



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## 'Race' and species in the post-WW2 United Nations discourse on human rights

Corbey, R.H.A.

### Citation

Corbey, R. H. A. (2013). 'Race' and species in the post-WW2 United Nations discourse on human rights. In *The politics of species: Reshaping our relationships with other animals* (pp. 67-76). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/82161>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License:

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/82161>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## 5 “Race” and species in the post-World War II United Nations discourse on human rights

Raymond Corbey

Discursive and analytical resources used to study or combat stereotypes can themselves be articulations of such stereotypes. In the following I will show this for the humanist post-World War II United Nations discourse on human rights and racism, which proclaimed a new, more inclusive demarcation of morally respectable beings by a continuing exclusion of others. This constitutes a formidable obstacle for a definition of rights and moral responsibility that includes non-human animals. The same problem faced the subsequent “Great Ape Project,” which proclaimed an extension of the rights of human apes to non-human apes only.

From a background in both philosophy and anthropology I have always had a keen interest in historical roots and cultural backdrops to views of human and non-human animals, in particular the Western idea of human exceptionalism and unique dignity. In the following, I compile a tentative inventory of the main backgrounds, roots, and contexts of the implicitly speciesist post-World War II United Nations Declarations on Human Rights and Racism, ending with some reflections on the nature of such proclamations.

### All humans equal

In the aftermath of the racist atrocities of World War II a new, anti-racist conception of humankind and human rights was proclaimed. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948; published in 1952: United Nations, 1952; see Figure 5.1) states that “Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the *human* family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. . . [All] *human* beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (my italics). “Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person, and to not to be held in slavery or servitude” (United Nations, 1952).

The *Statement on Race* (UNESCO, 1950) was the first of several subsequent declarations explicitly focusing on racism. The *Proposals on the Biological Aspects of Race* (1964), for example, claim that “[all] men living today belong to a single species, *Homo*

*The Politics of Species: Reshaping our Relationships with Other Animals*, eds R. Corbey and A. Lanjouw. Published by Cambridge University Press. © Cambridge University Press 2013.



**Figure 5.1** Eleanor Roosevelt holding a copy of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, a document that she helped create. US National Archives.

*sapiens*, and are derived from a common stock... Neither in the field of hereditary potentialities concerning the overall intelligence and the capacity for cultural development, nor in that of the physical traits, is there any justification for the concept of ‘inferior’ and ‘superior’ races” (Dunn *et al.*, 1975: p. 358).

Until then a Eurocentric double standard for “races” – one for “whites,” another for “non-whites” – had predominated. Quote marks are in order, because developments in twentieth century genetics made it abundantly clear that biological variability within present-day humankind are a matter of very small and gradual differences caused by variable gene frequencies. There are no human “races” in terms of types with fixed essences that can be hierarchically ordered in terms of moral qualities, mental capacities, or motivational characteristics. All variability was now assumed to be cultural (see Stoczkowski, 2009).

The inclusion of non-European “races” in the “human family” was made possible by a persisting speciesist, *Homo*-centric standard for all other species as the foundation of society’s moral and legal order. Humans were not to be treated like “beasts.” Quote marks again. There are millions of animal species, among them thousands of mammal

species and two hundred extant primate species, one of which is the extant human species. Yet this single species is set apart in opposition to millions of other species that are lumped together not just as "animals" – or more accurately as *other* animals – but as "beasts" – a term with negative connotations. It was in this pejorative sense that "lower races" were associated time and again, metaphorically, metonymically, literally, with (other) animals.

The biological homogeneity of humankind was presented as an argument for moral and political equality within that species. The inclusion of all members of the human species in a community of moral equals was thus made possible by the exclusion of the members of all other species. The human kind was uniform, which forbade dominion over some humans by others; it was unique in living nature, and so justified human dominion over and exploitation of other, disposable, commodified, animal species. Caucasian exceptionalism was combated while human exceptionalism persisted.

