Manufacturing Dissent: The racialization of opposition to animal advocacy in South Africa

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Abstract
In 2015, some members of the Humanities Faculty at the University of Cape Town proposed that animal products be taken off the menu at official Faculty functions. The proposal was rejected. Cordeiro-Rodrigues, in his paper “The racialization of animal advocacy in South Africa”, this journal, blames the proposers for this rejection, claiming that “the proposal’s approach neglects the racialized history of animal advocacy in South Africa, while also being carried out at an inopportune time and context.” We dispute Cordeiro-Rodrigues’ claims on a number of grounds, and argue that not only does he fail to substantiate his claims against the proposers, he also mischaracterizes the history of animal advocacy in South Africa, and, most worryingly, ignores the immense suffering perpetrated on animals in animal agribusiness.

Keywords
Speciesism, animal advocacy, South African racial politics, ubuntu, veganism

Dr Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues (2020) accuses those who submitted a formal proposal to exclude animal products from the menu at all official events of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Cape Town (UCT) of “racializing” the debate on animal advocacy in South Africa (Cordeiro-Rodrigues, p.2). He also blames them for the “African faculty’s disavowal of the proposal and of animal injustice in general” (p.1). Although he concedes that the proposers “were not intending to be racist”, he does claim that they contributed to racial polarization in the Faculty insofar as they “neglected the racialized context and history of animal advocacy in South Africa, thereby reinforcing the racialization of the animal advocacy discourse” (p.2). He argues that by not discussing what he
alleges is the “racialized history of animal advocacy”, and not using the concept of race in the proposal, the proposers racialized the debate about animal advocacy, and contributed to some people disavowing the proposal (pp.1, 8).

We argue, on the contrary, that the racialization of this issue was created by the Dean of the Humanities Faculty and some of his supporters. Cordeiro-Rodrigues, the journalist Marianne Thamm, and others who propagate this narrative in turn contribute to this polarization. In other words, the racialization of this issue was manufactured by those who opposed the proposal. This racialization of opposition to animal advocacy not only prevented an important symbolic stand against speciesism, but it also contributes to the exploitation of animals by downplaying their suffering and denying them moral status. The animals were – and continue to be – the real victims.

First, the facts
At a special meeting of the Humanities Faculty Board at the University of Cape Town in October 2015, four main and 14 co-proposers brought the proposal that, given the suffering, cruelty and killing involved in the production of animal-derived food for human consumption, the Faculty should support the motion that no meat or animal products be served at any Faculty event or meeting. The proposal covered only events or meetings arranged by, or on behalf of, the Faculty of Humanities, and was not intended to include departments, schools or units within the Faculty.

The proposal was largely symbolic, but the hope was that this would be the start of a stronger commitment by the Faculty – and hopefully the university – to end its support of unnecessary animal suffering.

Cordeiro-Rodrigues makes several false, unsubstantiated and misleading claims in his paper.

• “some, especially amongst the Black faculty, interpreted it as a trojan horse for racism” (p.2).

This interpretation of the proposal was made by one member of the Humanities Faculty — Adam Haupt from Film and Media Studies — and nobody else in the Faculty explicitly endorsed it. Cordeiro-Rodrigues quotes as his source for Adam Haupt’s accusation an article by the journalist Marianne Thamm (Thamm, 2016). However, there is no reference in Marianne Thamm’s article to Adam Haupt’s “trojan horse” claim. This undermines Cordeiro-Rodrigues’ claim that “Many black
faculty members contested the proposal on the grounds that it was racist” (p.1). Of course, even if many black faculty members had made this allegation, this would still not mean that the allegation was true.

• Cordeiro-Rodrigues writes: “One of the arguments presented in favour of the proposal was that a cultural practice does not necessarily have moral value. Hence, even if it is a cultural practice to eat meat or practise ritual slaughtering, this does not mean that the practice ought to be endorsed” (p.4).

At no point in the presentation was the issue of ritual slaughter addressed. We can thus only speculate why Cordeiro-Rodrigues claims that it was. One possible reason for his doing so is that it may make the charges of racism somewhat more plausible if he can argue that the proposers argued against traditional African customs which involve ritual slaughter.

It is true that the proposers did raise the issue of whether a cultural practice ought to be defended under all circumstances. Here is what was said:

Here’s one way of putting the first point: ‘Who are you to question my right to participate in my cultural practices, and indeed in a practice that unifies many South Africans? Not to eat meat is to exclude myself from certain meals, festivals and other interactions; indeed, to exclude myself as a fully-fledged member of a religious, ethnic, cultural or national group.’

