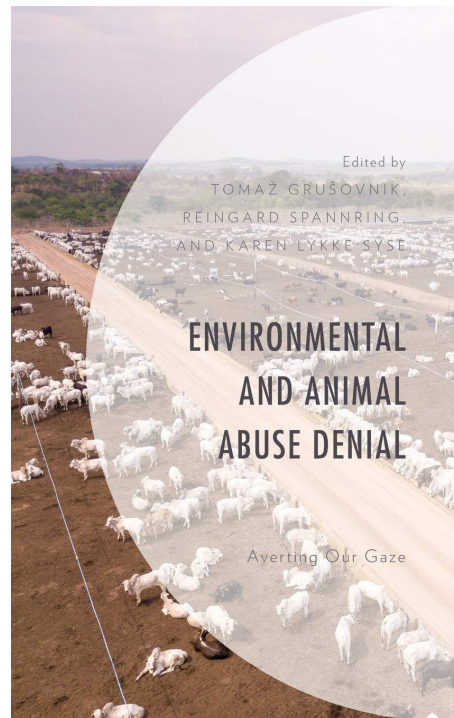


Tomaž Grušovnik, Reingard Spannring,
and Karen Lykke Syse (eds.):
*Environmental and Animal Abuse Denial:
Averting Our Gaze*. Lexington 2021.

Building on the wave of science denial literature from the past two decades, which has now somewhat run its course in terms of describing in general who denies science and for what reasons, this book combines two related yet distinct forms of denial: that of the environment and of animal subjectivity. In doing this, a fresh and reinvigorated approach to denial is presented. Rather than a generalized science denial, combining environmental with animal abuse denial keeps the book particularly interesting as chapters alternate between these two mutually informative topics. The editors organize their book without formal sections dividing chapters, but order chapters by disciplinary approach. After an introductory first chapter by the editors, the next two chapters come from psychology, followed by three philosophical chapters, four from social science, one from ethology, and a final chapter from law. It should be noted that disciplinary labels, while attempting to be inclusive of similarly oriented sub-fields, still overgeneralize and disciplinary



boundaries are not fixed. Other ways of linguistically categorizing the approaches to these chapters are indeed possible. Nevertheless, the interdisciplinarity of this collection reflects the variations of denialism enacted by various actors in differing social positions and places.

As summarized by the editors in their introduction and applied by many authors in their respective chapters, this book nuances denial according to Stanley Cohen's (2001) three forms of denial. In brief, these are: literal outright denial of facts, reinterpretation of facts, and failure to act according to the facts. This

typology is especially helpful for those new to denialism. Multiple chapters break down these forms of denial and apply them to various case studies which is especially helpful in understanding how each can be considered distinct yet related to each other.

The psychological chapters are interesting in that they help to illuminate what goes on in the minds of those set on denying the obvious (or at least what seems obvious to others), and in helping to make some sense of this rather nonsensical stance. However, these chapters feel as if they are simply the “output” of the power of social influences. The chapter by John Sorenson and Atsuko Matsuoaka represents this apogee as their chapter gives a stunning overview of the social forces at work in creating denial about the harms of animal agriculture. In reading this chapter it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of actors that constantly spin lies and spend money to deceive the public into thinking that farming animals is benign at worst.

To be clear, my commentary here is not to pit psychology against sociology. But it is difficult to imagine that the phenomenon of denial would not be massively lessened if the dominant discourse from society reflected that of the scientific discourse. If every social institution relayed information about how human behavior is harming the nonhuman world, and saying that we should trust

the science and explaining why we should do so, while providing alternatives along with the means to achieve them, individuals should be much less likely to concoct their own “alternative facts” which, of course, are not facts at all, but farces. In other words, it seems as if psychological approaches to denial are more descriptive and less action oriented than social approaches. Problems (and their solutions) concerning the environment and animal abuse seem fundamentally located in social structures (e.g., culture, see Vetlesen’s chapter in this book) and influential social actors (e.g., the media and politicians), necessitating social movements.

The chapter by Syse and Bjørkdahl is a standout in showing how society creates conditions ripe for denialism to flourish. This chapter in the center of the book is written almost like a so-called “slow burn” movie with a plot twist at the end. The chapter documents changes in the way meat was presented and sold in markets in Norway. Starting in 1950, Norway began incorporating the Western supermarket approach to grocery stores, replacing butcher’s counters and window displays of carcasses with barely identifiable pieces of meat which were pre-cut out of public view. Such concealment makes it all too easy to disassociate the reality of meat production from its consumption. Syse and Bjørkdahl show how this transition occurred both socially (in terms of the transition in market

design) and personally (the psychology of individual shoppers). The phrase “out of sight, out of mind” is apt here as this chapter shows, by use of a single case study: Within the material layout of supermarkets, concealment and public alienation from meat production can operate to produce widespread denial. It is not hard to imagine how essentially the same mechanisms can operate to foster denial of environmental issues like global warming and species extinction, as social relations and conditions create unequal exposure to and experiences of such events.

Syse and Bjørkdahl end their chapter with a discussion of an incident in which a television personality posted a picture on their personal Facebook page of an entire pig who was wrapped in cellophane and sold in one of Norway’s new supermarkets. The picture elicited numerous comments by Norwegians who were both shocked and disgusted at such an explicit reference to where meat comes from. It is of course a fundamental truism that to obtain meat, animals must be killed. But when consumers are alienated from this process, it becomes all too easy, even the default position, to forget or to deny it.

From this story, one may be tempted to point to so-called cell-based meat as a form of meat without killing animals (Bhat, Bhat, and Kumar 2020). Indeed, this is the dominant discourse

of this nascent industry. However, this is the general type of action that Kopnina, Gray, Washington and Piccolo warn against in their chapter on techno-eco-optimism. Arguing it as the ultimate form of denial, Kopnina et al. assert that naive faith in technology leads people to deny taking actions in the present, or to deny that there is an ongoing problem because technology will fix it soon enough anyway. This is dangerous thinking and it becomes a social problem because such a stance affects others. While certainly appealing, techno-eco-optimism ultimately buries us further into the denial that creates and sustains environmental and animal harm issues.

All of this has implications for human-animal relations. It is clear from this book that an absence of human-animal relations is a sufficient condition for environmental or animal abuse denial. Lack of knowledge of the nonhuman world from personal experience allows people to deny facts that they are not familiar with or do not know. Conversely, appropriate and respectful human-relations fosters relationships with nonhumans which makes it much harder to deny that animals suffer or that the natural world is and can be depleted. Human connection to the nonhuman world is imperative to overcome denial in all its forms, and increased technology does not accomplish this. Instead, we need to think about how to organize social systems to promote

respectful, reciprocal human interaction and relationships with nonhumans. Indeed, sometimes this also implies restraint, to allow the natural environment and nonhuman animals to live autonomously, free from human control.

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