

## **How do we end this Carnage?**

**An interview with Jean-Marc Gancille**

December 11, 2020

**Anti-speciesism posits that it is unethical to exploit or harm animals simply because they belong to a different species than our own. In his latest book, animal rights activist Jean-Marc Gancille defends this position, arguing that ethical farming will always be a contradiction in terms, and denounces a failure on the part of many environmentalists to connect the dots between the climate cause and the subjugation of animals.**

As a second wave of Covid-19 sweeps across Europe this autumn, a [study published by IPBES](#) at the end of October shows that preventing pandemics would cost significantly less than trying to limit their devastating impact before an effective vaccine can be produced. IPBES scientists are calling for a radical transformation of our economic, financial, and agricultural models, including a drastic reduction in livestock rearing and with it our meat consumption. This is grist to the mill of the fast-growing vegan and vegetarian movements, which are still too often caricatured as either a bunch of harmless crackpots, or a group of dangerous radicals who want to impose their way of life on everybody else.

It's in this context that we talk to author and animal rights activist Jean-Marc Gancille, whose latest book *Carnage*, published in September 2020, takes an uncompromising look at the massacre of animals globally today and calls for the end of animal exploitation through a series of radical, concrete solutions.

***Green European Journal:* Why publish this book now, when there are already plenty of others out there on the subject? Was it the lack of scientific evidence that warranted another book?**

**Jean-Marc Gancille:** There are a great many arguments likely to convince most people that we live in a society that oppresses and enslaves animals at every level, but these levels are not perceived together as a whole. Each person sees the levels separately, viewing them through the lens of entertainment, the natural world, food, captivity... I think that we lack an overall picture of this "carnage", one that provides an overview of the myriad ways in which we massacre and subjugate animals in space and time. As we do so, we deny their cognitive faculties and [sentience](#) – still not widely understood.

So I've tried to provide an uncompromising assessment of the situation and of the fact that some positions are untenable today, to show that there is an urgent need for radical solutions. We need to shift the [Overton window](#) on animal rights, to stop the small steps and take a giant leap into a new paradigm, one that gives full consideration towards those who, like us, have the right to exist.

**Are scientific arguments enough to end anthropocentrism? Or do we need to endow living beings with a new sacredness, something more spiritual?**

When it comes to understanding the importance of these questions, not everyone works in the same way. Some will be much more open and receptive to spiritual arguments, to emotions, while others, like me, will be much more sympathetic to rational arguments. Personally, I need to explore issues in depth and see what the science says

today about things such as animal sentience or data on the extent of massacres globally.

Today, we are seeing a whole range of actions in favour of animal rights: vegetarianism and veganism, boycotts, liberation actions, political or philosophical essays like those by [Corinne Pelluchon](#). At the same time, like many people who have long been fighting for animal rights, I am aware of just how strong the resistance is. But, paradoxically, it's an area in which awareness is growing more quickly than others. For example, among younger generations, animal ethics seem to be gaining ground even faster than environmental ethics, despite the latter being constantly highlighted by Greta Thunberg and the "climate generation", and animal rights continuing to be the object of much mockery.

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**The pioneers of fighting climate change were speaking out as early as the 1960s, and there now seems to be a real awareness. Yet declaring yourself a vegan in the name of animal ethics remains a fringe position. How can we explain this gap between the issue of climate, on the one hand, and animal rights, on the other? Is it just a matter of time?**

We can act much more concretely and effectively on our convictions at an individual level when it comes to animals rights than we can on the question of carbon and the climate crisis. Today, there's nothing forcing us to eat animals or their by-products, whereas we can't really work or live without heating our homes, travelling, consuming a bare minimum... It appears that it's easier to leave behind an oppressive attitude towards animals overnight than it is an extremely carbon-intensive way of life.

**Will the sixth mass extinction event be easier to resolve than the climate crisis?**

Yes, paradoxically, this may be quicker to resolve, even though the two crises are intimately linked. I remain fairly pessimistic about our future and our common destiny, but if I have any cause for satisfaction, it's to see the extent to which animal rights and anti-speciesist ideas are spreading and having a much greater impact at an individual level compared to those around the climate crisis, about which there are continuing calls for collective action.

**One criticism regularly levelled at vegans and anti-speciesists is that they're serving as "capitalism's useful idiots" by enabling agro-industry to gain a stranglehold on synthetic meat production. What do you think?**

These are the sorts of debates that I regularly have with mainstream environmentalists such as Benoît Biteau, the agronomist farmer and Green MEP. For me, it's a spurious argument.

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On the one hand, I vehemently disagree that small-scale livestock farming contributes to biodiversity, which, in my opinion, it has ruined more than anything else. On the other hand, I think that the idea of [carbon sequestration](#) by

pasture is very debatable: there's a lot of controversy around the contribution of livestock, even if "responsibly" farmed.

What's more, I regularly notice that the vast majority of vegans and vegetarians around me generally eat very little industrially produced food. So there's a prevailing view that doesn't match the reality that I can empirically observe. When I looked into it further, I came across some particularly illuminating articles (some links can be found in *Carnage*): manufacturers of synthetic meat themselves admit that their target market is omnivores who, out of a feeling of guilt, want to find occasional substitutes to meat. Because generally, when you give up meat, it's not to see it back on your plate in a different guise.

Furthermore, this idea of "vegans pandering to industry" feeds the dominant narrative that "responsible" livestock farming is possible. This absolves the guilt of the vast majority who continue to eat meat and who, as everybody knows, always shop at a "local independent butcher who's very nice and does organic meat". It's hypocritical and lets people off the hook to separate "bad" factory farmers from "good" small farmers who kill "with dignity". But you can't kill "with dignity".