### Human exceptionalism in European metaphysics

The post-World War II United Nations discourse on human rights and racism was, and still is, a broadly humanist one. It issues from a European tradition of exceptionalist metaphysical and moral views of (unique) human nature and dignity, and the (special) place of humans in nature. This tradition reaches back over 2000 years to both Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian religious doctrines. This is the first root of the humanist United Nations discourse I would like to discuss. Time and again, from Plato and Aristotle through Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, through Descartes and Kant, up to substantial parts of present-day philosophy, human individuals were taken to be fundamentally different from individuals belonging to other animal species. As minds with subjectivity and agency they were also taken to transcend and stand apart from their own natural, animal-like bodies.

The decisive, "essential" difference – reflecting a specific, immutable metaphysical *essentia* in the sense of Aristotle, Scholasticism, and Roman Catholic orthodoxy – was humans' capacity to be reasonable, both in a cognitive and in a moral sense. In broad circles worldwide, including the overwhelming majority of legal and political systems, it is still seen this way. In a present-day phrasing, which is much indebted to Immanuel Kant and Enlightenment thought: humans are uniquely self-conscious, free-willing, and, therefore, morally responsible beings. In a leap, which I have never understood very well, this is usually taken to imply automatically the unique moral respectability – "dignity" – of humans themselves. Non-human animal subjectivity has always been, and continues to be, a blind spot, a conundrum for mainstream European thought.

This humanist discourse has loosened itself from, but still converges with, religious ideas in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Subscribed to by over two billion people, the latter sees humans as the only living beings with reasonable, rational souls, created in the image of God and therefore standing high above the rest of nature. As Pope John Paul II phrased it in an address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on October 22, 1996:

It is by virtue of his spiritual soul that the whole person possesses such a dignity even in his body. . . if the human body takes its origin from pre-existent living matter the spiritual soul is immediately created by God. . . theories of evolution which, in accordance with the philosophies inspiring them, consider the mind as emerging from the forces of living matter, or as a mere epiphenomenon of this matter, are incompatible with the truth about man. Nor are they able to ground the dignity of the person. With man, then, we find ourselves in the presence of an ontological difference, an ontological leap. (Pope John Paul II, 1996)

### The “new synthesis” of evolutionary biology and genetics

Ideological pressures toward assuming the unity of humankind, prompted by the racist excesses of World War II and drawing upon mainstream European thought, converged with an important development in twentieth-century biology. The New Synthesis between evolutionary theory and genetics replaced earlier scientific approaches to races in terms of a hierarchy of fixed types, so forming a second important influence on the United Nations Declarations on Human Rights and Races. Prominent biologists such as Julian Huxley and Theodosius Dobzhansky were actively involved with both the New Synthesis and with those declarations. They defended the biological and genetic homogeneity of the species *Homo*, which served as an argument for moral and political equality and the right to full citizenship of all humans, whatever their cultural background or physical characteristics.

Humankind was supposed to be variable only culturally. New synthesis biology saw the human species as a “grade,” an adaptive evolutionary stage with a specific ecological niche that precluded the presence of similar species, and thus tended to stress the unity of the species. No two hominid species could live in the same ecological niche because of competition. The new synthesis also tended to assume a linear, progressive development to more advanced stages (Corbey, 2012), still wrestling to be rid of the influence of early conceptions of evolution as directed by an inner drive toward a fixed goal along a pre-ordained path – rather than by Darwinian natural selection.

Nowadays various forms of metaphysical naturalism are growing ever stronger. They hold that natural sciences such as evolutionary biology or cognitive neuroscience understand nature and human nature. They replace essence with variation, higher purpose in cosmos and history with coincidence, top-down metaphysics with bottom-up ones. Remarkably this was not yet the way in which the New Synthesis, part of the naturalistic turn in twentieth-century thought, influenced United Nations’ discourse: anthropocentrism lingered on in the latter’s scientific humanism.

