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## **Animal welfare under socialism: Anthropocentrism, instrumentalization, and ideology in the GDR**

### **1. Introduction**

The German Democratic Republic (GDR), as a socialist state, sought to align its policies and practices with Marxist ideology, emphasizing collective welfare, economic productivity, and the transformation of society. However, the application of these principles to non-human entities, such as animals, reveals a complex and often contradictory approach. This article explores the GDR's approach to animal welfare, examining how Marxist rhetoric and socialist objectives intersected with utilitarian and anthropocentric values. The GDR framed its agricultural and industrial policies within a socialist framework, prioritizing efficiency and productivity. The treatment of animals often reflected a deeply anthropocentric worldview, in which animals were valued primarily for their utility to human society. This tension between utilitarian exploitation and ethical considerations raises critical questions about the compatibility of Marxist principles with the broader concept of interspecies ethics and "social necessity" to protect animals.

The main thesis of this article is that in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), animal welfare law was shaped by a utilitarian and anthropocentric interpretation of

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Marxist ideology, which instrumentalized animals and prioritized socialist production and collective human welfare over interspecies ethics. Despite rhetorical alignment with ideals of social justice, the legal and practical treatment of animals reflected their instrumental value to the socialist project rather than recognition of their moral status. This article argues that the GDR's political construction of animal welfare reveals fundamental tensions between Marxist principles and ethical concerns for non-human beings. Critical discourse analysis will be used in combination with ideological critique within a historical-legal framework. By analyzing official policies, propaganda, and dissenting voices within the GDR, this article sheds light on the ideological conflicts inherent in applying socialist ideals to animal welfare. The theoretical research method will be applied to exploring moral or ethical foundations of law. The study will be applied to show the impact of ideology on law.

## 2. The Marxian and Marxist approach to animals and the concept of “socialist animal welfare” and “animal hygiene”

Classical Marxism includes no systematic theory of animal ethics, and animals appear only marginally in Marx and Engels' writings – mainly as resources within human labour or natural history.<sup>1</sup> In *Capital*, Marx frames animals as productive forces, while Engels in *Dialectics of nature* sees them as evolutionary precursors to humanity. Rooted in humanism, Marx's concept of “species-being” privileges conscious, social labour, excluding animals from historical agency and moral consideration.

Later thinkers, like John Bellamy Foster, highlighted Marx's ecological insights, such as the “metabolic rift”, but these remain largely human-centred<sup>2</sup>. The absence of a developed framework for animal rights in classical Marxism helps explain the GDR's selective, utilitarian approach to animal welfare – not as a departure, but as consistent with orthodox Marxist limits on non-human life.

According to Marxist ideology, human freedom means, among other things, the “mastery of nature and society and the preservation of their values”<sup>3</sup>. As the most highly developed living being with the ability to reason, humans were assigned the task of protecting animals from harmful influences as far as possible. “Socialist animal welfare”

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<sup>1</sup> F. Engels, *Dialectics of nature*, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1934, pp. 170–184; K. Marx, *Capital critique of political economy*, vol. I: *The process of production of capital*, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1887, pp. 129, 239, 359.

<sup>2</sup> J.B. Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, New York Press, New York 2000, pp. 141–177.

<sup>3</sup> A. Burckhardt, *Analyse und vergleichende Wertung der Tierschutzgesetzgebung verschiedener europäischer Länder in Hinblick auf die Neufassung der Tierschutzgesetzgebung der DDR. Analyse der Sektion Tierproduktion und Veterinärmedizin* [Eng. *Analysis and comparative evaluation of the animal welfare legislation of various European countries with regard to the new version of the animal welfare legislation of the GDR. Analysis by the Animal Production and Veterinary Medicine Section*], Wissenschaftsbereich Staatsveterinärkunde der Karl-Marx-Universität Leipzig im Auftrag des MLFN, Leipzig 1989, p. 10.

was characterized accordingly: "Animal welfare in a socialist society regards the animal as a link in the phylogenetic development and takes into account the vital needs and physiological characteristics that correspond to the developmental stage of an animal species and the breed-specific characteristics".<sup>4</sup> The protection of the living environment, which included animals, was seen as a prerequisite for human well-being.<sup>5</sup> This thesis represents an *a priori* argument, as it cannot be proven empirically and as such was simply valid as a principle. It was assumed that the treatment of animals of socialist people was characterized by reason. The German lawyer Burckhardt attempted a corresponding definition of the term "animal welfare" in 1968. He wrote: "Animal welfare is a concept that arises from the prevailing moral views and the state of interpersonal relations within society (...) as well as from the level of the state of development of the productive forces and the relations of production. Within the framework of social necessity and possibilities, to treat animals competently in accordance with their biological characteristics and protect them from improper treatment."<sup>6</sup>

The primary question arising from this definition is the "social necessity" of practicing animal welfare. The prevailing socialist doctrine held the view that animal welfare was a sub-area of animal hygiene. Animal hygiene, in turn, encompassed all areas that were to ensure a trouble-free production process. This meant that animal welfare was declared to be a measure to safeguard production.<sup>7</sup> In this system, animal welfare had the primary task of "optimizing the environment for breeding animals in order to exploit the benefits inherent in the animals' genetic makeup".<sup>8</sup> Burckhardt formulates the purpose of animal welfare in a similar way, by emphasizing the importance of animals for humans: "Through the growth of the productive forces, socialist society is constantly gaining more and better opportunities to protect animals, which are used as farm animals, laboratory animals, for recreation and leisure, for social and other reasons. In doing so those animals, especially farm animals, are prerequisites for the physical existence of humans"<sup>9</sup>.