Clearly it would be arrogant and irresponsible not to think carefully about a widely accepted practice before asking people to express even limited disapproval or disquiet about it. But equally clearly, the entrenchment of a practice is no guarantee of its goodness. On the contrary, bad practices seem more egregious when they are well-established. For instance, surely part of the horror of certain kinds of human subjugation is that they were and are cherished by some groups. So if the way we treat animals is a great wrong, it is not neutralised but worsened by its ubiquity.

It should be clear from this quotation that the proposers were objecting against the eating of animal products as a general South African practice, and were not targeting African cultural
practices. Almost every cultural group in South Africa (and in the world), whether African or not, supports the eating of animals. The proposers argued that eating meat involves causing unnecessary harm to animal victims, and this provides good grounds to refrain from doing so.

- Cordeiro-Rodrigues states that “one faculty member said that the presentation was racist because it recalled the gazes of a white savior instructing black workers” (p.4).

There is no record in the minutes of the meeting of this statement, and Cordeiro-Rodrigues provides no reference for it. (Of course, even if someone did make this claim, the analogy is ludicrously absurd – and not only because the Humanities Faculty is racially diverse).

**Racialized animal advocacy in South Africa**

Cordeiro-Rodrigues also has an entire section of his paper dedicated to “racialized animal advocacy in South Africa”, in which he argues that animal advocacy in South Africa has historically been racialized, and the proposers’ failure to acknowledge and deal with this history contributed to the racialization of the proposal (pp. 4–8).

In making this claim, it is noteworthy that he consistently elides “animal advocacy” and “animal justice”, on the one hand, with environmental and conservation issues, on the other (p.5). As evidence of this “racialized animal advocacy”, he provides the following examples:

- Routinely, expeditions to Africa organized by Royal Societies concluded as part of their reports that black people could not manage their natural resources and that there was, therefore, a duty and justification for white settlement” (p.5).
- ‘In the Eastern Cape of South Africa, especially in the Transkei, from the end of the 19th century, colonial authorities limited local indigenous people’s interactions with the environment in order to save the local flora and fauna from destruction’ (p.5).
- “With respect to dogs, the local white authorities decided to prohibit black people from owning dogs because they understood that Africans used them in ways that destroyed the environment” (pp.5–6).
- “When black people went hunting, it was as classified illegal poaching, while when white people hunted it was classified as a sport” (p.6).
These examples have nothing at all to do with animal advocacy, especially if we understand such advocacy as fighting against speciesism or animal injustice. According to Cordeiro-Rodrigues’ own definition, animal justice must be non-speciesist. Certainly, colonialism in Africa did not advocate for animal justice, and not one of Cordeiro-Rodrigues’ examples is evidence that it does. An even-handed assessment of the impacts of colonialism on southern African animals would yield the conclusion that colonialism perpetrated injustice against animals, rather than advocated justice for them.

Further, he lists colonial practices that are clearly not examples of animal advocacy/justice pursued by colonists. If anything, these are examples of colonialism inflicting serious injustices on animals. Examples of colonial practices he mentions include killing free roaming animals (he uses the speciesist term “vermin”), “massive canicides”, killing animals belonging to “black” Africans, killing predators, hunting, and commercialising a trade in elephants’ tusks (p. 6). He later also mentions “industrial [animal] farming” as a legacy of apartheid (pp. 10–11). So, he simultaneously claims that colonialism has a history of animal advocacy and that the colonists were committing canicides and hunting animals for fun. The list of practices he himself has collated under the heading of “Racialized animal advocacy in South Africa” is enough to undermine the claim that colonists were pursuing animal justice.

To avoid the implication that his purported examples of animal advocacy are irrelevant because they are not instances of animal justice, he says that the colonists were hypocrites; at key moments he switches from talking about animal justice to talking more vaguely about “discourses around saving animals and the environment” (p. 6). When it comes to drawing inferences about his historical examples, however, he switches back to the stronger claim that his examples are instances of colonial animal justice, by saying “the examples above demonstrate a link between racial injustice and the protection and promotion of animal justice in the South African context” (p. 8). He thus equivocates between referring to colonial animal justice and looser terminology such as “discourses on animal and environmental protection” (p. 6), the former when asserting a conclusion, the latter when attempting to provide evidence for the conclusion.

