



‘Criminal Beasts’: Metaphors that Reveal Common Oppression to Humans and Animals



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Abstract

With the outburst of Covid-19, Chinese people were soon being singled out by western media as savage bat eaters, or even worse, virus-spreading pests. This literature review aims to analyze the power dimension in creating animalized criminals and criminalized animals to prove that the common oppression operates in similar patterns and ideologies against non-white human and non-human animals. While institutional and legal context play a fundamental role in constructing the hierarchy of oppressions, the study focuses on language use and media representation that links criminality to animality. By emphasizing speech use and metaphors, the study first proposes to draw upon common but problematic injustices in daily life for the readers. Secondly, since language use is rather noticeable to identify and change compared to legal contexts, changes of the power relation can be more easily made among readers.



Keywords

Speciesism, racism, criminalization, rhetoric, communications studies, metaphors

1. Introduction

As long as [the] humanist and speciesist structure of subjectivization remains intact, and as long as it is institutionally taken for granted that it is all right to systematically exploit and kill non-human animals simply because of their species, then the humanist discourse of species will always be available for use by some humans against other humans as well, to countenance violence against the social other of whatever species—or gender, or race, or class, or sexual difference

Wolfe 2003, 8

With the outburst of Covid-19, Chinese people were soon being singled out by Western media as savage bat eaters, or even worse, virus-spreading pests (Agence France-Presse 2020; Chang and Corman 2020). An Italian governor stated that Italy did better than China because of Italians' "culturally strong attention to hygiene, washing hands, taking showers, whereas we have all seen the Chinese eating mice alive" (Human Rights Watch 2020).

By denouncing Chinese people as less human-like (more specifically, westerner-like), some westerners would find it justified to put blame or punishments on the identified scapegoat to alleviate their helplessness and anger. Their anger was further consolidated to Asian hate, and the urge to wipe out Asians, as if they were virus containers or pests, had resulted in fatal mass shootings. Similar linkages of enemies to animals can be found throughout history and from laws to literature.

This paper conducts a literature review to analyze the power dimension in the making of animalized criminals and criminalized animals. The aim is to prove that the oppression operates in similar patterns and ideologies against non-white human and non-human animals (NHAs). While institutional and legal context play a fundamental role in constructing the hierarchy of oppressions, this article focuses on language use and media representation that links criminality to animality. By emphasizing speech use and metaphors, the paper first proposes to draw upon common but problematic injustices in daily life for the readers. Secondly, since language use is rather noticeable to identify as it evolves, changes of the power relation can be more easily seen among readers.

2. The power dimension of humanization

By analyzing the formation of humanization alone, we can find plenty of powerful forces that fuel the classification between human and animal, revealing that the nature of humanization is Eurocentric, racist, and speciesist. Within a dualistic

mindset, hierarchies are generated and use binary classification to separate the superior from the inferior othering. Similar to how white and non-white racial differentiations operate, the boundary of humans and NHAs is institutionally constructed through science, laws, and language. Scientific experiments are shaped to prove the rationality and intelligence NHAs lack; furthermore, some biological interpretations imply that animality or criminality is innate and unchangeable, thus leaving no room or chance for their justification. On the other hand, being "humane" are often connected with morals, dignity, and civilization that grant rights exclusively to human.

However, examples found in Canadian immigrant policies exclude refugees by specifying who should be denied human rights, working hand in hand with ideologies that objectify, criminalize, and animalize refugees in Canada (Francis 2019). Scientific classifications, legal contexts, and language uses have institutionalized discriminations to NHAs function in identical ways as the direct oppression against non-westerners and animals underlies the problematic "racially loaded" humanization (Ko 2017, 21). Not only racism and speciesism are applied in the same context of oppression; sexism, classism, and criminalization are crossing each other in the process of humanizing and animalizing others. The colonial legacies are xenophobic and racist, with white supremacy reinforcing these ideologies through the continuous use of animal-linked racialization that "works to sustain the power of dominant groups over others and helps deny their legitimacy as citizens" (Elder, Wolch, and Emel 1998, 184). Foreigners can never be "human" enough to be recognized for human rights, and so are NHAs that are often being likened to. It is what Kim called "taxonomies of power" that create conflicts through drawing cultural and racial differences, heating the competition between humans and NHAs (Kim 2015). From a critical perspective we can detect the power relation behind, by identifying the "paradox of anthropocentric humanism" that is perpetrating discrimination towards NHAs when making a human and nonhuman division (Almiron & Khazaal 2021, 61).