There is no doubt that this passage foregrounds the anthropocentric definition of animal welfare. The preservation of animal health was described as "applied animal welfare". At the same time, the hygienists explicitly distanced themselves from animal welfare concepts that focused on the animal as a fellow creature: "However, this [animal welfare] cannot and must not be confused with idealistic or even crazy views that see in animals not only animate but also 'animated' beings"<sup>10</sup>. This statement can

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> A. Burckhardt, *Juristische Probleme des Tierschutzes* [Eng. *Legal problems of animal welfare*], "Monatshefte für Veterinärmedizin" 1968, Bd. 23, H. 20, p. 764.

<sup>7</sup> G. Mehlhorn, *Lehrbuch der Tierhygiene* [Eng. *Textbook on animal hygiene*], Gustav Fischer Verlag, Jena 1979, pp. 47–49.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> A. Burckhardt, *Analyse und vergleichende...*, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> G. Mehlhorn, *Lehrbuch...*, p. 49.

also be applied to the area of private animal husbandry. The “humanization” was to be prevented as well as the anthropomorphization of pets and companion animals. This development would not have been compatible with the ideological principles of Marxism. In some cases, humanization and anthropomorphization were equated with the ethical concept of animal welfare.

Although the GDR positioned itself as having done away with fascism, it retained several legal frameworks from the Nazi era – including provisions from the 1933 *Reichstierschutzgesetz*<sup>11</sup> (Animal Protection Law). These were often preserved with minimal changes, revealing a pragmatic continuity in legal form. However, the ideological foundations differed sharply. Under National Socialism, animal protection was embedded in a racialized, *völkisch* worldview that idealized the natural order linked to purity and blood. In contrast, the GDR’s Marxist framework stripped animal welfare of symbolic or moral meaning, treating animals primarily as instruments of socialist production.

This contrast exposes deeper differences in the nature-culture relationship. Nazi ideology sought to naturalize culture, projecting its racial logic onto the animal world. Marxist ideology, by contrast, aimed to transform nature through labour and planning. Thus, while legal similarities existed, the underlying ethical logic diverged: the Nazi approach moralized animals within a hierarchical vision of life, while the GDR subordinated them to economic and ideological utility. This comparison helps clarify the specific, utilitarian character of the Marxist approach to animals in socialist law.

For example, the abovementioned *Reichstierschutzgesetz*, while still technically in force, was interpreted through a socialist lens that emphasized the protection of animals primarily for their role in contributing to the national economy. Legal and scientific discourses reinforced the notion that animal welfare was justified not through ethical obligations but through its contribution to efficiency and productivity. This reframing ensured that ethical arguments rooted in compassion, sentiment, or religious doctrine were excluded from the legal order<sup>12</sup>.

### 3. Economic animal welfare and ideological consistency

In the GDR, the prevailing doctrine held that the well-being of animals was to be preserved only insofar as it served human interests. This gave rise to a form of “economic animal welfare” in which animal protection was linked to the prevention of disease, the maintenance of production quotas, and the avoidance of economic loss. Veterinary and agricultural manuals spoke of animals primarily in terms of their productive

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<sup>11</sup> Reichstierschutzgesetz vom 24. Nov. 1933 (RGBl. I p. 987), <https://alex.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/alex?aid=dra&datum=1933&page=1112&size=45> (accessed: 13.02.2025).

<sup>12</sup> A. Laue, *Das sozialistische Tier: Auswirkungen der SED-Politik auf gesellschaftliche Mensch-Tier-Verhältnisse in der DDR (1949–1989)* [Eng. *The socialist animal: Effects of SED policy on social human-animal relations in the GDR (1949–1989)*], Böhlau, Köln 2017, p. 79.

value, and discussions of ethical treatment were framed in utilitarian terms.<sup>13</sup> This does not mean that ethics in relation to animals did not exist in the GDR. Marxist ethics focused on interpersonal relationships and emphasized the comradely relationships between people. According to Marxist ideology, there was no need for the existence of a special animal welfare ethic. Under socialism or communism, it was assumed that “the exploitation of man by man is eliminated and he can develop freely in his personality”<sup>14</sup> – that was summarized under the term “human behavior”. It was assumed that it was a matter of socialist course to apply this “human behavior” to animals as well. Apparently, it was at least assumed that the animal existed as a “moral object”. In that context, protecting it was equated with protection “from destruction through the haphazard pursuit of profit and from the effects of inhumane behavior”.<sup>15</sup> The animal ethics approach postulated by Albert Schweitzer’s ethical concept of “reverence for life” was occasionally mentioned. It was said to have been a part of the prevailing worldview of dialectical and historical materialism.<sup>16</sup> With the exception of certain individual cases, animal welfare in the GDR was practiced for purely anthropocentric reasons. In anthropocentric animal welfare action and thinking is based on “pure human interests”.<sup>17</sup> Anthropocentrism is aimed at the welfare of humans, without considering the interests of the animal in particular.<sup>18</sup> If, as in the GDR, the animal is defined as an “economic product and means of production”, we will have “economic animal welfare” as a special form of anthropocentric animal welfare.<sup>19</sup>

If one attempts to assess the importance of animal welfare in the GDR, system-specific processes must be taken into account. A rigorous comparison of East German and West German (BRD) conditions at the time is difficult due to the completely different socio-political systems. The period under review also shows an intensification of agriculture in the BRD. The fundamental difference to the GDR, however, was that the structure of agriculture in West Germany was based on family farming, which stood in contrast to the industrialized East German agriculture. Furthermore, in the GDR the emergence of democratic, self-organized animal welfare movements was nipped in the bud, before it could develop, by the political leadership, whereas in the BRD various animal welfare organizations and associations were founded.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup> A. Lorz, *Tierschutzgesetz. Kommentar* [Eng. *Animal Welfare Act. Commentary*], 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., C.H. Beck, München 1987, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> G. Mehlhorn, *Lehrbuch...*, p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> T. Klikauer, *Stage 7: The management morality of environmentalism* [in:] *Seven management moralities*, ed. T. Klikauer, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2012, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137032218\\_1011](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137032218_1011).