In truth, animals suffered grave injustices under colonialism in southern Africa, and it is easy to demonstrate this. For example, colonialism subjected cattle, sheep and goats, to fenced-in areas, which dramatically undermined their freedom of movement, and access to water and pasturage.
Under duress of shouting and whips, and in often fatal conditions, oxen pulled wagons across South and southern Africa for over 200 years (Alexander, 1838, pp. 76–77; Baines, 1864, p. 63; Livingstone, 1857, p. 153). The interference with cattle’s pastoral ways of life enabled diseases like rinderpest to flourish (Marquardt, 2017, pp. 355, 357–359, 362). Animals were subjected to harmful veterinary regimes and invasive experimentations (Edington, 1897, p. 59; Gilfoyle, 2003), forced artificial insemination and genetic manipulation (Bonsma, 1987, pp. 3–4, 18–20, 23–25, Quinlan et al., 1941, 264), industrial slaughterhouses in South Africa in particular from the early twentieth century (Cripps, 2012, p. 14, 119-120; Union of South Africa, 1920, p. 22) and inter-continental trafficking of their bodies (Dommissie, 2011, p. 89; Simons, 2000, p. 51). These are only a few ways in which colonialism brought and perpetuated grave animal injustice in southern Africa.

It is thus puzzling why Cordeiro-Rodrigues thinks that the history he cites has any relevance to animal justice in South Africa, and to the proposal. Cordeiro-Rodrigues elides various issues to make his charges of racism seem more plausible. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Cordeiro-Rodrigues seems intent on manufacturing arguments to support a predetermined conclusion.

**Concern about Cited References**

There is also a concern about the way Cordeiro-Rodrigues uses references to back up his historical claims. Consider one example. As part of his section under the heading “Racialized animal advocacy in South Africa”, which, as we have noted, is part of his broader claim that animal advocacy has historically been racialised, he claims (p.5) that colonists in the Transkei limited local Africans’ access to the environment in order to save plants and animals from destruction. All his references in support of this claim are from one edited volume about dog histories in southern Africa (McKenzie, 2008; Tropp, 2008; Van Sittert and Swart, 2008). The first reference (McKenzie, 2008) does not mention the Transkei or Eastern Cape at all (McKenzie, 2008). It is about control over and killing of dogs in Cape Town. In the second reference (van Sittert and Swart, 2008), the term Transkei appears only in a footnote, which cites Cordeiro-Rodrigues’ third reference for his above claim (Van Sittert and Swart, 2008, p. 13). Where the Eastern Cape is mentioned it is about settler “wild animal poisoning clubs” and “co-operative poisoning campaigns” to protect colonial animal agriculture, i.e., colonial “flocks” and profits (Van Sittert and Swart, 2008, p. 12). The other mention of the Eastern Cape is when a settler there is quoted in regard to various dog breeds (Van Sittert and Swart, 2008, p. 8). So, the first two references are not in support of his claim at all.
The third reference (Tropp, 2008), which is about the Transkei, is also about colonists “mass killing... Africans’ dogs” in order to stop Africans from hunting animals to “protect local wildlife”, and also to protect colonisers’ hunting this “wildlife” (Tropp, 2008, p. 145). The conclusion he draws from these three references is that colonists were protecting the environment and pursuing animal advocacy/justice. But his only relevant reference in this case is unambiguously not an example of colonial animal advocacy/justice but rather the very opposite.

Cordeiro-Rodrigues makes the sweeping claim that “at the end of the 19th and 20th centuries, settler colonialism in Africa was justified on the grounds that whites had a civilizing mission to take care of animals and the natural environment” (p.5). To suggest that settler colonialism was about taking care of animals, or justified as such, is misleading. We scrutinised the three references he placed in support of this claim, and again neither of them supported it. This bears emphasis. Africa is not a country: it is comprised of 54 countries, with over 1500 human language groups (Horsthemke, 2015, p. 1). It is vast and diverse. Nor did settler colonialism even occur in Africa in the late twentieth century. At least seven different European countries colonized parts of Africa in very distinct ways, and, as noted above, there is abundant evidence of extreme harms perpetuated against animals under colonialism.

Furthermore, for a paper that relies heavily on claims that colonialism historically pursued animal justice, there is only a single reference to historical material, and that document is a report about colonial practices of killing “vermin” in the Cape of Good Hope (pp.6, 21), which again contradicts Cordeiro-Rodrigues’ claim that colonialism pursued animal justice.

