
About the author...

Les Mitchell is a member of Cape Eastern Regional Meeting and is originally from Liverpool. He has worked in Pathology, Community Health and Science, in the UK, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and South Africa. He gained his doctorate at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, for his dissertation on 'Discourses and the Oppression of Non-human Animals: A Critical Realist Account'.

He is the Director of the Hunterstoun Centre of Fort Hare University and a Fellow of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics. Les is a keen hiker, follows premier league football and does a bit of watercolour painting. His research interests are critical realism, non-human animals, discourses, power in society, genocide, moral disengagement and alternatives to violence.

13 Reporting 'The War'

Les Mitchell

YOU ASK YOURSELF, how it is that something can be there, can be so obvious, yet you just don't see it? Somehow this thing doesn't even penetrate your consciousness. It's as if you know but you don't know that you know.

I can't remember when I first completely understood that 'The War' existed. I suppose there were messages being received all the time, inconvenient information adding up until eventually a cohesive image emerged. In some ways it was like those pictures to help you to understand about optical illusions. Is it a candle stick or two old ladies with big noses? It isn't there and then, without anything changing, it suddenly is there and you wonder why you couldn't see it before. In a way that is what it was like for me when I found out about 'The War'.

A long path of denial

I can remember thirty years ago being given a leaflet on the street in Liverpool. It showed a photograph of a prisoner in some sort of restraint being held in a laboratory and being experimented upon. I remember thinking it was very sad that these things had to happen but

I knew that this was what had to be done. As a scientist I understood that this was the way of things and that some must suffer, for the greater good of all. But I also remember feeling that, in truth, the glib justification which I offered myself that day was fundamentally flawed. Deep down I knew that there was something appallingly immoral about what we were doing.

Years later, after living in Zambia and Tanzania, I was once again back around Merseyside in England and a late-night documentary film narrated by Julie Christie about our use of ‘animals’ was on TV. I didn’t want to watch it but somehow felt I had to. It lasted hours and covered all sorts of things including factory farming and vivisection. One sequence I remember vividly was of a prisoner in a combat research unit laboratory. It was the days of the cold war and military scientists wanted to know how long a soldier would be able to go on fighting in the event of being irradiated. In the sequence shown, the prisoner had been previously exposed to radiation and was clearly suffering the terribly debilitating effects of radiation sickness. She was on a tread mill and being forced to run by having painful electric shocks put through her feet. She ran and ran and ran with a look of desperation and despair on her face and, as she ran, she vomited and vomited because of the radiation sickness. I can still see the images to this day.

Another sequence showed two small prisoners strapped in seats and held in head restraints so that they could only face forward. They were side by side and hour after hour were ‘trained’ to do tasks by being given painful electric shocks when they did the ‘wrong’ thing. For a few minutes each hour the shocks ceased and there was a short rest period. When this time arrived and the shocks stopped for a while the two small bodies remained in restraints, heads rigidly facing forward. As if by a predetermined agreement and even though they could not turn to look at each other, each one reached out a hand towards her fellow. They held each other’s hands, giving each other a little bit of comfort during their brief respite from the painful ordeal they were suffering.

In that simple gesture, that moment of intimacy and solace between the two little ones, the door to a world which was not supposed to exist, reluctantly creaked open.

More years went by and due to a strange set of circumstances I found myself in Grahamstown, South Africa with a little time on my hands. I decided, finally, to really look into what we do to those with whom we are at war. As I attempted to do this, to discover more and explore deeper, the dreadfulness, the guilt, the disbelief and the sheer overwhelming scope of our violence drew me in. Make no mistake, this is a very dark place to journey; as desolate a landscape as you will find. It is a terrain which can only be comprehended in fragments for fear that a comprehensive reflection on this bleak world will crush a person psychologically and spiritually. Then followed years of research and eventually the writing of a thesis; by that time turning away would never be an option again. It is just not possible to know what we do on a daily basis, to billions of non-humans and still remain silent.

So now I report 'The War' and I report it any way I can – in academic work, in newspapers, on the radio, at meetings, wherever and whenever an opportunity arises. Let me tell you a little of what I have discovered about our 'War'; the slavery, the power abuse, the violence and the oppression. Forget about the Geneva Convention, in this war there are no rules of engagement, no respect for rights, the casualties are massive and they all come from one side – and its the other side that always wins.

