

Animal work: metabolic, ecological, affective

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What work does the naturalization of work do? What are its political economic implications? Trajectories of bringing nature into the ambit of capitalist accumulation have been a long-standing social science concern. But how might one explain capitalist logics of accumulation without placing nature's forces and potentials squarely on the side of capital – as political economic straightjackets tend to do? After all, these are potentials that capital presupposes but does not itself produce. I address these questions by focusing on concepts of 'animal work' or 'nonhuman labor' (Barua 2017; Blanchette 2015; Porcher 2015) that offer crucial insights into how nature is constitutive of political economic organization.

Animals are workers in the shadows of capitalism: their labors remain, or are rendered, invisible but become pivotal when actual practices of value extraction are taken into consideration. Animals, however, are not self-directed creatures exchanging alienable labor in the marketplace of their own volition. 'They are paws not hands' (Haraway 2008). Conceptualizing animal work through humanist frameworks, or anthropomorphic extension, is misleading. Intention and functionality are immanent to the labor process rather than the imposition of prior design upon an external substrate – what Marx (1976) argued was the difference between labors of the architect and that of the beelabor. Divisions between productive and reproductive labor become a moot point here for animals are simultaneously bodily technologies and living commodities. Furthermore, animal work is porous, performed relationally with an entourage of actors, cross-cutting animal-human divides.

Three examples highlight the political economic import of animal work. The first is what one could term *metabolic labor*: the body work of animals lying at the heart of contemporary biocapital, as commodities and as modes of production. The transformation of commercial broiler chicken into creatures that grow to twice the size of their counterparts in the 1930s, in less than half the time, is a prominent example (Boyd 2001). Born to become meat, chicken are not simply 'raw material' but laboring bodies that capital parasitizes upon and turns into an accumulation strategy. This ever-expanding dynamic of valorization has rendered chicken into the [world's most common bird](#), their bones now a defining feature of the Anthropocene's stratigraphy. Metabolic labor thus points to an anatomo-politics of capital (Negri 2017), albeit proceeding through nonhuman bodies.



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A second modality of animal work is *ecological*: a form of eco-social reproduction necessary for the maintenance of ecosystems. Work done by insect pollinators such as bees is an exemplar. Often framed in terms of ‘ecosystem services’: a range of metrics, indices and ‘willingness-to-pay’ measures are deployed to bring ecological work into the realm of economic calculability as ‘natural capital’ (Helm 2015). However, conceptualizing pollination as labor rather than services – and here I am not referring to trite nonhuman divisions of labor into the worker, queen and drone – foregrounds a very different political entomology at work. Honeybee colonies in North America, for instance, have registered a 50% decline, triggering a ‘[pollinator-mediated food crisis](#)’. Costs for replacing the work of bees with human labor can run into billions of dollars for relatively small regions. As a consequence, ‘[rent a hive](#)’ schemes have emerged: orchards pay up to US\$200 per hive for bees’ labors. [In India](#) on the other hand, poor regulation and a large informal market has manifested in child labor carrying out cross-pollination in cotton farms experiencing major pollinator declines. ‘Willingness to pay’ approaches espoused by neoclassical economics typically undervalue bees’ labors and relegate eco-social reproduction.



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A third, and no less important, dimension of animal work is *affective labor*. Corporeal, somatic, whose products are intangible, affective work of animals particularly become visible in the entertainment industry and its regimes of spectacular accumulation. This includes [cat cafes](#) – a trending retail phenomenon spreading from San Diego to Singapore – where customers increasingly desire new forms of intimacy with felids to cope with stressful atmospheres. Yet cats are predominantly nocturnal animals that sleep long hours during the day. Frequently woken up and placed on waiting customers' laps in the daytime requires cats to cope with their own physiological stress. Similarly, ['celebrity' bull elephants](#) in southern India are forced to interact with publics as they travel from one town to another, participating in over two-hundred processions annually at lucrative rental fees exceeding US\$1,000 per day. The micropolitical channelling of affect to foster spectacular consumptive experiences are contingent upon significant disciplining of proboscidean spect-actors: elephants are often bored and depressed in captivity. In moments of resistance, individuals are even known to kill their handlers (Barua 2016).



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In summary, animal work brings hidden geographies of exploitation and expropriation to the fore, pointing to new directions for analyzing the reproduction of capital. Metabolic, ecological and affective labor carried out by animals not only highlights the violence in commodifying life, but signifies the economic force of nonhuman potentials co-opted by capital. Animal work enables reorienting understandings of capitalism: it shows the latter is not just a set of cultural and economic practices, but *ecological* as well.

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