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Animalising Social Life : an introduction

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Rhoda Wilkie¹

Animalising Social Life: An introduction

“Animals are the older brothers of human beings.
Before there were people, they were here...
Any history of man, [sic] therefore,
That neglects our relations with other creatures
Can never be thorough or complete”
(J. Herder 1784, cited in Meyer 1992: 157).

If, as Herder suggests, attending to people's relations with other animals is a prerequisite to more fulsome accounts of life, then this special issue of *Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica* will further animalise our understanding of social life. With the proliferation of Human-Animal Studies (HAS), an interdisciplinary field 'primarily devoted to examining, understanding, and critically evaluating the complex and multidimensional relationships between humans and other animals' (Shapiro 2008: 5), more scholars are unearthing 'more-than-human' vistas which has hitherto remained in the shadowy background (Whatmore 2006: 604). This is a significant and timely scholarly retrieval; as it reminds us of our longstanding co-existence with other species and the multitude of ongoing multispecies contexts, networks and encounters that we continue to be embroiled in today (Wilkie in press a). Although sociology is a relative newcomer to human-animal scholarship (Taylor 2012), HAS scholars have questioned the largely human-centric focus of social science disciplines by studying other animals too (Carter, Charles 2011; Cudworth 2011; Peggs 2012; Taylor, Signal 2011)². Prior to discussing the emergence of the 'animal turn' in sociology, and highlighting the tarnished status of multispecies scholarship within this more anthropocentric wing of the academy, I will firstly consider why nonhuman animals and related issues may have

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² For the purpose of this article, I am using HAS as an overarching field descriptor.

gained a higher profile in late modernity – both inside and outside of the academy (Franklin in Armstrong, Simmons, 2007: 1).

Societal and Scholarly Turn Towards Nonhuman Animals: Why Now?

The groundbreaking work of Boris Levinson, an American child psychiatrist, is thought to have played a key role in igniting the contemporary scholarly interest in human-animal relations (Sanders 2007: 3); he recognised the therapeutic role of animals in psychiatric settings and coined the notion of ‘pet therapy’ in 1964 (Serpell 1996: 89). The profile of animal-related issues was further enhanced inside and outside of the academy during the 1970s and 1980s by the emergence of significant philosophical debates about the moral status and rights of nonhuman animals (e.g. Singer 1975; Regan 1983; Atterton, Calarco 2004). As Robert Garner notes,

For the first time, those concerned about the treatment of animals have had the benefit of a sustained attempt by academic philosophers to change radically the status afforded to animals in moral thinking. The result has been the development of a “new” ideology (or, to be more precise, ideologies) which has had profound implications both for the [animal advocacy] movement which seeks to protect animals and for the way in which the debate about their treatment has been conducted (1993: 1–2)³.

As these developments occurred at a time when people were more attentive to and concerned about animal welfare-related issues this ensured a ‘receptive social climate’ for such ideas (Garner 1993: 64). Pioneering fields such as cognitive ethology, primatology, and animal science all fortified this climate by providing fresh insights into many aspects of animal intelligence, sentience, emotion, sociality, communication and culture in different species of animals (e.g. Bekoff 2006; De Waal 2001; Duncan 2006; Griffin 1984; Hillix, Rumbaugh 2004; Masson, McCarthy 1994). This new knowledge about nonhuman animals was widely dispersed and popularised by television too; as indicated by the proliferation of and public appetite for natural history programmes and animal-dedicated channels. Since the ‘fly-on-the-wall’ approach is often used in such documentaries to portray the intimate life worlds of familiar and exotic species to viewers in the comfort of their own homes, this filming technique is thought to have played its part in de-centring ‘humanity by ... reducing the perceived distance between humans and animals’ (Franklin 1999: 48).

³ Peter Singer, an Australian moral philosopher, struggled to locate animal-related articles by academic philosophers when writing the first edition of his book *Animal Liberation* (published in 1975). However fifteen years later, he ‘could have filled this entire book with an account of what has been written on this topic’ (1995: 241).