'The War'

Wars are fought for many reasons, for territory, water, timber, gold, oil and so on but also to enslave and use the population which is defeated. This war began on a small scale about 10 000 years ago as our species of ape began to become more and more dominant over our fellow beings. As we killed them at an increasing rate we also started to take their young and keep them as our prisoners. The term we use for this act of theft and enslavement is *domestication*. That was, in my opinion, what

really marked the start of 'The War' in earnest.

Things have escalated significantly since then and particularly so over the last five hundred years as *Homo sapiens* has made greater inroads into the last wild places with our insatiable appetites for land, food, water and a whole range of things to provide for something we describe as progress. Many of our fellow species are forever gone because of our greed and thoughtlessness. They evolved as our fellow travellers through hundreds of millions of years of struggle, surviving against all sorts of adversity only for their whole kind to be extinguished forever by us.

Of those who remain, many populations are staring into the abyss of annihilation. Grimly they hold on as we take more of their food and land, poison the air they breathe and the water they drink and prevent their natural migrations. We have stolen their ancestral lands, their ancient clan homes where they had lived for tens of thousands of years. No longer do we have to go out and physically kill our adversaries; for the most part they are simply, slowly and silently, ceasing to exist. We, as a species, are the incarnation of the sixth extinction.

But perhaps in many ways it is our prisoners who fare the worst. For our slaves it is a sentence of ceaseless oppression. We hold many billions in slavery, using them daily for power, transport, experimentation and entertainment; we treat their bodies as machines for the production of flesh and to produce children - who we then take away and kill. It is no exaggeration to say that our whole world has been built on the groaning backs, and with the stolen lives, of non-human animals.

Slavery

For thousands of years non-human animals have been forced to work for the benefit of humans in some form or other. From the 17th century onwards, however, large numbers of non-human animals have been put to work.¹ Hribal describes animals as part of the working class under a capitalist system and has written an account of the part played by animals in both the agricultural and industrial revolutions in Europe.

The account compares non-human animals to others who lived and still live, under similar conditions, such as human slaves, some children, home workers and sex workers.² The unspoken ‘right’ to use animals for labour and the exploitation of non-humans for various products such as milk and wool is seldom questioned seriously and non-human animals are often portrayed as being willing partners in these processes.

Non-humans of various kinds – horses, oxen, dogs, mules, donkeys, ponies, camels, elephants and many others – have lost their freedom and given their lives to endless grinding work; pulling loads, powering all kinds of machinery, dragging barges, ploughing, carrying things on their backs and working in the mines until finally they became worn out and were discarded. At one time in Liverpool alone 20 000 horses worked on the streets. Hribal gives the following example of non-humans toiling in the industrial revolution;

Spinning frames and carding devices could now be powered via a trotting horse. So whether in Paul and Wyatt’s Birmingham operations, Richard Arkwright’s Nottingham mill, or in John Lee’s Manchester factory, these equine laborers lived on-site, and spent their days and nights ‘treading the wheel’. Work normally began at 7.00 a.m. during the winter and at 6.00 a.m. in the summer with the average shifts lasting 12 hours. Night shifts were not uncommon.³

We still use non-humans today for many of these things as well as other uses such as vivisection but the greatest number of all we use as machines to produce commodities from their bodies – milk, skin, fat, flesh, bones, wool, and so on. Our society is awash with the bodily products of the living and the remnants of the dead. Steven Wise describes how

... the blood of a slaughtered cow is used to manufacture plywood adhesives, fertiliser, fire extinguisher foam, and dyes. Her fat helps make plastic, tires, crayons, cosmetics, lubricants, soap, detergents, cough

syrup, contraceptive jellies, creams, ink, shaving cream, fabric softeners, synthetic rubber, jet engine lubricants, textiles, corrosion inhibitors, and metal-machine lubricants. Her collagen is found in pie crusts, yogurts, matches, bank notes, paper, and cardboard glue. Her intestines are used for strings for musical instruments and racquets. Her bones are in charcoal ash for refining sugar, in ceramics, and in cleaning and polishing products.⁴

Today many non humans do not even feel the grass under their feet, living in concrete floored milking parlours or being held in stalls for the whole of their short lives which may span just a couple of days or up to a few months. Others are corralled in massive feedlots, no trees to shelter under, just standing in the burning sun or sweeping rain, in the dust or the mud they are forced to simply exist, until the day comes when they are taken away to die.

