

Milk's Global Rise: A Case Study to Illuminate the Transspecies Violence of Law and Colonialism

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Mathilde Cohen, *Animal Colonialism: The Case of Milk*, 111 **Am. J. Int'l L. Unbound** 267 (2017), available at [SSRN](#).

Many progressive scholars and advocates on the Left presume that the animal rights movement is culturally imperialist (at least in its American and Canadian iterations).¹ This presumption holds steadfast in spite of the considerable scholarship, notably originating in ecofeminist thought, demonstrating the multiple ideological, discursive, and material links between human and nonhuman animal oppression advanced through dominant Western epistemologies and political, social, economic, and legal orders.² Or, put differently, in many ways, arguments highlighting what is wrong with animal commodification and exploitation often indict Western worldviews on animals rather than seek to extend such worldviews elsewhere.

Why this presumption nonetheless persists is a complex issue. Certainly, one reason is the real and imagined whiteness of the movement (again, in its American and Canadian iterations). A further reason may be the related insufficient adoption of an intersectionalist ethic in high-profile animal rights campaigns where animal injustice is disconnected from human injustices. The perception can then flow that those who care about equality for animals do not care about vulnerable (often racialized and indigenous) humans.³

Most legal scholarship on animals in the United States does not embrace an intersectionalist orientation when discussing injustice against animals. To the extent the dearth of intersectional analysis in animal law scholarship fuels the association of animal rights with cultural imperialism, Mathilde Cohen's [Animal Colonialism: The Case of Milk](#) is a very welcome corrective. Her short yet informative analysis about milk's global rise compellingly illustrates the transspecies nature of law's violence and ensuing inequalities. Specifically, Cohen shows how Eurocentric international law and trade, European dietary and legal norms in relation to animals, and European and American modernist discourses championing cow's milk over traditional breastfeeding and maternal care occasioned a global rise of the human consumption of cow's milk that was pivotal to empire-building throughout the world. This entailed devastating harms for colonized peoples and animals both.

Using an ecofeminist frame, the article helpfully develops the emergent umbrella concept of "animal colonialism" as well as the sub-concepts of "milk colonialism" and "breastfeeding colonialism" that Cohen identifies as central to animal colonialism. (P. 268.) Through a generative discussion of these nascent terms, Cohen explains why the normativity of humans' drinking another mammal's milk should be seen as an injurious colonial practice that works against most of the world's colonized peoples (and, of course, animals themselves).⁴ In doing so, she contributes postcolonial understanding to the body of literature that discusses milk's cultural status worldwide as a pure and ethically benign substance.⁵

Cohen begins by explaining the concept of "(a)nimial colonialism... as a dual phenomenon, consisting, on the one hand, in using animals to colonize lands, native animals, and people and, on the other hand, in imposing foreign legal norms and practices of human-animal relations upon communities and their environments." (*Id.*) Cohen notes how Europeans were keen to bring their pastoral and agricultural practices, which included cows and sheep used for their milk, with them during invasions, and were also keen to acquire the land mass needed to sustain these large ruminants, and later to colonize appetites toward drinking cow's milk. Although a critical part of animal colonialism in the case of milk is compromised by the literal colonial spread of animal bodies that international law enabled, Cohen ensures that we also understand the imposition of European legal norms that normalized animals as property as critical to animal

colonialism. She writes: “The notion of animals as property proved essential to the diffusion of animal farming, particularly dairying, as it justified taking the milk from female animals for human consumption.” (P. 269.)

In explaining “milk colonialism,” Cohen draws from historical accounts to highlight how the dairy industry spread from European metropolises as an integral part of colonial and neocolonial expansion. (*Id.*) Most people around the world had never raised animals for lactation and milk consumption. Europeans viewed non-dairy diets as civilizationally inferior. They promoted cow’s milk as a universal healthful food and also justified land dispossession on this ground so that more and more animals could be raised. By the nineteenth century, Cohen notes, modernizing technologies enabled this highly perishable substance to withstand global export to new populations in colonized lands as well as constitute a vital part of the diet for colonizing human forces. Cohen emphasizes that in the twentieth century, international law and trade allowed American and European powers to export their milk surpluses to newly created markets in colonies and countries of the Global South such as China and India. (*Id.*)

Cohen goes on to highlight how the global ubiquity of humans’ drinking cow’s milk today is detrimental to both women and animals’ ability to feed their children from their own bodies. Cohen calls this “breastfeeding colonialism.” (P. 270.) Cohen notes how the British and French, but also other European states, linked the regulation (read: discouragement) of breastfeeding to ideas of nationhood, imperial identity, and racial superiority. European powers also ridiculed indigenous breastfeeding and other mothering practices and the quality of the milk that non-European cows produced. They promoted European and American cows’ milk as the best nutrition for human children through discourses of “civilization, modernity, and scientific medicine.” (*Id.*)

Although feminists and reproductive justice experts have exposed the harms of such colonial mindsets on women and their infants worldwide, Cohen importantly emphasizes the harm the colonial trumpeting of cow’s milk and its entrenchment today enacts on cows and their calves, highlighting the grief and trauma inherent in the practice of separating mothers from their nursing-ready newborn calves so humans may appropriate the calves’ milk. (P. 271.) As an outcome of this last point, Cohen innovatively concludes that long-standing and contemporary postcolonial and intersectionalist feminist concerns about reproductive justice surrounding the global politics of breastfeeding should let go of their anthropocentric focus and focus instead on a transspecies right to breastfeed. (*Id.*)

Through chronicling in condensed yet incisive fashion the colonial dynamics instrumental to the historical and global rise of cow’s milk as a human food, Cohen’s analysis compellingly disrupts several misconceptions: that animal exploitation and human exploitation are separate phenomena, that caring about animals is always already culturally imperialist, or that reproductive justice is only a human concern. She enriches both animal law scholarship and equality law scholarship by facilitating understanding of why decolonial politics requires attending to the human instrumentalization of animals.⁶

1. For more on this presumption, see Will Kymlicka & Sue Donaldson, *Animal Rights, Multiculturalism, and the Left*, 45 **J. Soc. Phil.** 116 (2014). [2]
2. See Carol J. Adams & Lori Gruen, *Introduction*, in **Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth** (Carol J. Adams & Lori Gruen eds., 2014), discussing this scholarship. [2]
3. For further elaboration of this problem of the perceived whiteness of the movement as well as the politics of racism and cultural imperialism surrounding single-issue campaigning, see Angela P. Harris, *Should People of Color Support Animal Rights?*, 5 **J. Animal L.** 15 (2009); Claire Jean Kim, *Multiculturalism Goes Imperial: Immigrants, Animals, and the Suppression of Moral Dialogue*, 4 **Du Bois Rev.: Soc. Sci. Res. on Race** 233 (2007); Claire Jean Kim, **Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species and Nature in a Multicultural Age** (2015). [2]
4. Cohen builds on Yoriko Otomo’s postcolonial analysis of milk as a global commodity. See Yoriko Otomo, *The Gentle Cannibal: The Rise and Fall of Lawful Milk*, 40 **Austl. Feminist L.J.** 215 (2015). [2]
5. For an influential example, see Deborah Valenze, **Milk: A Local and Global History** (2011). [2]
6. For more on this last point, see the indigenous ecofeminist-inspired scholarship of Margaret Robinson. See

Margaret Robinson, *The Roots of My Indigenous Veganism*, in **Critical Animal Studies: Towards Trans-Species Social Justice** 319 (Atsuko Matsuoka & John Sorenson eds., 2018) and other works. [?]

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