This upsurge of more fulsome understandings of other animals revitalised the animal protection movement too; as it prompted more people to re-think the moral status and institutionalised (ab)use of animals in modern industrialised societies. 'The fact that growing awareness of animal capabilities has coincided with the introduction and intensification of more severe ways of treating animals provides a juxtaposition of factors which, by itself, goes a long way towards explaining the increasing concern about animals' (Garner 1993: 65). For example, because animal welfare/rights groups drew sustained and critical attention to intensive practices often equated with 'factory farmed' animals, this increased public awareness and concern about how 'food with a face' might be produced in such contexts (e.g. Harrison 1964; Rollin 1995; Stevenson 1997; Williams 2004: 46; Druce, Lymbery 2006; Pollan 2006; Turner, DeSilva 2006). Consumer anxieties were further heightened in the UK by a series of food scares during the 1980s and 1990s, such as those generated by and associated with Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), *Salmonella* and *E.coli* (e.g. Pattison 1998; Franklin 1999; Smith, Bradley 2003). The accumulation of such food-related concerns not only (re)connected people with the animate products on their plates, it also transformed 'private troubles' about food animal production into high-profile 'public issues' (Mills 1959: 8; Benton, Redfearn 1996; Garner 1996; Curry Report 2002).

This growing interest in and politicisation of agricultural animals impacted on legislative frameworks too. For example, up until 1996, livestock were legally categorised as 'goods' or 'agricultural products' in Article 38 of the Treaty of Rome; 'the cornerstone of European law' (Stevenson 1994: 116). This meant farm animals were technically no different from crops and vegetables. Following extensive lobbying in the mid 1990s by animal welfare groups such as *Compassion in World Farming* the legal status of farm animals was revised to that of 'sentient beings' (Stevenson 1994; Camm, Bowles 2000; Mcleod 1998). In principle, this landmark reclassification undermines the 'tool-like' status of livestock, because it draws attention to their animate natures (Arluke, Sanders 1996: 173), and it shows 'The status of commodified domestic animals such as cattle, sheep, pigs, and chickens, once excluded from spheres of moral concern and legal protection, is being re-evaluated' (Emel, Wolch 1998: 14). The ambiguous and dynamic status of non-human animals also highlights a key paradox in HAS scholarship, i.e. 'the definition and treatment of animals as functional objects, on the one hand, and sentient individuals, on the other' (Rowan in Arluke, Sanders 2009: xviii). The 'constant paradox', as it has been referred to, is especially evident in interspecies work contexts where animal practitioners and handlers have to grapple with the 'caring-killing paradox' too, such as in veterinary clinics, medical research, kill shelters and livestock farming (Arluke, Sanders 1996: 85; see also Arluke 1994; Sanders 1995; Birke, Arluke, Michael 2007; Wilkie 2010; Morris 2012). In practice, this means instrumental attitudes towards animals often co-exist with caring-type attitudes (Wilkie 2005: 228). In some ways, such contradictions are not new (e.g. Maehle 1994; Thomas 1983; Ryder 2000). However, the 'recognition of [some]

animals as full or partial moral subjects', and the expression of more emotional and compassionate attitudes to a multitude of (un)domesticated species does indicate the changing nature of human-animal relations in late modernity. Franklin has described this transient state of human-animal affairs as a move from 'anthropocentric instrumentality' to 'zoocentric empathy' (Franklin, White 2001: 223; Franklin 1999: 175)⁴.

Since scholars are also exposed to these interspecies-related dilemmas and controversies in their everyday roles as 'concerned citizens' and 'ethically-troubled consumers', then perhaps 'present-day social scientists have not just *chosen* to make animals more important in their investigative endeavours; they have also to some degree been *forced* to take cognizance of animals, and to treat both them and the various issues surrounding their relations with humans with the seriousness that they arguably very much deserve' (Wilkie, Inglis 2007b: 3 *emphasis in original*). Moreover, if 'the creative mind' is 'attracted by problems which are overlooked, or not recognized as anomalies by his [or her] colleagues', then HAS provides a vital scholarly home and network for like-minded colleagues involved in multispecies research (Shapiro cited in Dogan, Pahre 1990: 35; Wilkie in press a)⁵. The proliferation of 'new books, journals, conferences, organizations, college programs, listserves, and courses, both in the United States and throughout Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada' (Shapiro, DeMello 2010: 307), and the publication of the field's first two textbooks (DeMello 2012; Taylor 2013), all point to a thriving area of innovative scholarship. For example, although animals within the social sciences have long been regarded as ideal symbolic vehicles that are 'good to think' with (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 89), the animal turn also requires sociologists, and cognate colleagues, to realise that animals are 'symbols with a life of their own' (Daston, Mitman 2005: 13). This development is significant; because it affords animals a more active role within social life and it draws attention to the more-than-human nature of society and sociality. A further implication of animalising our understanding of social life is the need for multispecies methodologies that enable researchers to study 'contact zones where lines separating nature from culture have broken down, [and] where encounters between *Homo sapiens* and other beings [can] generate mutual ecologies and coproduced niches' (Kirksey, Helmreich 2010: 546).