Looking at those of our land based detainees who we use for food, we kill fifty-five thousand million (55 000 000 000) of them every single year.⁵ This is over 150 million individuals every twenty-four hours. Every one of them a child of parents, an individual, alive in this world for her own purposes who can experience pleasure and pain, fear and freedom and, if given the chance, the closeness of her family. This death toll is the equivalent of killing every person in South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Botswana, Angola and Uganda every single day of the year.⁶ There will be another 150 million fatalities again tomorrow but you won't read about it in any newspapers or hear about it on the TV. No atrocity will be mentioned, no tragedy referred to; no problem at all, just business as usual. This is a silent war, waged with our complicity and our consent, pursued for our profit and our pleasures.

Who is a slave?

It might be argued that slavery only describes the ownership of one person by another but Midgley points out that the Latin word *persona* never applied to slaves.⁷ In ancient Greece, slaves were classed as

non-persons as Aristotle makes clear when he notes ‘[t]he slave is a living tool and the tool is a lifeless slave’.⁸ Similarly, during the time of slavery in pre-civil war America, slaves were not recognised as legal persons.⁹

The defining characteristic of slavery is the ownership of one being by another. It is first and foremost a relationship of absolute power and as such open to the most corrosive abuse. Lovejoy maintains that slavery in general is a specific form of exploitation and his description captures the powerlessness of slaves:

First, slaves were property... Slaves were completely at the disposal of their masters: The[sic] labor power of slaves could be used however desired; even their sexuality and, by extension their reproductive capacities were not theirs by right.¹⁰

Concerning slavery and the Mangbetu people of north eastern Congo, Hutereau writes;

Slaves... are the absolute property of the master. He beats them, sells them, trades them, mutilates them, executes them ... Slaves have no right to legal protection.¹¹

The ownership of the slave does not only extend to the individual who has been enslaved but to their unborn children as well. As Meillassoux observes of female slaves who have born children:

As a rule their children belonged to her master even when he was not the genitor. The male slave with whom she had these children was not the ‘father’ and had, as a result, little or no interest in them.¹²

In the case of the Songhat-Zarma people of Mali and Niger, drawing a parallel with animals, de Sardan writes:

The child of two slaves belonged to the master of the woman, just as the increase of a herd belonged to the owner of the cow.¹³

Surely there can be no doubt that non-humans are our slaves. Non-humans are absolutely owned; they are held captive and coerced and have no agency except that allowed by their owners. They are mutilated in various ways, castrated, branded, toes clipped, beaks burnt; their babies are taken from them, their families are broken up and they are bought, sold and made pregnant at the will of others. Under the law they are property and have no rights whatsoever; they cannot be represented in court and they are utterly powerless to resist what we do to them.

Each of us is born into a world where non-human slavery already exists and has existed for many thousands of years, so it is hardly surprising that we accept the way we treat non-humans as being something normal and natural. However the striking correspondence between our oppression of humans in slavery and our oppression of non-humans today cannot simply be dismissed because we find it inconvenient and unpleasant.

Alibis, explanations and self delusion

So how can we live with all this killing? How can we justify what we do? How does this war, slavery and oppression go on? For even if we do not physically carry out any of these acts ourselves, we support them with the goods we buy, the organisations we sustain and our silence. The answer to this question is complex but two aspects, I think, are crucially important. First we carefully hide what we do from the majority of the population. For example we no longer poleaxe and dismember our captives in city streets (the shambles) nor do we allow people to watch as we put chemicals into the eyes of rabbits. These things might offend our sensitivities and they are done in large anonymous industrial killing plants and in laboratories deep inside establishments. The second thing we do is to construct a social reality where treating non-humans in the way we do is entirely acceptable, normal and justifiable. We do this in a number of ways but particularly through the language we use.

Creating reality in language

It may seem strange to suggest that we construct our social reality through language but the words we use and the way we use them carry a great deal of hidden meaning. Language is not just a simple vehicle for transmitting basic information from one person to another but carries ideology deeply imbedded within it. Is the young woman standing on the corner at night a whore, a sex worker or a child of God? Each description tells us a little something about how the user of the language sees that woman, about their moral outlook, about how they understand the world to be; in other words about their ideological view.