<sup>17</sup> J. Helios, W. Jedlecka, A. Ławniczak, *Aspekty prawne, filozoficzne oraz religijne ochrony roślin i zwierząt – wybrane zagadnienia* [Eng. *Legal, philosophical and religious aspects of plant and animal protection-selected issues*], E-Wydawnictwo, Wrocław 2016, p. 59; A. Lorz, *Tierschutzgesetz...*, p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> J. Helios, W. Jedlecka, A. Ławniczak, *Aspekty prawne...*, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> A. Lorz, *Tierschutzgesetz...*, p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> A. Laue, *Das sozialistische Tier...* p. 305.

The issue of animal welfare was already being debated in the young GDR. The focus was not only on the question of founding an organization, but also on the question of motivation to pursue animal welfare. According to the prevailing ideology, the animal, which should be protected for its own sake, played no role. It was also pointed out that animal welfare was not one of the priorities of the general public: "Animal welfare is less a concern of the working population in general, but rather of a group of people particularly interested in animal protection as part of nature preservation".<sup>21</sup> Regarding the formation and promotion of animal welfare associations, the Ministry of the Interior argued in 1957 that there was no need for them, as animal welfare was guaranteed "to the necessary extent" with socialist progress.<sup>22</sup> The need for democratic, self-organized animal protection was deemed non-existent. Instead, animal welfare should be practiced to such an extent that "material values are preserved for the national economy, the necessary protection of wild native animals is ensured and that the socialist concept of morality is fully applied in this area".<sup>23</sup> These and similar propagandistic formulations were used to answer requests from citizens for the reorganization of animal protection and to appease their, sometimes urgent, requests. At the same time, the anthropocentric nature of any animal welfare concept was repeatedly pointed out. For example, a reply from the Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry (*Ministerium für Land- und Forstwirtschaft*) stated: "All questions in the field of animal welfare are best represented by our new society and by the constantly growing awareness of consciousness of our people, who, imbued with a humanistic spirit, will in future prevent individuals from treating our animals badly and mistreating or even torturing our animals, because it not only hurts our feelings but also causes economic damage."<sup>24</sup>

They explicitly distanced themselves from emotionally-based animal protection and placed human interests at the centre of the discussion. In contrast, in many other countries, including the BRD, there was already a noticeable tendency in the 1970s to strengthen ethical protection of animals as fellow creatures.<sup>25</sup> The amendment to the German Animal Protection Act of 1986<sup>26</sup> included the aspect of co-creation. The situation was different in the socialist neighbouring country. The change in the human-animal

<sup>21</sup> Minutes of the department head meeting of 26 October 1956, available on-line after a login: <https://invenio.bundesarchiv.de/invenio/login.xhtml> (accessed: 15.02.2025).

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry (Lothar Hüssel) to the Central Committee of the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Comrade Mellentin) dated 18 July 1957, available on-line after logging in: <https://invenio.bundesarchiv.de/invenio/login.xhtml> (accessed: 15.02.2025).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from the Veterinary Inspectorate to J. Rössger dated March 5, 1959 available on-line after a login: <https://invenio.bundesarchiv.de/invenio/login.xhtml> (accessed: 15.02.2025).

<sup>25</sup> G. Teutsch, *Man and his fellow – creatures under ethical aspects*, "ALTEX – Alternatives to animal experimentation" 2000, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 163–213; *Lexikon der Tierschutzethik* [Eng. *Encyclopedia of Animal Welfare Ethics*], Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen 1987, p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> *Erstes Gesetz zur Änderung des Tierschutzgesetzes vom 12. August 1986* [First Act amending the Animal Welfare Act of August 12, 1986], [https://www.bgbl.de/xaver/bgbl/start.xav?start=%2F%2F%5B%40attr\\_id%3D%27bgbl186i1309.pdf%27%5D](https://www.bgbl.de/xaver/bgbl/start.xav?start=%2F%2F%5B%40attr_id%3D%27bgbl186i1309.pdf%27%5D) (accessed: 15.02.2025).

relationship in the sense of a philosophical and ethical reformation was not desired in the GDR. This was probably partly due to the fact that such a change would not only impact animal rights activists and the citizens who kept animals. Brumme argued in his lecture on philosophical ethics and cultural pessimism that the reshaping of the human-animal relationship as a phenomenon of a changed moral norm was likely to have an impact on society as a whole and not just animal rights activists.<sup>27</sup> Just as the political leaders wanted to distance themselves from western animal welfare ethics, they tried to prevent any organized form of animal protection in the sense of democratic self-organization. With the argument that, according to the current Marxist worldview, socially organized animal protection was obsolete, the numerous petitions from the citizens of the GDR interested in animal welfare were dismissed.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4. The utilitarian concept in the animal ethics in the GDR

The GDR's central authorities actively discouraged independent expressions of animal protection that deviated from state ideology. Democratic, citizen-led animal welfare associations were suppressed or never permitted to form as mentioned above. Requests by citizens to create animal protection organizations were met with deflections, typically citing that animal welfare was already sufficiently addressed by socialist policies. This monopolization of moral discourse ensured that only state-approved narratives of animal treatment – those aligned with economic planning and socialist morality – were permitted.<sup>29</sup> The creation of the advisory councils for animal welfare and animal hygiene at the beginning of the 1970s can nevertheless be seen as progress with regard to the efforts of animal welfare activists.<sup>30</sup> Although their effectiveness proved to be very limited and dependent on the support of the local veterinary services, the fact that such commissions were set up disproves Busch's assertion that animal welfare was not officially addressed.<sup>31</sup> The Marxist view of the world leaves no