Despite the abundant similarities that help us recognize humans and NHAs together as animals co-existing on the planet, people have tried very hard to differentiate the two. And for what purpose? The purpose is to differentiate the dominant from the subordinate, providing a justification to exploit the other. In Ko's explanation, "racism uses the social construct of the race for *their benefit*" (italics in the original) and the speciesist definition of species boundaries would legitimize discrimination towards others (Ko 2017, 24). Fearing to fall off to the lower hierarchy and facing treatments like criminals and animals, people intensify and abide by these rules. When the racial hierarchy is applied to animals, race, sex, and class, they become speciesism, racism, sexism, classism, and also colonialism. Fundamentally, all the -isms need legitimation for the "the subjection of 'inferior' human beings through the race and species' cross-overs" (Olson 2013, 165).

3. Criminalizing and animalizing others

*We are living in a period of increased punitive sentiment
towards those who are identified as criminals*

Olson 2013, 307

Following racism and speciesism, criminal metaphors are frequently applied to non-white, non-Christian communities and NHAs. While plenty of examples can be found in literature and legal texts, this paper allocates criminal metaphors in two categories: first, animalizing non-white people with illegal descriptions, and second, anthropizing NHAs as criminals. In the first category, criminal language is applied to immigrants, homosexuals, black, brown, and Asian people through dehumanization or animalization.

Concerning the use of animal references, Elder, Wolch and Emel's article "Race, Place, and the Bounds of Humanity" summarize three main approaches of using animal metaphors to racialize, dehumanize, and maintain power relations: "1) By using animals as absent referents or models for human behavior; 2) by imputing similarities in behavior or bodily features and/or associations with the animal world, and 3) By viewing people (and cultures) through the lens of specific human practices on animal bodies." (Elder, Wolch, and Emel 1998, 194). As all the above are based on subjectivity of humans, the makings of fabricated similarities are usually conducted by creating barriers between humans instead of connecting humans to animals.

Agamben also described the phenomenon of animalizing humans as "the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of animal in a human form" throughout the time (Agamben 2004, 37). An early example of this is 1909 Puck's cartoon, in which immigrants with labels of "thief," "kidnapper," and "murderer" were portrayed as herds of rats to symbolize the invasion of foreign immigrants (Puck 1909). Since rats were considered carrying plagues that were supposed to be wiped out and eliminated from society, the metaphor implied the unfavorable image of immigrants in the US people's understanding. The concept was made obvious when the author showed crowds of local people cheering as the immigrants were departing in the form of rats. Thus, nonhuman animals were used to depict degenerated humans by making them barely look like one. What is ironic is that the immigrants portrayed in the comic were white European immigrants, showing how the criterion of othering is somewhat relative and is constantly changing, and sometimes exceptions can be made, as Tchen and Yeats wrote: "It's all a question of whether they get incorporated into the society or not. Fu Manchu: No. Charlie Chan and the 'hard-working' 'foreign' service worker who know their place: Yes" (Heller 2014). On the other hand, the Filipino workforce in Canada was vilified and dehumanized for their household arrangements based on survival,

"they are being treated like they are the virus that needs to be removed from the community" (Croteau 2020).

Some animalizing denouncements can be found in describing the terrorists who are often referred to as opponents of the public. As former President of the US Donald Trump remarked at the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of ISIS: "He died like a dog. He died like a coward" (Newburger 2019). The equation is neither accurate nor relatable but reveals that dehumanization is directly linked to animalization and that any opposition to his criteria of justice is less human-like. There are terms of "bestial terrorists" or "bestial attacks" that appeared in numerous newspapers, referring to radical criminals in a dehumanizing way so as to distance them from the civilized and rational people (BBC 2018; Taylor 2018).

Other animalizing languages can be seen in portraying gangsters. For example, in the movie *Fahrenheit 932* African American street gangs are depicted implicitly with racist discourse to draw their irrational, inherent and animal-like violence: "Gang shooters mark their kills by tossing down their hats, some sort of anthropological quirk of territoriality, like cats spraying on a bush" (Byers and Johnson 2009, 198). Employing savagery metaphors to the outlaws depict them as born criminals, as biological and scientific proofs that aim to demonstrate that sub-humanity is unchangeable. In Olson's words, the criminality is "scripted onto his body through rhetorical uses" (Olson 2013, 86).