As we use language in a particular context we create and reinforce our ideology of the world. Language in action in this way may be described as a discourse and we can have discourses of capitalism and socialism but also a discourse of liberation, a farming discourse or a football discourse. Discourses compete with each other but if one becomes particularly dominant, it marginalises any alternatives. This then becomes the taken for granted way the world is believed to be; it becomes common sense and as such is seldom, if ever, questioned.

Discourses and their construction of reality can be very important and have far reaching consequences. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission which was convened to look into the atrocities committed under Apartheid makes the following observation;

It is common place to treat language as mere words, not deeds, therefore language is taken to play a minimal role in understanding violence. The Commission wishes to take a different view here. Language, discourse and rhetoric does things: it constructs social categories, it gives orders, it persuades us, it justifies, it explains, gives reasons, excuses. It constructs reality. It moves certain people against other people.¹⁴

Later the Commission links the discourses to the ideologies which they construct and reinforce.

In the South African context it is important to understand how multiple discourses combined, intersected and intertwined to create climates of violence. In this respect the ideologies of racism, patriarchy, religions, capitalism, apartheid and militarism all intertwined to 'manufacture' people capable of violence. Ideologies in these sorts of combinations provide the means and grounds for people to act violently and yet, ironically, believe they are acting in terms of worthy, noble and morally righteous principles.¹⁵

It is not very long ago that it was taken for granted that women are incapable of carrying out scientific research or indeed understanding science at all. Women had other roles in life which they were meant to perform such as entertaining, cooking and raising children. This was simply understood to be the natural way of the world; it was obvious and common sense. Ridiculous though that may seem today it was an ideology which affected and continues to affect the lives and aspirations of many millions of young women.

Similarly, some races were once viewed as obviously superior to others. So much was clear, a plain truth to all those concerned (at least to members of the 'superior races'). The explanation was that superior races were those designated by God as inherently being superior or alternatively, drawing on social Darwinism, they were 'more evolved' than the 'lower races'. This gave them the justification to dominate and use those lower races.

We live in a highly scientific world but there are many who still see human beings as the pinnacle of creation, the most advanced creature on the earth. It is not uncommon to read about humans being referred to as the *most highly evolved species on the planet* yet all organisms alive today have been evolving for the same length of time. So how, we may ask, can one particular species of naked ape be said to be more evolved than any other living being? Unfortunately this ideology is subtle and deeply entrenched. Even in scientific literature there are references to such things as *lower animals* and *lower vertebrates*. In fact

we speak of *humans and animals* as if these are two separate groups even though we know that humans *are* animals. We would not speak of women and humans or French people and Europeans but when it comes to animals, we use linguistic deception to dissociate ourselves from our fellow animal beings. Indeed the very term ‘animal’ carries with it connotations of a lower nature, disgust, lustfulness, barbarity and violence.

In the Holocaust there was an existing discourse of anti-Semitism but this was combined with a relatively new discourse from the ‘science’ of eugenics. Eugenics, according to Charles B Davenport, one of its leading figures, is ‘the science of the improvement of the human race by better breeding’.¹⁶ The idea that the human race could be ‘improved’ by ‘better’ breeding was supported by many well-placed adherents in Germany, the United States and elsewhere and was a discourse transplanted, almost without alteration, from farming. Patterson describes how, by the end of the nineteenth century, American and German scientists had accepted a rigid theory of inheritance which generally left aside social influences on people and ranked human groups in a hierarchy with the allegedly inferior ones being ‘immoral, depraved, criminal, or simply sufficiently different to be threatening’.¹⁷ Eventually both the United States and Germany introduced compulsory sterilization and, in 1932, the Third International Conference of Eugenics was held in New York with its theme ‘A Decade of Progress in Eugenics’.¹⁸ This ‘science’ maintained that ‘defective’ people in society, which meant the disabled, the mentally ill, criminals, homosexuals and the ‘feeble minded’, posed a threat to the purity and future strength of the stock. There was a continual fear of contamination of good stock by bad and of the weakening of the stock by the introduction of ‘bad blood.’ Patterson further records that, following the First World War, the doctrine of racial hygiene took hold in German medicine and science. This meant that institutionalised patients could be described as having ‘lives without purpose’ and as ‘human ballast’, ‘semi-humans’, ‘defective humanity’, ‘mentally dead’, ‘empty shells of human beings’

and those who were 'unworthy of life'.¹⁹ The ground was prepared for not only the sterilization but the killing of undesirable elements. The United States, Germany, Denmark and other Scandinavian countries all enacted legislation to allow compulsory sterilization.²⁰