<sup>27</sup> M.F. Brumme, *Zwischen philosophischer Ethik und Kulturpessimismus. Redeweisen über Tierschutz* [Eng. *Between philosophical ethics and cultural pessimism. Ways of talking about animal welfare*] [in:] *Internationae Archäologie. Studia honoraria*, Bd. 8: *Historia animalium ex ossibus. Beiträge zur Paläoanatomie, Archäologie, Ägyptologie, Ethnologie und Geschichte der Tiermedizin. Festschrift für Angela von den Driesch zum 65. Geburtstag* [Eng. *International Archaeology. Studia honoraria*, vol. 8: *Historia animalium ex ossibus. Contributions to paleoanatomy, archaeology, Egyptology, ethnology and the history of veterinary medicine. Publication in honour of Angela von den Driesch on her 65<sup>th</sup> birthday*], eds. C. Becker, J. Peters, J. Schibler, Marie Leidorf GmbH, Rahden, Westfalen 1999, p. 93.

<sup>28</sup> A. Laue, *Das sozialistische...*, p. 272.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 274.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 221.

<sup>31</sup> B. Busch, *Tierschutz in der Tierproduktion der DDR* [Eng. *Animal welfare in livestock production in the GDR*] [in:] *Veterinärmedizin im Sozialismus. Ein Beruf im politischen und gesellschaftlichen Spannungsfeld. Fachtagung der DVG am 28. und 29.10.1994 in Berlin. DVG-Tagungsband 1994 „Geschichte der Veterinärmedizin im Sozialismus“* [Eng. *Veterinary medicine under socialism. A profession in the political and social field of tension*].

doubt that humans should be treated as superior to other living beings. The utilitarian approach frequently discussed today in animal welfare ethics was not, at first glance, up for debate in this ideology. The guiding principle of classical utilitarianism is the increase of happiness in the world or the reduction of suffering.<sup>32</sup> The basis of utilitarian thinking is the application of the principle of equality. According to Peter Singer, the basic principle of equality implies the equality of all people, whereby the interests of every human individual are to be valued equally.<sup>33</sup> The principle of equality in relation to animal ethics means the extension of equal treatment to animals on the basis of their capacity for suffering.<sup>34</sup> Equality in the context of animal welfare includes, among other things, the equal value of "human and animal interests, human and animal rights to life, happiness and the satisfaction of needs"<sup>35</sup>

If we look at utilitarianism in the context of the GDR, we could say that socialism or the Marxist-Leninist ideology probably included interpersonal utilitarianism, but did not extend it to non-human individuals. The animal as a moral object was virtually neglected with regard to the application of the principle of equality; only the interests of humans were focused on. To a certain extent, the socialist worldview with its emphasis on the comradely relationship between people and the rejection of human exploitation by humans is more in line with utilitarian principles than capitalism, for example. Utilitarianism does not mean focusing on individual happiness, but the maximization of the happiness of all those involved. Socialism with its altruistic component comes close to this ideal, at least in theory.

According to Brumme, the application of the principle of "equality" in relation to the animal represents an illusory "attempt to enhance its value in order to prevent abuse and torture", i.e. "a humanitarian motive".<sup>36</sup> In doing so, the author makes it clear that equality is not essential in order to recognize the "intrinsic value" of non-human living beings. According to Brumme, the idea of application of equality to animals is explained by the humanity's desire to "create a union between humans and nature"<sup>37</sup>, to absolve itself, at least theoretically, of its responsibility for the destruction of nature and the flora and fauna living here.<sup>38</sup>

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*DVG symposium on October 28 and 29, 1994 in Berlin. DVG conference proceedings 1994 "History of veterinary medicine under socialism"*, ed. M.F. Brumme, DVG Verlag, Gießen 1994, p. 75.

<sup>32</sup> U. Wolf, *Einleitung [Introduction]* [in:] *Texte zur Tierethik [Eng. Texts on animal ethics]*, ed. U. Wolf, Philipp Reclam, Stuttgart 2008, p. 9; J. Helios, W. Jedlecka, A. Ławniczak, *Aspekty prawne...*, p. 44.

<sup>33</sup> P. Singer, *Rassismus und Speziesismus [Eng. Racism and speciesism]* [in:] *Texte zur Tierethik...*, p. 28.

<sup>34</sup> G.M. Teutsch, *Lexikon...*, p. 59.

<sup>35</sup> M.F. Brumme, *Zwischen philosophischer Ethik und Kulturpessimismus. Über Schopenhauer und heutige Redeweisen vom Tierschutz [Eng. Between philosophical ethics and cultural pessimism. On Schopenhauer and today's ways of talking about animal welfare]* [in:] *Den Tieren gerecht werden. Zur Ethik und Kultur der Mensch-Tier-Beziehung [Eng. Doing justice to animals. On the ethics and culture of the human-animal relationship]*, ed. M. Schneider, Universität GH, Kassel/Witzenhausen 2001, p. 117.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 120.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 121.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from the Veterinary Inspectorate to J. Rössger dated March 5, 1959.

In the GDR, the focus of efforts that today are discussed as animal welfare was on achieving the maximum possible output with the available resources, i.e. to achieve a continuous increase in productivity. The motivation for economic animal welfare consisted exclusively in profit optimization and increase in performance. Mehlhorn supplements these statements with the thesis "that economy and animal welfare are not in opposition to each other, but that they are essential for an efficient and high-quality production of animals and animal products".<sup>39</sup> This view did not only apply specifically in the GDR. In the area of livestock farming, exclusively economic animal welfare was also the norm in other countries<sup>40</sup>. The priority of economic aspects over those of animal welfare is still valid in the agricultural sector today.