While in earlier views presumed biological differences had been taken to imply moral and political inequality, now similarities between all members of the species *Homo sapiens* were stressed. These similarities were taken to imply humans’ moral and political equality and their right to full citizenship, whatever their cultural background or physical constitution (see Haraway, 1988). But the Caucasian yardstick for races was combated with a persistent human yardstick for species and the consequent exclusion of non-human species from moral respectability and from the “family of man.” The pivotal

role of that metaphor in the 1950s climate of opinion is illustrated by an exhibition of photographs showing people from 68 different societies, and entitled *The Family of Man*, that was mounted by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1955 (Steichen, 1955). The exhibition travelled around the world for eight years, with stops in 37 countries.

### The repudiation of biology in cultural anthropology

A third major influence on the human-exceptionalist, post-World War II discourse on human rights, was the cultural anthropology of that period, in particular in France and in the United States. In both traditions – the French one in the wake of Emile Durkheim, the American one in that of Franz Boas – cultural anthropology was seen as relatively autonomous with respect to the life sciences. It was supposed to deal with those aspects of humans that transcend their organic existence: linguistically expressed symbolic meaning and moral values, and how these structure society.

Many cultural anthropologists, under the influence of these two traditions, still think that the symbolic capacity of humans implies a rupture with nature and organic life. Humans are special, for they have entered into a different order of existence, that of symbolic language, reflexivity, and morality. Efforts to bring the symbolic and moral world of society and culture within reach of life-science perspectives such as behavioral ecology or gene-culture coevolution are repudiated (Carrithers, 1996; Corbey, 2005). "Culturalists" do not deny the role of biological and material constraints, but they see these as trivial; for them, symbolic meaning is the decisive factor. Cultural behaviors are not taken primarily to be objective matters of fact, but meaningful and appropriate in their specific contexts. As such, the argument goes, they partially, or even essentially, elude objectifying approaches, regardless of how germane such approaches may be to underlying biological or ecological processes. The distinctive quality of humans is not that they live in and adapt to a material world, like other organisms, but that they do so according to meaningful, culturally variable, symbolic schemes.

A major voice in the coming about of the declarations on race was that of the prominent French ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, while American anthropologists in the Boasian tradition had their say too. In both cases we meet Immanuel Kant again, the most influential exponent of humanist Enlightenment philosophy. The Boasians and Franz Boas himself had been influenced decisively by the intellectual climate in late nineteenth-century Germany, where in a neo-Kantian setting philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey and others pleaded for the relative autonomy of hermeneutic, interpretive human sciences vis-à-vis the natural sciences. Boas, who studied in Germany, read Kant intensively; the same goes for two of his most influential pupils, Ernst Sapir and Alfred Kroeber. They saw culture as an extremely variable, relatively autonomous layer superimposed upon humankind's uniform biology. It therefore required a methodology different from and irreducible to that of the biological sciences. In a strongly relativist vein they defended the equality of all human cultures.

Lévi-Strauss concurred with both this dualism and this relativism in his own, idiosyncratic way. He too, through the work of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss was influenced by the nineteenth century, in this case French, neo-Kantianism. Cultural anthropologists don't study nature, bodies, landscapes, and kinship in themselves, but examine instead the ways in which they are culturally perceived and symbolically categorized. Both disciplinary traditions, Boasian and neo-Durkheimian, focus on how humans as moral beings rise above their naturally selfish, Hobbesian animal individuality that is directly rooted in the biological organism.

### People are not "animals"

A fourth root of negative attitudes toward other animals is a cluster of phenomena to do with cultural attitudes and the articulation of cultural identity. It is of a slightly different order than the first three. I will concentrate on modern European culture in these remarks, but I think the argument is relevant for many other cultural settings too.

