

10 Questions

CAROL J. ADAMS

Twenty years later, the sexual politics of meat are still ripe for discussion. *By Joseph Connelly*

Adams at a recent speaking engagement



CAROL J. ADAMS' *THE SEXUAL POLITICS of Meat* is a radical work that significantly altered both the course and discourse of vegan history, offering critical theory that has immeasurably influenced the second wave of Western vegetarianism. Adams' *SPoM* was a sleeper hit at the time of its release, and has built popularity slowly and steadily, much like the veg movement over the past two decades. The book cross-references meat eating with gender, race, and species oppression and shows how they all have roots in patriarchy. Adams has constantly updated her watershed work, and this year saw the publication of an expanded 20th anniversary edition, indicating that the book is just as relevant and needed today as when first published.

1 In *SPoM*, you coined the term "absent referent." For those who have not yet read the book, please explain what that is.

Actually, what I did was wrench a literary term from its mooring and politicize it. Basically, behind every meat meal is the death of the animal whose place the meat takes. The "absent referent" is that which separates the flesh eater from the animal and the animal from the end product.

2 What's the significance of the absent referent?

The function of the absent referent is to allow for the moral abandonment of a being. I also observe that in a patriarchal culture, women and animals become overlapping, intersecting absent referents.

3 How did patriarchy co-evolve with humans' relationship with animals?

With the domestication of animals, humans discovered how conception happened, and, after that discovery men wanted to control women's sexuality so that they ensured that they weren't getting stuck with offspring who weren't theirs. Other series suggest that hunting animals gave men more power because they controlled the valued protein source—animal protein. Some anthropological studies have found that in cultures where vegetable protein is the main protein source, more egalitarian relationships between men and women exist. In *SPoM*, I avoid making a definitive claim because—however it evolved—right now the problem of patriarchy and meat eating is so intertwined that we won't undo one without challenging and ending the other.

4 What evolutionary benefit could there have been for an animal-protein based, patriarchal society?

None. Neal Barnard of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine suggests that at one time it might have been necessary for our evolutionary predecessors to have compact protein sources, especially in terms of their need for concentrated fat, but that time passed long ago. It's now thought that the first meat eaten was actually taken from insects and from scavenging the meat left over when carnivores were done eating; until recently the majority of human beings survived on vegetable protein.

5 Why are meat's sexual politics so deeply embedded in our culture?

Dominance provides intermittent rewards, and as we know, intermittent rewards are all that are needed for someone to continue to do what he or she is doing. Through dominance (over women, non-dominant men, people of color, and animals), people experience pleasure: the pleasure of consuming or using another. This pleasure exists because of privilege, because our culture has inequality structured within it.

But the privilege and its cultural construction disappear from consideration, and what remains is the “pleasure.”

6 It’s been 20 years since you first published the book. What has changed in that time?

First, the appearance of wonderful vegan restaurants, cookbooks, seitan recipes, cupcakes, truffles, marshmallows, food fairs and celebrations, and the entire vegan community (which VegNews does a great job of representing). Yet, at the same time, the word “feminism” carries negative connotations for so many people, including young women, who don’t even realize how they are benefiting from feminist activism. Second, the increased sexualization in representations of domesticated animals (what pornography used as standard poses for women in the 1980s, meat advertisements use in the 21st century). Third, the push back by meat eaters who continually try to find new ways to justify killing animals, such as the slow food movement, locavore movement, backyard chicken raising, and home slaughter. Finally, that a new generation of students and scholars are discussing “intersectional oppressions” and including animals within their analysis.

7 Can you give an example of intersectional oppression?

Culture is heavily invested in controlling female reproduction (after all, there wouldn’t be meat eating, dairy, or egg consumption without it): from the phantom of the “aborting woman,” to the right-wing fixation on teenage girls’ sexuality, to the heinous treatment of female domesticated animals. Dairy farmers want to make cows’ milk the de facto “milk” while women are banned from breast feeding in public. The lowered status of female animals enslaved to humans’ desires is found in our words for them: “bitch,” “cow,” “sow,” “old biddy,” “hen,” and then those words are used to put women down. So there it is: women, animalized; animals, feminized.

8 What do you mean by “the phantom of the aborting woman?”


Instead of viewing women’s reproductive decisions as choices we are making over a lifetime, from our teenage

years through to and after menopause, anti-abortionists focus on women’s decisions at certain times in their lives not to have children and depict the woman who aborts as being immoral rather than making an ethical, thoughtful, engaged decision about herself and those she lives with. On the other hand, within the animal-rights movement—among those who oppose bringing any children into the world—sometimes women are called “breeders” and are criticized for becoming pregnant. In either case, women are not trusted to make ethical decisions about their own reproductive capacity—she is either a monster or animal-like. Ironic, isn’t it?

9 I heard you made a guest appearance on the “beef” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*.

In a way, yes! As the cops try to solve the murder of a young woman, they arrive at a book signing, where a white woman is showing slides that juxtapose images of women and meat. She is saying, “Our society views women and animals pretty much the same... as cuts of meat” and “Meat eating and the patriarchal world go hand in hand.” It was very strange seeing my own fictional counterpart, showing my *SPoM* slideshow! Many people saw it as an homage to my work; I like to say that it illustrated my theory—because even when a TV show discusses meat eating, it can’t avoid acknowledging the patriarchal world in which it exists.

10 You’ve written, “Engaged theory makes change possible.” What does this mean to you?

I think that would make a great epitaph. It’s like feminist-vegan theory—I write theory believing that understanding how our society is structured equips us to change it. For instance, one of the reasons some animal activism falters is that it fails to challenge the patriarchal nature of animals’ exploitation. And feminists who continue to eat animals don’t recognize how they are re-inscribing patriarchal values with those meals. Activism needs theory to keep it on track. 

VegNews Publisher **Joseph Connolly** congratulates Carol on the anniversary of her landmark book.

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