Utilitarian approaches or concepts that address equality in animal ethics based on their capacity to suffer were not foreseen in Marxist philosophy. This also manifested itself in the area of pet ownership. Here the socialist-influenced, anthropocentric approaches to animal welfare were just as clearly emphasized, as the following paragraph from the Monthly magazines: "On the basis of the socialist ownership of land and soil, i.e. of nature, the ethical and moral weight of small animal husbandry, animal welfare and animal hygiene must be included in environmental and nature conservation. (...) Every citizen has the opportunity to acquire the necessary knowledge for the proper keeping, feeding and care of animals. If not done properly, this can lead to husbandry errors that disrupt social coexistence in residential areas and have an impact on the behavior of citizens who do not keep animals and could possibly become a danger to livestock in agricultural production."<sup>41</sup>

This passage makes it clear that the animal as an individual and "fellow creature" played just as little a role in animal welfare efforts in the GDR as their ability to suffer. What was relevant was first and foremost the "socialist order", which, just like the national economy and production, should not be jeopardized by disregarding animal welfare principles. The term "animal welfare" was almost always used exclusively in conjunction with the term "animal hygiene". The importance of animal hygiene as the science of maintaining animal health was seen as a prerequisite for "highest

<sup>39</sup> G. Mehlhorn, *Lehrbuch...*, p. 50.

<sup>40</sup> For Poland see: L. Jastrzębski, *Ochrona prawa przyrody i środowiska w PRL. Zagadnienia administracyjne* [Eng. *Nature protection and environmental law in the People's Republic of Poland. Administrative issues*], Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 1979, p. 78; D. Jarosz, *Obrazy okrucieństwa. Wstęp do badań nad traktowaniem bydła i trzody chlewnej w Polsce na przełomie lat pięćdziesiątych i sześćdziesiątych XX w.* [Eng. *Images of cruelty: An introduction to research on the treatment of cattle and pigs in Poland in the late 1950s and early 1960s.*], "Roczniki Dziejów Społecznych i Gospodarczych" 2019, vol. 80, p. 383; also for other animals see: *idem*, *Wielka masakra psów w Polsce gomulłowskiej* [Eng. *The great massacre of dogs in Gomulka's Poland*], "Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i Materiały" 2019, vol. 17, pp. 103–133.

<sup>41</sup> W. Richter, E.G. Grünbaum, *Schlußfolgerungen und Erfahrungen bei der Entwicklung von Tierhygiene und Tierschutz in einer Bezirksstadt* [Eng. *Conclusions and experiences in the development of animal hygiene and animal welfare in a district town*], "Monatshefte für Veterinärmedizin" 1978, Jg. 33, p. 768.

continuous performance”.<sup>42</sup> In comparison with the current trend of what Brumme calls a “sentimental [small animal] husbandry based on you-evidence and the child-scheme”<sup>43</sup> in which the animal is used as a substitute for partnership and interpersonal relationships, in the GDR the “keeping, breeding and sporting activity with animals” was considered a “part of the conscious utilization of nature” and an “important factor in personality-building leisure activities”.<sup>44</sup> Apparently, the political policy-makers, at least tried to exclude any emotionalizing component in animal husbandry from the outset. The aspect of “animal use” that dominates pet ownership today is often justified by the pet owner with reasons such as “love” or the “relationship” with their animal. The use of the animal as a social partner often leads to a disregard for the animal’s needs. As the “social-partner animal” is increasingly elevated in the eyes of its human owner to the level of an equal, the typical characteristics or species traits of the animal lose importance for its owner. This type of “animal use” leads to “consumption”, in particularly serious cases also to “abuse” of the four-legged social partner. In comparison, a Marxist large-scale animal owner concealed the use of the creature behind socialist principles. A well-founded characterization of the human relationship in socialism and the analysis of the associated animal ethical principles represent topics for future research projects.

## 5. Subjectivity of animals in law and the concept of dignity

The legal status of animals in the GDR was marked by a systematic denial of subjectivity. While animals were present in law, they were recognized only in terms of their economic or hygienic value, never as entities with their own moral standing. The *Reichstierschutzgesetz* was the law in force in the GDR.<sup>45</sup> Although ethical animal welfare was already addressed in this law, as the official justification of the 1933 law provided “the animal must be protected for the sake of the animal”.<sup>46</sup> However, this passage was no longer valid in the socialist society of the GDR. Pathocentric ways of thinking, which placed the avoidance of pain and suffering at the centre of animal welfare interests played a subordinate role in GDR society. Animal welfare ambitions that considered the “dignity” of the animal did not even appear. Extending the concept of dignity to animals is one of the three “pillars” of ethical animal welfare. The definition of the term

<sup>42</sup> M.F. Brumme, *Zwischen philosophischer Ethik und Kulturpessimismus. Redeweisen über Tierschutz...*, p. 93.

<sup>43</sup> W. Richter, E.G. Grünbaum, *Schlußfolgerungen und Erfahrungen...*, p. 768.

<sup>44</sup> A. Laue, *Das sozialistische...*, p. 200.

<sup>45</sup> RGBl. I 1933, p. 987, <https://alex.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/alex?aid=dra&datum=1933&page=1112&size=45> (accessed: 13.02.2025).

<sup>46</sup> A. Lorz, *Tierschutzgesetz...*, p. 39; see also: J. Schäfer, L. König, *Der deutsche Tierschutz – ein Werk des Führers! Zum Umgang mit ideologisch kontaminierten Begriffen der NS-Zeit* [Eng. *German animal welfare – a work of the Führer! Dealing with ideologically contaminated concepts of the Nazi era*], “Deutsches Tierärzteblatt” 2015, Bd. 63, Nr. 9, p. 1250.