Unfavorable stereotypes of "the" non-human animal in general and a number of specific animals in particular had a role to play in the cultural discourse and attitudes of Europeans. They provided models of "bestial," "uncivilized," "low" behaviors to be avoided by those who took themselves to be "civilized" – who behaved, ate, defecated, dressed, and made love in a manner they felt was correct. One's own body, bodily functions, and certain impulses were also perceived as "animal," and to be subdued. Expressions such as "you behaved like an animal," or "people should not be treated like beasts" in the post-Holocaust political discourse, as well as various forms of verbal abuse show how non-human animals served as forceful symbols of uncivilized conduct, connected with shame and disgust. They featured in articulations of cultural identity in terms of the exemplary alterity of the animal as such, while certain animals became paragons or "natural symbols" (Douglas, 1970b) of brutishness, associated with uneasiness and aversion regarding what was considered improper or unbecoming.

There is also an extensive literature on European citizens' tendency to extend these associations to peasants, the working classes, the colonized, various infamous professions, and the sexually "deviant," among others (Frykman and Löfgren, 1987; Blok, 2001). Various distorting and distancing mechanisms have added to the role of articulations of cultural identity in attitudes toward other animal species, for example misrepresenting them as insensitive or evil, or concealing cruel practices (see Twine, this volume). This facilitated their exploitation in a variety of ways and helped to maintain a moral order and dietary regime that favored humans. Beings that were seen as low and defiled were thus not only exploited materially, but also discursively, serving to express and deal with things human.

Finally, we should not forget that in corporally embedded cultural regimes of appreciation and feeling about living beings, evolved cognitive and motivational predispositions are at work. Recent empirical research suggests that all humans, species wide, have a domain-specific cognitive system for categorizing and reasoning

about living beings. It tends to attribute fixed essences to living beings as their underlying causal nature and to construct hierarchies. Scientists disagree on the precise nature of this psychological equipment and its effects are hard to disentangle from culturally transmitted beliefs and attitudes, but this line of research is promising in terms of a better understanding of both racism and speciesism (Livingstone Smith, 2011, this volume).

### The Great Ape Project

In 1993, inspired by the United Nations Declarations on Race and Human Rights, a group of academics from various disciplines argued for a further widening of the community of moral equals to include all great apes (Cavalieri and Singer, 1993: pp. 4–7). The Great Ape Project's "Declaration on Great Apes" claimed the right to life, individual liberty, and avoidance of suffering. It argued that there is no meaningful criterion of personhood that excludes non-human apes and no natural category that includes apes but excludes humans. This declaration has had a substantial bearing on changes in legislation regarding the legal status of non-human apes in a number of countries worldwide.

However, the fact that it left the status and personhood of other animals open to future reflection provoked criticism. Similarity to humans still seemed to be the standard against which non-human species should be judged. The inclusion of great apes was made possible by the exclusion of other species, analogous to the inclusion of non-Caucasian "races" at the expense of non-human species in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. As one of the project's contributors conceded, "[we] need to change 'The Great Ape Project' to 'The Great Ape/Animal Project' and to take seriously the moral status and rights of all animals by presupposing that all individuals should be admitted into the Community of Equals" (Bekoff, 1998a; see Bekoff, this volume; Dunayer, this volume). The great apes could serve as a convenient starting point, a bridgehead to the animal world, and the "Declaration on Great Apes" could be extended to other sentient beings.

### Ritual recognition

Present-day moral, legal, and political philosophy and discourse is rife with analogous cases of implicit, silent, taken-for-granted exclusion of other animals. A glaring example is the contemporary philosophical debate on recognition (*Anerkennung* in German), the act of acknowledging or respecting another being and its status, rights, and achievements. Among the most prominent recent contributors are Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor and German philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth. All three operate in the social contract wake of, among others, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel. While there is much to be found on multiculturalism and cultural "others," one searches in vain for serious consideration – let alone



recognition – of the status of non-human species among these thinkers (see, for example, Taylor, 1994).