Since animal-related issues can also provoke polemic and passionate standpoints such research can be readily equated with an animal rights agenda (Jerol-

⁴ For a critical perspective see Cudworth (2011).

⁵ Since HAS occurs in a wide range of disciplines this indicates the interdisciplinary nature of multispecies scholarship (e.g. Wilkie, Inglis 2007a; Birke, Hockenhull 2012). Additional examples include: geography (e.g. Philo, Wilbert 2000; Urbanik 2012; Whatmore 2002; Wolch, Emel 1998), history (e.g. Fudge 2008; Kalof 2007; Ritvo 1987), cultural and literary studies (e.g. Baker 2000; Dekoven, Lundblad 2012; Rothfels 2002; Weil 2012; Wolfe 2003), law (Francione 2008; Hauser et al 2006), feminist studies (e.g. Adams 1994; Adams, Donovan 1995; Donovan, Adams 2007), anthropology (e.g. Ingold 1994; Knight 2005; Noske 1997) and philosophy (e.g. Haraway 2003 and 2008) and sociology (Arluke, Sanders 1996; Franklin 1999; Irvine 2004; Nibert 2002; Tester 1991; Wilkie 2010).

mack 2005; Best 2009). That said, HAS is a melting pot of different scholarly approaches, disciplines and politicised positions. As Margo DeMello notes, 'while activism to better the lives of nonhuman animals is not a key component of Human-Animal Studies, many HAS scholars are themselves activists' (2010: xiv). As growing numbers of animal scholars merged their academic roles with activism this facilitated the rise of Critical Animal Studies which 'is the academic field of study dedicated to the abolition of animal and ecological exploitation, oppression, and domination' (ICAS website 2012; Humphries 1997; Twine, 2010; McCance 2013). Even though multispecies researchers may be varyingly engaged in pro-animal scholarship, it should not be assumed they are unreserved champions of animal-related politics (Aaltola 2011). Although some colleagues participate in activist-orientated scholarship and/or animal advocacy politics, it is not always the case (Wilkie in press a). As Lundblad explains, 'If animal studies can be seen as work that explores representations of animality and related discourses with an emphasis on advocacy for nonhuman animals, animality studies becomes work that emphasises the history of animality in relation to human cultural studies, without an explicit call for nonhuman advocacy' (Lundblad 2009: 500). As recently noted, this distinction within HAS scholarship may become a key fault line in the future, whereby animal scholars may begin to differentiate themselves by the extent to which they engage in or distance themselves from activist-scholarship (Wilkie in press b: 8).

Having introduced the contemporary interest in and scholarly turn towards nonhuman animals, let's now consider in a little more detail the emergence of the 'animal turn' in sociology, and the tarnished status of multispecies scholars and their scholarship within this more anthropocentric wing of the academy.

Sociology and HAS Scholarship: The emergence and tainted status of 'animal sociology'

Whilst sociology has tended to accentuate what differentiates humans from other animals, which partly explains why sociologists have overlooked the continuities between and similarities to other species (Murphy 1995: 692; Alger, Alger 2003), this human-centric focus was questioned in 1928 by an American sociologist called Read Bain. In a 'little-known, but significant, paper', Bain introduced the idea of and need for 'animal sociology' (Sanders 2007: 3). In his article, *The Culture of Canines: a note on subhuman sociology*, Bain suggests the 'denial of culture to subhuman animals is probably a phase of anthropocentrism', and argues 'Just as animal intelligent and emotional behaviour, anatomical and physiological structure and function, and group life, have their correlates in human behaviour, so the dividing line between animal and human culture is likewise vague and arbitrary' (in Wilkie, Inglis 2007 a: 8–9). Bain's attentiveness to human-animal continuities has been described as the 'sole dissent[ing]' voice to the more sociologi-