Through Olson's findings, from early modern rogue literature to legal context, a long history of humans as criminalized animals can be found in literature, including Shakespeare's use of metaphors such as "criminal beasts" for stigmatization (Olson 2013, 167). In addition to the above examples, homosexuals are marked as outlaws since they commit "crimes against nature," "the crime of bestiality," or "sub-animal behavior" through the establishment of sodomy law (Rydstrom et al. 2000, 240). The *others*, as considered by the *humane* humans, are so broad, and they can be interrelated through language and legislations as "institutional humanism" (Francis 2019).

4. Criminalizing nonhuman animals

We use language to create social realities, and language not only shapes our understanding of the world but also impacts on our behavior and actions. Race, for example, is a signifier that demonstrates a classification based on a system of power that maintains an order (Hall 1997). The language uses of degradation that links certain groups of humans to NHAs suggest that an unequal nature exist in every aspect associating with race. Here it is necessary to quote from Aníbal Quijano to understand the power involved: "The invention of race is a pivotal turn as it replaces the relations of superiority and inferiority established through domination. It reconceives humanity and human relations fictionally, in biological terms" (Quijano 2016, 532).

The second genre of criminality metaphors is exercised directly onto NHAs. There is a case of a bear being killed in Canada for consuming a part of a dead man's body in a logging area in 2012 (Canadian Press 2012). What caused the bear's death was that he was "the prime suspect" of the man's death and that he was killed because he had "lost its fear of humans" (Taylor 2013, 93). The racial hierarchy is clear here, in which no animal from a lower rank can harm a being of a higher level; otherwise, it shall be punished or deprived of life as if it is the law of nature. Similar to how the fictional Fu Manchu, who threatens the westerners with his schemes and plots, became the typical oriental antagonist.

Another example of the criminalization of animals is a dog ordered to be destroyed for biting a woman at an off-leash park (Schmunk 2020). The fact that the dog was executed for being considered dangerous shows how, through criminalizing, humans are righteous enough to rule over others. The rhetoric thus functions as a legitimation for the subjection of inferior human beings (Olson 2013). The differentiation between domesticated pets and *wild, savage* animals also draws a boundary between what is accepted by human society and what can or should be *controlled*. But once what used to be allowed shows threatening potential to humans, they become outlaws that are not forgivable. While institutionalized laws reinforce oppression against NHAs, or in other words, permit the oppression, language maintains the hierarchy by making sense for the public to accept the manufactured hierarchy. Language defends the oppression that is taking place.

Further examples show how societal oppressions have been employed to both criminals and NHAs as the hierarchy goes from thoughts to actions. For NHAs, their treatments are like criminals in the form of punishments. Early reported examples of animals being put on trials include hanging pigs, dogs, and countless domesticated or animals in nature, show how these animals are punished for violating human property, harming humans, or just being a "suspect" (Evans 1906). Putting NHAs subjects to laws allows people to apply violence as punishment at their will since sovereignty and state power are established based on the principle of exclusion (Agamben 1998).

Animals in zoos or factory farms also face caging, surveillance, and exploitation, resembling criminal imprisonment. Animals are not only bearing punishments like criminals, they are also subjects of experiments in laboratories in the way human criminals used to. And when it comes to criminal trafficking, the identical operations are used for slave and animal trafficking. On the other hand, the crossovers of mutual rights can be found in an optimistic example which animal activists fight for criminal reform against punishments, including death penalties (Olson 2013, 56).

To conclude, this paper has reviewed how power dynamics operate as societal oppressions through language by examining examples of racist classification to human and NHAs. The criminalizing metaphors on either human or NHAs is comprehensive from speech to actions, and from institutionalized humanity to

exploiting others including humans and NHAs, creating a ground for justified punishments toward the considered inferior group. This review aimed to entail connections between the oppressed in order to highlight the need to fight inequality all together, instead of standing for anti-racism but support animal exploitations, as it is "only on the basis of the assumption that human species members have a right to torture and subject non-human animals can the practices of abusing humans by treating them as akin to animals occur" (Olson 2013, 311). In order to dismantle the hierarchy that leads to oppression, we must first acknowledge the dominant (white and male) human-centric, colonial, racist, speciesist, classiest, and criminalizing frames, then challenge the rhetoric with accurate and non-discriminating language. Simply put, we should identify the oppressor and the oppressed. Though most oppressions could be under disguise, through examining the language use we can uncover similar patterns constructed. It is essential to decolonize the framework to dismantle racism, considering that the structural hierarchies are built "not because of what's in our genes" but because "what is in our history" (Hall 1997, 4). And finally, an ethical approach in communication is necessary to alleviate conflicts that grow from anthropocentric perspectives and individualism. By recognizing the common suffering, we can remove ourselves from a human centered view and rhetoric.



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