Remember, in Western countries, eating meat is no longer a vital necessity. It saddens me to have to fight about this with Greens, like on the animal welfare committee of Europe Ecologie Les Verts (EELV), for example, which managed to promote the concept of "ethical livestock farming" during the last local election campaign.

By continuing to ignore the right to life of non-human animals, I believe this fierce resistance among Greens not only harms animal rights but the whole environmental movement.

**As a result, ideological divides are opening up in political ecology. Yet, given the current state of the natural world, shouldn't everyone be trying to get along and make common cause? How can we bring people together?**

I have long been in favour of an alliance between those who are concerned about animal ethics and farmers opposed to factory farming, convinced that at the very least we could agree on the first issue. But while, for example, [animal rights organisation] [L214](#) set up forums to try and find common ground on a progressive approach to tackling a minimum number of shameful situations, many Greens could not even bring themselves to hear what was said, still holding on to the idea that killing an animal unnecessarily can be acceptable and justified. We can't move forward in the fight for animal ethics by starting from such a different presupposition.

**Isn't there also a French meat culture which means that, even among environmentalists, it's harder for arguments about animal rights to cut through, compared to, say, Scandinavian or Anglo-Saxon countries?**

I've got family in Germany and I have indeed noticed that there's a greater tendency for environmentalists to also be vegan or vegetarian over there. In Scandinavian countries too, when you meet environmentalists, most of the time they're proponents of moving towards a plant-based diet. For them, it's a no-brainer! So it's true, there is a specific French context linked to this culinary heritage that has been mythologised around its farmers, which results in resistance and irreconcilable differences. More broadly speaking, it's undoubtedly harder to convince people in Latin countries that pride themselves in a certain *art de vivre*. What flabbergasts me is that it's these so-called *bons viveurs* who kill the most.

I don't want to forget fishing, either, because here too there seems to be a "virtuous" small-scale fishing up against "evil industrial fishing that is emptying the oceans". The bit about evil industrial fishing is largely true, but we also need to debunk the idea that small-scale fishing is virtuous. Environmentalists call for sustainable and responsible fishing through organisations like [Bloom](#). Yet, from the statistics (which I reference in the book), we now know that small-scale fishing and industrial fishing catch the same tonnage of fish for human consumption. So, we

shouldn't mythologise "virtuous" small-scale fishing which, at the end of the day, is just as harmful and just as responsible for the collapse of marine ecosystems, or what's left of them. It's a battle that gets less media coverage, but is often just as dispiriting when you see the amount of resistance and levels of argument.

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**Basically, for you it's the welfarist and utilitarian narrative that most serves as "capitalism's useful idiot"?**

Absolutely! You can put it like that.

**In the book you also discuss prospects for reconciling environmentalism and animal rights. How can this be done?**

Thomas Pelletier highlights all the contradictions which mean that, today, there's an environmentalist movement that is resistant to anti-speciesist ideas, taking up utilitarian positions in a sort of denial of suffering. A dangerous narrative is developing around the possibility of continuing to massacre animals, but in a "green" way, with pseudo solutions: small livestock farmers who claim that they are contributing to biodiversity and reducing CO2 emissions, and small fishermen who claim that their catches have no impact on the food chain and the collapse of marine systems. Yet this narrative means that nothing has to change.

**Aren't we going to find ourselves in a completely contradictory situation? Because younger generations, who surveys show are increasingly attached to animal ethics, will end up voting for mainstream Greens. Of course, there will always be tensions, but what hope is there for finding common ground?**

There are two things: are we going to be able to convert environmentalists to the animal rights cause? Judging by a number of groups on social media that are receptive to these arguments, like Transition 2030, which includes collapsologists and radical environmentalists among others, there is more and more interest in animal rights and a questioning of received opinion, which gives reason for hope. But incredible resistance and a deep divide remain between those who only think about carbon and those who are more concerned with the ethics of animal suffering. This antagonism is hard to reconcile.

In France, we won't be able to make EELV anti-speciesist and there will be more and more movements advocating these ideas such as the Parti animaliste and REV and nibbling away at the mainstream Green electorate. Although this movement remains fringe, it's no longer trivial.

I'd really like to see Greens agree on the fundamentals, but unfortunately the fundamentals aren't there. We can't ignore this current animal carnage in the name of unity, it's ever more divisive.

**To end anthropocentrism, as you put it in your book, what do we need to do both individually and collectively?**

The first and most obvious solution is to immediately stop all consumption of animal flesh and by-products. Then it's a question of refusing to support anything that leads to the enslavement and domination of animals by, for example, boycotting zoos, dolphinariums, and any theme parks where animals are kept in captivity for most of the time in disgraceful conditions and tormented to obey. We can also get involved in every fight for these ideas, without putting on a guerrilla uniform.

We must obviously oppose hunting and bullfighting. As far as possible, we must also limit our interactions with wild animals and allow them to regain their sovereignty, because we continue to encroach upon their space. For example, there is a frenzied pursuit of interactions with wild animals for selfies that is not just grotesque but above all harmful. Animals just need us to leave them in peace.

*Interview conducted over the phone in August 2020*

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Jean-Marc Gancille is an author and animal rights activist working in Réunion in a scientific association for the conservation of cetaceans, Globice. The association seeks to implement conservation programmes to study and protect marine mammals, to help them adapt to a deteriorating environment, with global warming, plastic pollution, and fishing. He is the author of *Carnage* and *Ne plus se mentir*.

Published December 11, 2020

Interview in English

Translation available in French

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/how-do-we-end-this-carnage/>

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