Lack of moral concern during the Holocaust, Glass maintains, was in part because of the climate created by German science, portraying killing Jewish people as simply part of a health policy.²¹ Jews were portrayed as vermin:

Science had established its dominance over the belief structure of Nazi Germany. Race lay at the centre of this scientific edifice; and racial hatred elaborated itself as a set of scientific principles obsessed with blood cleanliness, genetic purity, and a phobic reactivity to the potential of race contamination. These beliefs exercised an enormous influence over scientific, professional, political, and administrative practices.²²

Proctor claims that:

... science set the stage for the Final Solution long before the arrival of National Socialism. When the Nazis took over, the pre-existing scientific discourse allowed the doctors to become the priests of the cult of the German blood as well as its medical keepers and the exterminators of its potential polluters.²³

Power

It is the powerful who get to name the world and so inculcate their ideology until it becomes so every day and common place we fail to recognise it as ideology at all and it goes unchallenged. This as Bourdieu points out, leads to the '... recognition of legitimacy through the misrecognition of arbitrariness'.²⁴

Non-human animals have no power over humans in a physical sense and obviously no power in a social sense. So the social construction of their identity, their identity in the human world, depends upon human discourses. While in popular imagery they may be interesting,

cuddly, and cute and so on, we ruthlessly use non-humans for our own purposes and have constructed discourses which give us permission to do just that.

Our language use highlights this. We often use negative and degrading non-human descriptions. He is an animal, it was a brutal attack, dumb animal, dirty pig, greedy pig, a bitch, a donkey, an old cow, a dirty rat, behaving like a pig and in such ways we portray non-humans as disgusting, stupid, worthless, violent and gluttonous.

Some descriptions ascribe an implicit use for non-humans as if this is the purpose of individual being's life. Examples of this are; food animals, broiler chickens, layers, roasters, red beef cattle, laboratory animals, dual purpose breeds, beef calves, breeding cattle and slaughter lambs. Each description reinforces the erroneous idea that that this is the true purpose of this sentient beings existence while it is, in reality, a purpose, a use, imposed on her by her oppressors.

Non-humans are never murdered but culled, processed or harvested. We eat meat or steak or silverside but not flesh, we have on the table a leg of lamb but not a lamb's leg, and we do not drink mother's milk (meant for her dead baby) even though that is the true nature of the liquid in the carton. The world we construct has non-humans existing, not as individuals but en masse, as things which are replaceable by another batch of things when we have used up this lot. To truly think of them as individuals would be too much to bear for we might then begin to examine what we are really doing.

As a reporter of 'The War' I have, perhaps, exceeded my brief and meandered off to take a glimpse into other territory but every good correspondent should surely have something to say in explaining the events they report.

This is a short and in many ways incomplete essay and I do not ask you, kind reader who has come this far, to believe a single word of it. The evidence for 'The War' is all around us, as the mounds of body parts in any supermarket readily testify. So I leave you to your own thoughts and investigations. But let me finish with a famous reporter

of 'The War'. His words are unambiguous and he has the courage to speak them.

Leonardo da Vinci, 600 years ago, expressed his pity for animals saying, 'From countless numbers will be taken away their little children and the throats of these shall be cut, and they shall be quartered most barbarously'.²⁵ He also wrote, concerning the oppression and slavery of non-humans:

O asses which are beaten, O indifferent nature, wherefore art thou so partial, being to some of thy children a tender and benignant mother, and to others a most cruel and pitiless stepmother? I see thy children given into slavery to others without any sort of advantage, and instead of remuneration for the services they have done, they are repaid by the severest suffering, and they spend their whole life in benefiting their oppressor.²⁶

At the interface between humans and non-humans the innocent and truly powerless are delivered into the hands of total power. These are our hands, yours and mine. Can there be any greater test of our spiritual, moral and ethical resolve than this? Will we accept the challenge placed before us or will we continue to look the other way?

This has been your correspondent reporting the ongoing genocide in the fields, and supermarkets near you...



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