of the baby chicks due to mishandling are considered a natural part of the student's learning experience, marginalizing any true feelings of guilt or sadness that may arise from causing such harm to another being. And once the "experiment" is over, the surviving chicks are sent back to the hatcheries to be culled, often through asphyxiation, or by being ground up in a meat grinder. And thereby begins the acculturation process that teaches students that they literally have full control over the life and death of another being—the start of the cultivation of a human supremacist worldview.

This is, of course, one of the many messages students receive within the educational institution about their superior human nature. From the slaughtered animal foods served in the cafeterias, to the experimentation on live bugs, to the dissection of frogs, rats, fetal pigs, rabbits, cats, and baby sharks, to visits to zoos and aquariums to watch majestic wild animals living in life-long captivity—our schools are one of the first and most dominant institutions where young people learn that animals are ours to eat, experiment on, wear, use for entertainment, and abuse in any way we deem fit.

Crist also shines a light on the inconsistency in the way we treat different animals, including our treatment of companion animals, such as dogs and cats, and certain wild animals, such as pandas and dolphins, when compared with that of farmed animals or animals used for experimentation. This phenomenon, known as speciesism, is defined not only by the belief that all nonhuman animals are inferior to human beings, but also that some nonhuman animals are more worthy of our moral consideration compared to others, based on arbitrary and contradictory standards.

Through practices such as hatching projects described above, children are indoctrinated into becoming “hardened” in their emotional and behavioral attitudes towards certain other species. Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild found that contrary to the popular belief that our emotions are truly personal, unique, and formed within a pristine vacuum, they are rather just as much a product of our socialization—what she calls “feeling rules”—as our actions.¹ We are taught acceptable responses to situations, such as when, how to, and towards whom to express feelings of joy, sadness, remorse, anger, or empathy. In this way, children grow up with a set of emotional and behavioral rules and standards that often contradict each other and constitute “moral double standards,” as found by a recent study from the universities of Exeter and Oxford. Speciesism is learned during adolescence, and children generally expressed greater degrees of moral concern and empathy towards nonhuman animals, including across species, than adults did.²

Psychologist Melanie Joy explains in her book *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows* that these moral acrobatics distort our capacity for empathy and make us act against our values.³ Most people would never willingly engage in or support the kind of extreme acts of violence that take

place in a factory farm—appropriately deemed as one of the worse crimes in history by Yuval Noah Harari—such as force-feeding, tail docking, teeth clipping, dehorning, castration, debeaking, maceration, separation of families, and ultimately slaughter.⁴ Yet, the systems are created in a way that leads caring rational people to act in irrational ways. Otherwise, how can we explain, Melanie Joy asks, why we have been socialized to find a hamburger appetizing but not a burger made out of a golden retriever?

And these ethical double standards don't just end with the human and nonhuman animal divide. Crist explained in her essay that the powers of oppression that derive benefit from the domination of animals do so equally with the exploitation of marginalized human communities. These divisions pervade our institutions, our language, our behaviors, and our consciousness in the form of structural ableism, racism, sexism, and classism, to name just a few. In fact, the most derogatory way to address a person is to call them an animal, or to treat them like an animal. Multiple layers of supremacy are embedded within such an expression that collectively seek to reduce both the person in question and the nonhuman animal into despicable objects that deserve not just our contempt, but violence, and even death, if necessary.

Recognizing the interlinkages between these systems of oppression is an important step towards realizing that liberating marginalized human communities and liberating nonhuman animal communities are complementary goals. Powerful scholars and activists, such as Sunaura Taylor, author of *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*, and Aph Ko and Syl Ko, authors of *Aphro-ism: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism* from Two Sisters, are laying the groundwork for us to begin engaging in these radically transformative discussions and actions.⁵ Courageously and humbly reckoning with our own complicity in these systems of privilege, power, and oppression paves a way forward for us to sincerely bring these conversations into the mainstream. Shifting public opinion is an essential step toward radically transforming these interlocked systems of oppression. By understanding that the worldview of supremacy is a product of learned emotions, language, attitudes, and behaviors that begin in childhood, we have the ability and tools to retrain these capacities to embody a new worldview— from one that seeks to control, compete, and destroy to one that seeks to cooperate, respect, heal, and restore. And our educational institutions would be an obvious place to begin those conversations.

Endnotes

1. Arlie Russell Hochschild, "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure," *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (November 1979): 551-575, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2778583>.
2. Luke McGuire, Sally Palmer, and Nadira Faber, "The Development of Speciesism: Age-Related Differences in the Moral View of Animals," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2022), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/19485506221086182/>.
3. Melanie Joy, *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows: An Introduction to Carnism* (Newburyport, MA: Conari Press, 2009). For more on this book, see <https://carnism.org/book/why-we-love-dogs-eat-pigs-and-wear-cows/>.
4. Yuval Noah Harari, "Industrial Farming Is One of the Worst Crimes in History," *The Guardian*, September 15, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/25/industrial-farming-one-worst-crimes-history-ethical-question>.
5. Sunaura Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (New York: The New Press, 2017); Aph Ko and Syl Ko, *Aphro-ism: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism from Two Sisters* (Woodstock, NY: Lantern Publishing, 2017).

About the Author



Nandita Bajaj is the executive director of Population Balance, where she also co-hosts The Overpopulation Podcast. In addition, she is an adjunct instructor with the Institute for Humane Education at Antioch University, where she teaches about pronatalism, human supremacy, and ecological overshoot from a framework of justice and sustainability. She has BS in Aerospace Engineering and Education, and an MA in Humane Education, and she worked in these fields for fifteen years.

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Nandita Bajaj, “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught,” contribution to GTI Forum “Solidarity with Animals,” *Great Transition Initiative* (February 2023), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/solidarity-animals-bajaj>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.