Intersectionality

Cordeiro-Rodrigues claims (p.8) that the proposers excluded other forms of injustice. This is untrue. The proposers, on the contrary, made clear the link between the mistreatment of non-human animals and other injustices. They noted, for instance, that

social justice is not independent of a regard for animal issues: some of the motivations for social justice – including the desire to reduce vast, undeserved, needless suffering – serve also to motivate a stand in favour of better treatment for animals. Scholars in many areas of the Humanities Faculty further social justice in various ways; we hope our colleagues might be moved by a proposal that is grounded in some of the same concerns.
They also highlighted the fact that workers in slaughterhouses — who are mainly poor and black — suffer from extreme anxiety and stress as a result of working in such horrific conditions. They noted that a local study (Victor and Barnard, 2003) into the psychological effects of slaughterhouse work found that all respondents admitted to “regular alcohol abuse, suffered from bad dreams and recurring nightmares representing feelings of fear, guilt and revolt in relation to their jobs.” Some workers intentionally harm themselves in order to avoid work; most become desensitized to suffering of both animals and other humans, and often become violent to those close to them. The proposers pointed out that violence against animals is also problematic for society at large, and especially for vulnerable populations who must accept whatever jobs they can find. They quoted abattoir workers, whose expressions of anxiety, guilt and torment made little impact on those who attended the presentation. Although Cordeiro-Rodrigues notes that “many vegan products consumed in South Africa are, in fact, harvested in extremely exploitative working conditions” (p.7), he too strangely fails to note the way that poor black workers are exploited and traumatised by the animal slaughter industry. The proposers certainly did not defend exploitation in any industry and it is disingenuous of him to suggest that by promoting veganism they were doing so. He also fails to note that the animal industrial business — unlike vegan industries — is intrinsically violent, brutal and exploitative. Once again, Cordeiro-Rodrigues seems to be cherry picking examples in order to defend a predetermined conclusion.

There are other statements in Cordeiro-Rodrigues’ paper which are unsubstantiated. He claims that UCT was plagued at the time by anti-black racism, that “some white faculty and students refused to accept that racism existed on campus” (p.9), and by doing so they denied the legitimate complaints of systemic racism and in this way perpetuated it. But Cordeiro-Rodrigues provides no evidence for these claims; both of the articles he cites in support of his position were published in an English newspaper, The Guardian, and their focus was on the University of Oxford (pp.9, 20). Cordeiro-Rodrigues also falsely states that “the timing of the campaign was therefore chosen at a moment of bipolarization of identity” (p.9). This error was also made by the journalist Marianne Thamm in her article cited by Cordeiro-Rodrigues. Two of the proposers, David Benatar and Elisa Galgut, replied to Marianne Thamm via a letter to the editor, in which they noted that
Moreover, as Ms Thamm should know, the initial call to the University to reduce its complicity with the maltreatment of animals preceded any of the 2015 student protests and was thus not a response to those protests (Benatar and Galgut, 2016).

Here is the background: in 2014 - more than a year before the student protests began - Benatar and Galgut published a piece in the university newspaper, in which they called upon the university “to put its principles of justice where its mouth is, and to pledge to take animal suffering off the menu at university functions” (Benatar and Galgut, 2014). Galgut followed this with a question to the University executive officer at a meeting of the Board early in 2015. When the Executive Officer replied that the Executive had not responded because no proposal had been made via formal processes, the proposers then requested that the matter be put to the Board. Thus Cordeiro-Rodrigues is wrong to claim that “the timing of the campaign was therefore chosen at a moment of bipolarization of identity”. Note, too, how this claim about “bipolarization” simply begs the question against the proposers: some may think that, at a time where social justice issues were being discussed, a proposal to draw non-human animals into the moral circle would have been considered entirely appropriate and should have been enthusiastically embraced by members of a Faculty that considered itself progressive. Indeed, this is precisely what one social commentator did think, when she wrote that: “UCT Humanities had the opportunity to make a choice that symbolically linked the animal justice struggle and the broader ecological struggle to race/gender and social justice struggles, as is happening in America with growing solidarity between the rapidly evolving vegan movement and Black Lives Matter” (Dodd, 2016). The racialization of the proposal was not made by the supporters of the proposal, but rather by its opponents — perhaps as a way to avoid thinking about their own culpability in promoting animal agribusiness and the enormous cruelty inflicted daily on innocent sentient beings.