Recognition in the sense of that debate is exactly what this book is about. Various views on ethics in connection with non-human animals are taken nowadays, some inspired by Aristotle, others by Immanuel Kant, yet others by Jeremy Bentham, to mention but three of the most influential. All three argue for a more inclusive definition of moral respectability. I will leave for now the difficult philosophical debate and end this chapter with some remarks on the ritual character of recognition, from an anthropological perspective. Here I think that the neo-Durkheimian tradition of research on categorization and ritual offers some interesting cues.

This tradition draws our attention to yet another aspect of the United Nations and Great Ape Project declarations, and the present book too: not so much of their content but rather of their performative aspect; less of what is said but of how it is said. I mean the difference between a passive description of reality like “the door is open” and an utterance changing something in reality, like “open that door!” or “I hereby open this meeting.” The first type of statement is true or false, the latter one more or less effective or successful. Seen from this angle, what happens in the statements on rights we are dealing with is a ritual – solemn, public, formal – incorporation or proposed incorporation of beings in a community of, in this case, moral equals. It is a rite of passage, a ritual articulation and bestowal of a new identity on both the community and the beings involved.

In the 1920s Marcel Mauss (1990), in synchronization with Emile Durkheim, analyzed the exchange of gifts, services, or civilities as a profoundly moral activity, as the coming into being of society as a moral order. A gift asks for, or is itself, a counter-gift. There is a three-fold obligation implied in every gift: to give, to receive, and to give in return. When people started giving, Mauss argues, they laid aside the spear, and omnipresent conflict developed into contract. One takes from enemies, but gives to friends. The gift as a moral gesture is thus constitutive of human society – a profound philosophical thought. Bestowing a name or a title on someone is constitutive of the identity of the giver as well as the receiver. It further articulates the relationship between them, creating specific rights, duties, and attitudes on both sides.

This rather abstract line of thought has turned out to be heuristically fruitful in ethnographic research on the constitution of the identity of groups and individuals – particularly in terms of dignity – through ritual exchange. “Dignity” from the Latin word *dignitas*, carries such meanings as “the quality of being worthy or honourable; worthiness, worth, nobleness, excellence... honourable or high estate, position, or estimation” (*New Oxford Dictionary of English*, Pearsall and Hank, 1998). Various declarations on slaves, women, racism, all humans, non-human apes, all sentient beings, ritually recognize the dignity of these categories of beings, incorporating them within the community of moral equals. And here again, I tend to stress the performative, expressive, voluntaristic aspect of the declarations under consideration as not only statements on what there is – moral respectability – but also and in particular as an act of recognition, an emphatic attempt to bring about worth and worthiness.

### Conclusion

I have discussed various roots of the humanist United Nations discourse on human rights and racism. This discourse was prompted by and explicitly referred to the Holocaust, the systematic state-sponsored murder of approximately six million Europeans during World War II. Remarkably, and controversially, detailed parallels have been drawn more recently by animal rights groups and prominent writers such as I. B. Singer, Marguerite Yourcenar, and J. M. Coetzee between the fate of animals in our global economy and that of the victims of the Holocaust. "[We] are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing", a fictive character in one of Coetzee's novels states in a lecture, "which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them" (Coetzee, 1999: p. 21; see Figure 5.2).

The subjects of rituals of acknowledgment and incorporation change from appropriated, commodified, objects to acknowledged subjects. One of the most profound political thinkers and theoreticians on recognition, Jürgen Habermas, distinguishes two aspects and modes of action that are germane to his influential work on human