“dignity” proves to be problematic in animal ethics discussions. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that there are different forms of dignity, some of which are ascribed to animals as well as humans, or, more broadly, to all living beings or even all organic matter.<sup>47</sup> Secondly, there are different views on the extent to which the types of dignity can be transferred to animals. Animal ethicists understand the animal as a bearer of dignity through the ability to feel suffering, joy or happiness. Kowalska goes even further: she assigns dignity to the “intrinsic value”, which “for humans and animals is assumed not to need justification and to be innate”.<sup>48</sup>

In doing so, they distinguish between an animal ethic and a human ethic that includes animals, which would be necessary to give animals the same dignity as humans. Kowalska sees this difference in a phenomenon which still exists today: a lack of appreciation and intolerant views of humans towards animals. She suggests instead integrating animals into the system constructed for humans and assuming an equality with certain differences between the species in order to treat animals as equal to humans. This discussion can easier be held in an affluent society. In the GDR, on the other hand, where shortages were more or less the order of the day, the primary concern was to provide the population with enough food, whereby food of animal origin played a major role. Politicians governed according to the motto “Only well-fed people is a satisfied people”. As there was a constant demand for certain foods in the GDR, which in some cases could not be nearly met, criticism of high meat consumption was stopped before it could progress.<sup>49</sup>

Ethical animal welfare is characterized by the protection of the animal as a “fellow creature”,<sup>50</sup> i.e. for its own sake. This form of animal welfare goes beyond the mere avoidance of suffering (pathocentric animal welfare) and the interests of humans (anthropocentric animal welfare) and was not implemented in the GDR due to the prevailing ideology. In the theory of co-creation, the individual animal is the focus of interest.<sup>51</sup> This fact alone was incompatible with the subordinate role of the individual in the GDR. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that the people who lived and worked in the GDR made efforts to treat animals sensibly. Since the concept of “co-creation” derives from the word “creation” and is therefore a religious concept, the question of animal ethics arises for non-believers. Schweitzer’s theory, already mentioned above, focuses on the “reverence for life” and emphasizes respect for nature and animals. How far this respect for animals goes and whether it can be equated with a perception

<sup>47</sup> S.E.G. Ortiz, *Beyond welfare: Animal integrity, animal dignity, and genetic engineering*, “Ethics & the Environment” 2024, vol. 9, no. 1, p. 96.

<sup>48</sup> S. Kowalska, *Godność zwierząt – w kierunku kultury ochrony i etyki życia* [Eng. *Dignity of animals – towards a culture of protection and ethics of life*], “Zeszyty Prawnicze” 2024, vol. 24, no. 3, p. 96.

<sup>49</sup> A. Laue, *Das sozialistische Tier...*, p. 221.

<sup>50</sup> A. Lorz, *Tierschutzgesetz...*, p. 39.

<sup>51</sup> K. Loeffler, *Ethische Probleme im Umgang mit Tieren* [Eng. *Ethical problems in dealing with animals*] [in:] *Tagung der Fachgruppe Tierschutzrecht und gerichtliche Veterinärmedizin der DVG* [Eng. *Conference of the DVG Animal Welfare Law and Forensic Veterinary Medicine Section*], ed. K. Loeffler, DVG-Verlag, Gießen 1993, p. 4.

of animals as “co-creatures” and as “equals” to humans, is likely to be and has been for each individual to decide. In the GDR, religious motives played a subordinate role, which may have been one reason why the relationship between humans and animals did not come to expression and was hardly discussed under socialism.

## 6. The specific relationship between human and animal in Socialism

The political course was the cause of the (rural) economic instability of the GDR. The comprehensive nationalization and idealization of nearly every aspect of life, coupled with the resulting paternalism and centralized control, led to economic inefficiency and widespread demotivation among the population. These factors rendered the system inherently fragile and unsustainable over time.<sup>52</sup> Situations relevant to animal welfare resulted on the one hand from economic weaknesses and on the other hand from people frequently accepting them as inevitable. The staff’s lack of identification with the company or cooperative and the frequent indifference towards the creature are also described by contemporary witnesses. The organization of production in shifts could, for example, lead to problems being “shifted” to the next shift. A veterinarian recounts: “If one shift discovered that a cow was unable to calve and another udder inflammation, then their numbers were written on a blackboard, whereupon the next shift had the same problem, but now more difficult. If you called the vet immediately, it could mean that you were kept busy beyond the end of the shift. So it happened repeatedly that seriously ill cows or calves could not be treated in time.”<sup>53</sup>

This example shows once again that circumstances adverse to animal welfare were system-specific. A lack of interest and commitment generally had no direct consequences for the individual, which was one of the serious differences compared to the private farming sector. Numerous difficulties arose, among other things, because of decision-makers inadequate knowledge of agriculture. Lack of qualifications and practical experience were a key issue in all areas of industrial animal production, which, as a logical consequence, also caused animal welfare problems. There were already deficits in some areas of farm management. For example, management positions were filled by engineers who came from completely different disciplines and who lacked

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<sup>52</sup> H. Prange, *Tierseuchen und Tierverluste im Blick des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der DDR* [Eng. *Animal diseases and animal losses in the eyes of the GDR State Security Service*] [in:] *Domestication of animals. Interactions between veterinary and medical sciences. Free communications. Report of the 30<sup>th</sup> Congress of the WAHVM and the 6<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Historical Division of the DVG in Munich 9–12 Sept., 1998*, ed. J. Schäffer, DVG-Verlag, Gießen 1998, p. 198.

