

***Nonhuman Humanitarianism: Animal Interventions in Global Politics.* By Benjamin Meiches. Minneapolis (Minnesota): University of Minnesota Press, 2023. pp. 234. \$100 (hardcover); \$25 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-5179-1384-7 (hc); ISBN 978-1-5179-1385-4 (pb).**

Alexandra Boesel, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)

In *Nonhuman Humanitarianism*, Benjamin Meiches examines the roles of nonhuman actors in international humanitarian assemblages, identifying how multi-species interactions increase the functions of human aid work. Meiches's work addresses a critical gap in International Relations (IR), with the acknowledgment of the key ways in which animals remake global political projects (see also Meiches, 2019). The author deftly employs wide swathes of relevant theory to focus on how concepts of anthropocentric reason and anthropocentric feeling continue to marginalize nonhumans in humanitarian work: animals labor in the projects of keeping humans safe, healthy, and fed, while performing work that is explicit about its human exceptionalism. Recipients of humanitarianism are worth saving because they are human, a shifting political semiotic, which has leaned on racist, classist and gendered logics throughout history to legitimize itself. Despite the anthropocentrism that pervades and is the basis for such humanitarian work, Meiches argues that multi-species justice can arise in these more-than-human assemblages of aid. Interactions between human workers and the de-mining dogs, disease and bomb-sniffing rats, and food-producing goats and cattle, Meiches argues, necessitate metacommunication, producing modes of multi-species understanding within humanitarian work. This metacommunication, per Meiches, holds potential for multi-species justice. While the author's theoretical framework creates a strong foundation for this argument, the empirical evidence for such a claim leaves the reader wanting.

The introductory chapter lays out his theoretical framework and argument for how animal actors challenge and transform the human-centric work of humanitarianism. The second, third, and fourth chapters begin with vignettes of various species that work within humanitarianism: de-mining dogs, bomb and tuberculosis (TB)-

sniffing rats, and finally, milkable and consumable goats, cattle and poultry. After reading these chapters, the reader is left with only fragments of interactions with the creatures that are meant to be the focus of the book. Theory leads the way in considering how animals (probably) transform humanitarian work and empirical application appears to take a back seat. While lacking in empirical evidence, the book undoubtedly provides incredible more-than-human genealogy, stitching together the important multi-species work of philosophers, anthropologists, and ethologists, with important international studies conversations regarding humanitarianism. Such interdisciplinary theoretical framework is critical in considering nonhuman roles in current geopolitical projects, especially given the multiple socio-ecological crises which humanitarian aid is increasingly addressing (i.e. climate change, mass extinction, etc.). This book makes important strides in calling for increased awareness of multi-species participation and enrollment in global social, political, and economic projects.

The book's strengths lie in the author's careful critique of the inescapable anthropocentrism of humanitarianism. Providing thorough theoretical and historical context, Meiches argues that humanitarianism's anthropocentrism has not only marginalized nonhuman life, but also humans. Relying on a shifting semiotic of the 'human' has impacted "how humanitarianism addresses humans, because the fluidity of the concept of the human produces and sustains inequity within and between human and nonhuman communities" (p. 7). As such, Meiches critiques humanitarian efforts for its biopolitics: subjects of subsistence aid are "included in a global political order only insofar as they exist as mouths to feed, a model that frequently serves as a pretext for making lives fungible" (p. 138). In a world where human and nonhuman lives are increasingly made vulnerable by socioecological crises of climate change, mass extinction, and more, the stakes of humanitarianism projects considering the nonhuman are critical.

Meiches makes the provocative assertion that the path towards multi-species justice is interaction. This claim is argued through the introduction of ethology, in the fourth and final chapter. Here, the author argues that the key to justice is in attempting to understand nonhuman metacommunication, or communication beyond human

verbality. Per Meiches, metacommunication is critical to helping achieve nonhuman humanitarianism, or even a less anthropocentric perspective, that is open to the view that Earthly politics do not just encompass human political claims. Or, as Meiches more pithily writes, “the problem is less the anthropomorphism, since humans inevitably anthropomorphize just as birds avianmorphize, but the form anthropomorphism takes when it views politics as exclusively made up of human statements” (2023; p. 154).

Unfortunately, the lack of empirical evidence for the democratizing capacity of metacommunication in multi-species humanitarian assemblages leaves the scholarly reader wanting. It seems more than possible that Meiches could—and perhaps did—gain evidence of such meta-communicative coalition-building. Meiches fourth and final chapter, which covers the vast field of ethology, could have offered such empirics, including observations or quotes from humanitarians who work alongside the dogs, rats, goats, or cows. Certainly, Meiches hints in his acknowledgments that such conversations were occurring, at least with the staff of APOPO, a global NGO which uses rats to sniff out bombs and TB, who cared for the bomb and TB sniffing rats. Why the author did not foreground a multi-species ethnographic approach that explicitly pulled upon ethology, as other scholars have (see Hartigan, 2020, 2021) is unclear. His theoretical assertions seem to necessitate such a multi-species methodology. Other multi-species approaches have also built on more local, situated, and decolonial knowledges to understand nonhumans (see Govindrajan, 2018; Parreñas, 2018); including such a methodological practice would have benefitted the text, prioritizing the subjectivities oft marginalized in humanist work. Particularly because Meiches work seeks to consider how nonhumans labor and give gifts, citing Indigenous ontologies that have long acknowledged more-than-human gifting and reciprocity would have been prudent (see Kimmerer, 2013; Nadasdy, 2007; Reo & Ogden, 2018).

Meiches makes an important contribution to the field of international studies, providing theoretical framework for considering how nonhumans transform global politics and calling for more attention to the need for multi-species justice. I look forward to the works to

follow that provide the empirical examples necessary to further his theoretical arguments.

References

- Govindrajan, R. (2018). *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayans*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hartigan, J. J. (2020). *Shaving the Beasts: Wild Horses and Ritual in Spain*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Hartigan, J. J. (2021). Knowing Animals: Multispecies Ethnography and the Scope of Anthropology. *American Anthropologist*, 123(1).
- Kimmerer, R. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions.
- Meiches, B. (2019). Non-human humanitarians. *Review of International Studies*, 45(1), 1–19.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210518000281>
- Nadasdy, P. (2007). The gift in the animal: The ontology of hunting and human-animal sociality. *American Ethnologist*, 34(1), 25–43. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2007.34.1.25>. American
- Parreñas, J. S. (2018). *Decolonizing Extinction: The Work of Care in Orangutan Rehabilitation*. Duke University Press.
- Reo, N. J., & Ogden, L. A. (2018). Anishnaabe Aki: an indigenous perspective on the global threat of invasive species. *Sustainability Science*, 13(5), 1443–1452.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-018-0571-4>