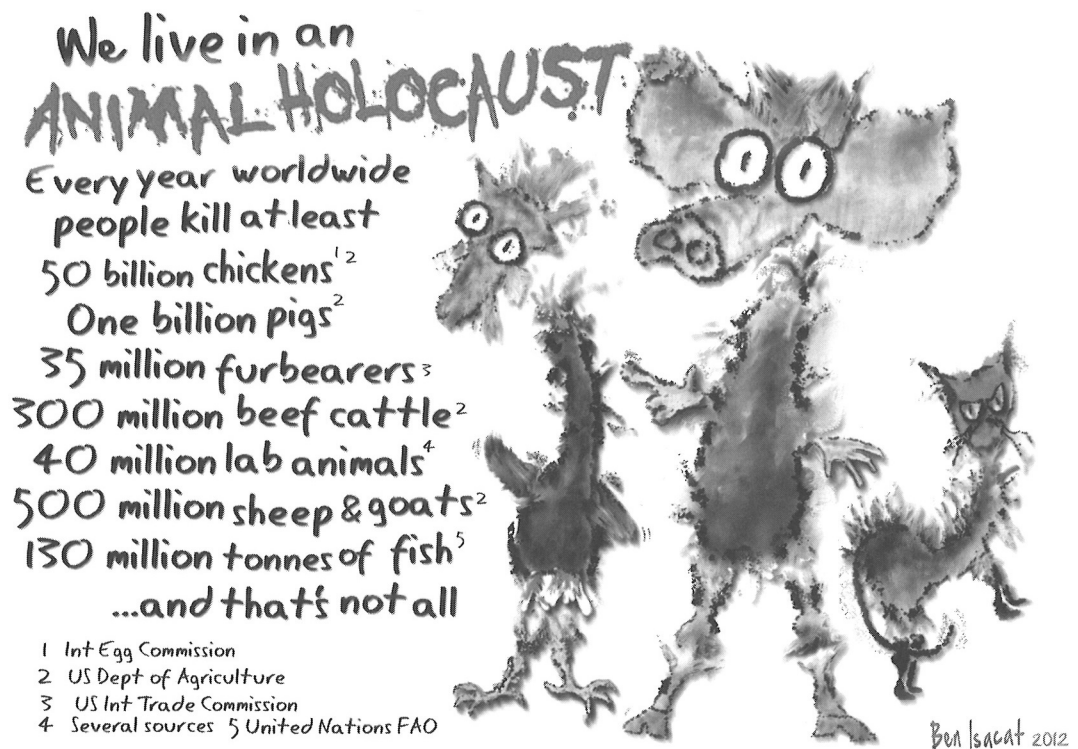


Figure 5.2 A print by, and courtesy of, Roger Panaman, aka Ben Isacat, a British animal rights activist, conservationist, biologist, and artist.

communication, democracy, and law, and for his cultural critique of industrial societies. On the one hand there is strategic action, which has to do with instrumental rationality, with optimizing the means to one's goals, and which can turn to violence. On the other hand there is reasonable, communicative action, which acknowledges – recognizes – the subjectivity of others, and enters into an open, reasonable communication on goals with them. Reason(ableness) is placed in opposition to oppression, giving to taking, inclusion to exclusion, respectful coexistence to appropriation, and otherness as enrichment to otherness as threat and lack. The challenge here, I believe, is to think *with* such theorists of recognition, using their sophisticated analytical resources, *against* them – against their too narrow, too Kantian view of subjectivity and respectability.

# The Politics of Species

Reshaping our Relationships with Other Animals

Edited by

RAYMOND CORBEY

Tilburg University and Leiden University, the Netherlands

and

ANNETTE LANJOUW

Arcus Foundation, New York



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107032606](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107032606)

© Cambridge University Press 2013

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2013

Printing in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd. Padstow Cornwall

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

The politics of species : reshaping our relationships with other animals / edited by R. Corbey, Tilburg University and Leiden University, the Netherlands and A. Lanjouw, Arcus Foundation.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-107-03260-6 (Hardback)

1. Speciesism. 2. Animal rights. 3. Human beings. 4. Human rights. I. Corbey, Raymond, 1954– II. Lanjouw, Annette.

HV4708.P675 2013

179'.3–dc23 2013010576

ISBN 978-1-107-03260-6 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.