<sup>53</sup> W. Köpp, *Von Tieren und anderen Menschen. „Seht, was aus uns geworden ist!“ Ein Tierarztleben zwischen Bauern und Sozialismus* [Eng. *Of animals and other people. “Look what we’ve become!” A vet’s life between farmers and socialism*], NWM Nordwest Media, Grevesmühlen 2012, p. 265.

even basic knowledge of agriculture.<sup>54</sup> In some cases, specialist staff in plant production were also deployed in animal production although they were not even remotely qualified for such tasks. This not only led to errors in the coordination of operational processes, but also to a loss of authority on the part of the management concerned and, as a result, to dwindling morale and discipline among the care staff.

The loss of importance of the individual animal itself was promoted by the fact that in many agricultural businesses in the GDR the state had appointed managers who lacked a farming background and who did not develop respect for animals.<sup>55</sup> Thus, it seems a logical consequence of their lack of empathy for (farm) animals that they frequently tolerated abuses. This may have been facilitated by the phenomenon of alienation between humans and animals, which was not unique to the GDR, but which follows inevitably from the reduction of manual labour. In this context, increasing “spatial distance” between humans and animals as a result of automation and the “mechanization” of animal use has led and continues to lead to the loss of the “you-evidence” and the dwindling of empathy towards the fellow creatures.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, there was the previously mentioned dimension of political and economic pressures that individuals working in agriculture faced, mirroring the experiences of all other citizens in the GDR. The farmers reacted to their professional incapacitation by the state with a disinterest that sometimes led to apathy and depression. These aspects often prevented any ethical approach to animal welfare in livestock farming in the GDR. This does not mean that an ethical approach was the guiding principle in animal husbandry outside the GDR. Rather, it can be said that the possibility of building a relationship between humans and (farm) animals based on empathy seems to diminish with increasing herd size and mechanization. The existence of a clear constellation between humans and animals does not, however, simultaneously guarantee that animal welfare is respected. It is possible that the “western” farmers had a closer bond with their cattle. However, it remains unclear whether these animals – most of which were kept tethered, unlike the cattle in the GDR, which were at least partially pastured and housed in loose systems without constant human supervision – lived in better or worse conditions.

The intensification of agriculture was also the reality in other countries, which is why the accompanying loss of a close bond between humans and animals should not be seen as specific to the GDR. There was certainly a difference compared to the GDR

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<sup>54</sup> A. Schilling, *Korruption im Wirtschaftssystem Deutschland: jeder Mensch hat seinen Preis* [Eng. *Corruption in the German economic system: everyone has their price*], Mankau Verlag GmbH, Murnau a. Staffelsee 2004, p. 50.

<sup>55</sup> W. Köpp, *Von Tieren und anderen Menschen...*, p. 300.

<sup>56</sup> H. Inhetveen, *Zwischen Empathie und Ratio. Mensch und Tier in der modernen Landwirtschaft. Rationalisierung der Nutztierhaltung als historisches Projekt* [in:] *Den Tieren gerecht werden. Zur Ethik und Kultur der Mensch-Tier-Beziehung*, ed. M. Schneider, Universität GH, Kassel/Witzenhausen 2001, p. 26; A. Idel, *Vom Produkt-Design zur Designer-Kuh. Die landwirtschaftliche (Aus-)Nutzung der Tiere* [Eng. *From Product Design to Designer Cow. The Agricultural (Exploitation) Use of Animals*] [in:] *Den Tieren gerecht werden...*, p. 34.

in that farms, regardless of their size, were private property in the West. People handle their own property with greater care, in any case when economic advantages arise from this. Ethical animal welfare may also have played more of a role here because the farm animals of the private peasant economy were more or less “part of the family”, at least on smaller family-owned farms. They provided for the family’s livelihood on a daily basis, so close human-animal relationships could develop. This contrasts with the social structure of the collectivized farm, characterized by shift changes and animal turnover. The anonymized relationship between animal keepers and farm animals could lead to indifference. The policy tried to compensate for this with measures such as the “principle of material interest”, which did not always work. There was a big difference in communist systems between declarations and statements and the practice of functioning of the totalitarian state.

## 7. Animal welfare in the GDR as an example of the instrumentalization of law

The regulation of animal welfare in the GDR can only be understood if one examines the relationship between law and ideology. Law is never a neutral set of rules; it expresses, legitimizes, and reproduces dominant worldviews.<sup>57</sup> As E.P. Thompson noted, the “rule of law” is an ideological construct, making power culturally acceptable.<sup>58</sup> In socialist regimes, law was explicitly a tool for shaping a new social reality according to Marxist-Leninist principles – cultivating collective values, suppressing dissent, and guiding citizens toward socialist morality.<sup>59</sup>

In the GDR, legal subjectivity was reserved for the “human socialist citizen” – a rational, productive member of the collective. Animals were excluded from moral and legal subjecthood, recognized only as economic resources within the socialist production system.<sup>60</sup> Regulations on animal welfare prioritized productivity, hygiene, and economic efficiency, rejecting “idealistic” notions of animals as moral equals. This anthropocentric, utilitarian stance aligns with G. Agamben’s concept of “bare life”: beings included in law only to be instrumentalized, never protected for their own sake.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> P. Eckhard, *Socialism under construction. Law and ideology in housing, construction and spatial planning in Poland 1944–1989*, Scholar, Warsaw 2024, p. 36–44.

<sup>58</sup> E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and hunters: The prigin of the Black Act*, Allen Lane, London 1975, p. 169.

<sup>59</sup> R. Mańko, *Legal form, ideology and the political* [in:] *Legal scholarship and the political: In search of a new paradigm*, eds. A. Sulikowski, R. Mańko, J. Łakomy, C.H. Beck, Warsaw 2020, pp. 17–40; O. Kirchheimer, *Political justice: The use of legal procedure for political ends*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1961, p. 197.