**Concerns regarding speciesism and anthropocentricism**

There are yet further problems with Cordeiro-Rodrigues’ arguments; they are speciesist and anthropocentric because he defends killing and hurting animals, albeit at a reduced rate (p.13). The vegan proposal implied that killing and hurting animals is wrong: animals are sentient and have moral status, and thus harming and killing them unnecessarily is morally wrong. Since the vegan proposal promoted a non-speciesist view, Cordeiro-Rodrigues needs to argue *in favour* of speciesism if his critique is to be taken seriously. By refusing to take the vegan argument head on,
he does not take on the vegan proposal at its strongest. Furthermore, his argument for reducing the rate of killing and hurting animals is anthropocentric. For example, he says that harming animals “harms oneself” (p.13). He draws on “Afro-communitarian literature” to argue that harming, killing and eating animals is harmful to “black people’s health” and exposes black people to “environmental hazards” (p.13). Harming animals, he says, also “activate[s] negative emotions in oneself which undermine[s] well-being” (p.13). So, while he recognises that eating animals harms humans, he does not argue for reducing harming animals for the animals’ sakes but rather because it harms humans. Another way of phrasing this is to say that the “Afrocentric” view he promotes defends killing and harming animals. Cordeiro-Rodrigues fails to recognise the primary victims -- the animals. Of course, as we stated above, killing animals for food also harms humans, and the human harms further motivate against killing animals for consumption.

Racism or speciesism?
Cordeiro-Rodrigues also writes that:

the prioritization of animal justice contributes to removing the aforementioned black injustices from debate in the political arena, thereby perpetuating them. Note that the resources of the people fighting for achievement of black justice, such as the RMF, tend to be rather scarce, which makes their campaigns more fragile, with any distraction a potential interference into the RMF and other black justice campaigns (p.9).

This is a typical argument used against animal rights / welfare campaigners the world over, a variation of which is: why are you wasting time and resources on animals when there are starving children in the world? Not only does this argument trivialize the serious injustices against animals, but it also creates a false dilemma: why not fight against both racism and the oppression of animals? Women’s rights campaigners are not asked to put their concerns on the back burner until racism is eradicated, so why does Cordeiro-Rodrigues suggest that those fighting animal injustice should do so? Does he suggest that the #MeToo movement should cease its campaigns until the Black Lives Matter campaign has achieved racial harmony in the USA? On the contrary: intersectionalists are quick to argue that “an injustice against one is an injustice against all”. As noted above, the proposers explicitly made the link between animal justice and other forms of social justice in their presentation.
It is also difficult to know how Cordeiro-Rodrigues could make the claim that RMF campaign was “fragile” with “scarce” resources when he references articles about the impact of the UCT RMF campaign on overseas institutions such as Oxford University. Moreover, the RMF was hugely successful at UCT - it not only influenced university policy regarding transformation, but its supporters managed to shut down the university for several weeks at a time, and caused hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of damage to university infrastructure around South Africa. Very few students involved in violent protests were brought to book by the university authorities. The vegan proposal, on the other hand, was extremely mild and limited in scope: the proposers were simply making an argument that no animal products be served at official Faculty functions. This would not have required the use of any additional resources, and it’s extremely unclear how such a campaign could have contributed towards “removing the aforementioned black injustices from debate in the political arena”. Indeed, the issue of “systemic racism” is an on-going one at UCT, so there is no evidence that it has been side-lined from the political arena.

We thus contend that Cordeiro-Rodrigues has no evidence whatsoever that the proposers were responsible for the failure of their proposal in virtue of being insensitive to racial issues. On the contrary, they pointed out how animal agribusiness contributes to the trauma of slaughterhouse workers, who must daily experience the torment of killing innocent animals because they have limited employment options. They also pointed out how animal agribusiness impacts on the environment - they quoted studies that showed the impact on global warming, water and ocean degradation; they also noted that eating animals contributed to human starvation. Blaming them for the failure of the proposal is akin to blaming the victims: we contend, on the contrary, that it is those who oppose animal advocacy in South Africa who racialized the proposal, and then sought to manufacture evidence in support of their prejudices.

We also note with concern that Cordeiro-Rodrigues seems to have paid almost no attention to the vast suffering of animals caused by animal agribusiness; not a word was given to the billions of victims who suffer unspeakable harms on factory farms and slaughterhouses in South Africa (or elsewhere) on a daily basis. His arguments for reducing the intake of meat and dairy were entirely anthropocentric. Anyone who took animal suffering seriously would – and indeed, should -- “wonder how a Faculty of Humanities that claims to care about issues of ethics and justice could be so morally blind that it voted overwhelmingly to perpetuate cruelty, even as it professes to be
progressive. The chilling effects of the race-baiting by some members of the Faculty cannot be an excuse for not taking the interests of animals seriously.”

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