<sup>60</sup> A. Laue, *Das sozialistische Tier...*, p. 65.

<sup>61</sup> G. Agamben, *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1998, pp. 15, 49; T. Pietrzykowski, *Personhood beyond humanism: Animals, chimeras, autonomous agents and the law*, Springer, Cham 2018, p. 163; M. Łaszewska-Hellriegel, *Environmental personhood as a tool to protect the nature*, “Philosophia” 2023, vol. 51, p. 1370.

Legal language reinforced this hierarchy. Terms like “animal hygiene” and “biological optimization” depersonalized animals and excluded them from the moral community, reflecting Judith Butler’s point that language shapes who is recognized as worthy of care or protection.<sup>62</sup> Thus, animal welfare law in the GDR was not simply an economic measure but a technology of subjectivation, defining whose suffering mattered and on what terms.<sup>63</sup>

Unlike in liberal democracies, where ideology is masked by the language of rights, the GDR made explicit the role of law in enforcing ideological priorities. Its reluctance to adopt ethical animal welfare demonstrates how deeply legal protection was subordinated to state planning, economic rationality, and political conformity.

## 8. Conclusion

The GDR’s approach to animal welfare, framed within its Marxist ideology, reveals a tension between utilitarian priorities and anthropocentric values. While the state sought to align its agricultural and industrial practices with socialist principles, its treatment of animals often prioritized economic efficiency and human interests over ethical considerations. The GDR’s policies, despite their socialist rhetoric, frequently reduced animals to mere resources, reflecting a deeply anthropocentric worldview. At the same time, the system’s inefficiencies and contradictions – such as the gap between idealistic propaganda and the realities of industrial farming – highlighted the challenges of applying Marxist principles to interspecies ethics. The case of the GDR offers valuable insights into the broader complexities of balancing economic, ideological, and ethical concerns within socialist systems. It underscores how difficult it is to reconcile utilitarian exploitation with the moral imperatives of animal welfare, a challenge that remains relevant in contemporary discussions about agriculture, sustainability, and interspecies justice.

The conclusion is that in the GDR there was only an “animal health protection” in the sense of economic animal welfare. This also answers the question raised at the beginning of this article about the “social necessity” of protecting animals. A sufficient supply of food is a concern of every society. In order to ensure a good supply of food of animal origin and to be independent of other countries, the GDR’s livestock had to be kept healthy. This was emphasized as a declared goal of animal welfare in the GDR. By examining the GDR’s approach to animal welfare, we can have a deeper understanding of how ideological frameworks shape human-animal relationships and

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<sup>62</sup> J. Butler, *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*, Verso, London 2004.

<sup>63</sup> A. Laue, *Das sozialistische Tier...*, p. 65; see also: Y. Thomas, C. Schütz, A. Schütz, A. Pottage, *The subject of sight, the person, nature: Remarks on the current criticism of the legal subject* [in:] *Legal artifices: Ten essays on Roman Law in the present tense*, eds. T. Zartaloudis, C. Francis, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2021, pp. 107–143.

of the ethical dilemmas that arise when economic and political priorities overshadow compassion and sustainability. The legal treatment of animals in the GDR illustrates how law, far from being neutral or purely regulatory, functioned as a tool of ideological production. By defining animals not as moral subjects but as units of labour, hygiene, or productivity, socialist law contributed to their systematic instrumentalization. This legal framing did more than reflect Marxist materialism – it actively shaped social consciousness, excluding animals from the ethical community and reducing them to economic variables. In doing so, law did not simply govern animals; it produced them as non-subjects, reinforcing a hierarchy in which only the human socialist citizen could claim legal and moral recognition. Ultimately, the GDR's legacy serves as a cautionary tale, reminding us of the need to critically evaluate the ethical dimensions of our interactions with the natural world.

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## Abstract

*Martyna Łaszewska-Hellriegel*

### **Animal welfare under socialism: Anthropocentrism, instrumentalization, and ideology in the GDR**

This article investigates the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) approach to animal welfare through the lens of Marxist ideology, focusing on the tension between utilitarian principles and anthropocentric values. It aims to analyze how the GDR's socialist framework, which prioritized collective welfare and economic productivity, influenced its policies toward animals, often reducing them to mere instruments for human benefit. The study assumes that the GDR's Marxist ideology shaped its policies and practices, including those related to animal welfare. It employs a methodological approach that comprises an analysis of official state policies, propaganda materials, and dissenting voices from that period. By examining these sources, the article seeks to uncover the ideological underpinnings and practical outcomes of the GDR's approach to animal welfare. The research reveals that the GDR's animal welfare policies were deeply rooted in anthropocentrism and utilitarianism, prioritizing industrial efficiency and agricultural output over ethical considerations. Despite its socialist rhetoric, the GDR often treated animals as economic resources, highlighting a contradiction between its professed commitment to socialist humanism and its actual treatment of non-human beings. The study also identifies broader ideological conflicts inherent in applying Marxist principles to animal welfare, particularly the difficulty in reconciling economic priorities with ethical concerns. This article contributes to the growing field of interspecies ethics by providing a unique examination of animal welfare within a state socialist system. It offers new insights into the complexities of applying Marxist ideology to non-human entities, shedding light on the tensions between utilitarian practices and ethical imperatives. By analysing the GDR's approach, the study not only enriches historical understanding but also provides a framework for contemporary discussions on sustainable agriculture, animal rights, and the ethical dimensions of human-animal relationships.

**Keywords:** GDR (German Democratic Republic), animal welfare, Marxist ideology, anthropocentrism, utilitarianism, animal rights