cally orthodox and influential views of George Herbert Mead; Bain's colleague at the University of Chicago who would provide the theoretical foundation for what would be termed 'symbolic interactionism' in 1937 (Sanders 2007: 1–3; Blumer 1969: 1). Because Mead emphasised the significance of the 'vocal gesture' above all other forms of communication, he effectively bracketed off human-human interaction from all other species. As argued by some present-day animal sociologists, Mead 'largely laid the groundwork for the conventional discounting of animals and lack of attention to their interactions with humans that dominated sociological thought until the last quarter of the twentieth century' (Sanders 2007: 3; see also Alger, Alger 1997; Sanders 1993, 2003; Irvine 2004)⁶. From this perspective, Mead's work played a key role in fortifying 'the conventional sociological belief that "authentic" interaction is premised on the abilities of social actors to employ conventional linguistic symbols' (Sanders 1993: 205–206). As alingual others, animals were thus deemed to engage in a 'conversation of gestures' or an instinctual exchange of gestures (Sanders 2007: 2). As Mead explains,

Gestures may be either conscious (significant) or unconscious (non-significant). The conversation of gestures is not significant below the human level, because it is not conscious, that is not *self*-conscious (though it is conscious in the sense of involving feelings or sensations). An animal as opposed to a human form, in indicating something to, or bringing out a meaning for, another form, is not at the same time indicating or bringing out the same thing or meaning to or for himself; for the animal has no mind, no thought, and hence there is no meaning here in the significant or self-conscious sense. A gesture is not significant when the response of another organism to it does not indicate to the first organism what the second organism is responding to (1964: 168 *emphasis in original*).

By depicting nonhuman animals as effectively 'mindless, selfless, and emotionless', Mead cast doubt on people's accounts of meaningful interactions with other animals. To think otherwise, was little more than 'anthropomorphic projection' i.e. people were simply attributing capacities and personalities to other species which they simply did not have (Sanders 2007: 3). According to Clinton Sanders, a pioneering human-animal sociologist in America, Mead's view of animals

came to be a taken-for-granted assumption when sociologists occasionally passed lightly over the topic of animal-human interactions. Since animals were not full-fledged social actors from the Meadian point of view, their encounters with humans were one-way exchanges, lacking the intersubjectivity at the heart of true social interaction. People interacted with animals-as-objects (1999: 118).

Although Read Bain's understanding of human-animal relations had the potential to animalise sociology and its 'sociological imagination' back in the 1920s, this

⁶ For a more nuanced reading of Mead and how his work may be used positively within HAS (see Wilkie and McKinnon 2013).

more-than-human perspective was clearly ahead of its time and would remain relatively dormant for another five decades (Mills 1959). In fact, it would take another pioneering American sociologist in the late 1970s to remind colleagues that 'Our social enterprise is not composed of humans alone' (Bryant 1979: 417). As Clifton Bryant asserts in his seminal paper:

To truly understand human social behaviour in all its vagaries, and to be completely sensitive to the full array of its nuisances [sic] and subtleties, we must enhance our appreciation of its zoological dimension. Accordingly, we might ... come to perceive whole new vistas of behavioural linkages by taking into account the "zoological connection". Our behaviour, our lives and our destiny are directed in part by the shadow of the beast. Let us, therefore, turn our sociological attention to this neglected area of social causation (1979: 417).

The 'zoological connection' is registering more fully on the discipline's radar; albeit rather belatedly (Taylor 2012: 44). For example, in recent years, Professional Sociological Associations in America (2002) and Britain (2006) have responded to members' growing interest in this area, especially amongst postgraduate students, by establishing specialist human-animal study groups within their respective organisations. Securing the involvement of graduate students is perhaps crucial to perpetuating the future of human-animal sociology because this generation of scholars may 'have the courage to challenge the field's outdated ideas about animals' (Irvine 2012: 127). This is an important point given that multispecies scholars may also experience and/or be susceptible to a tainted status within social science disciplines, because of the politicised and mixed-species subject matter of human-animal scholarship (Wilkie in press b).

For example, some sociologists have belittled animal studies by referring to it as "boutique" sociology, whilst others have 'experienced responses that range from amusement to derision' when peers find out they are studying human-animal relations (Arluke 2002: 370; Kruse 2002: 377). The questionable status of multispecies scholars and their scholarship possibly indicates HAS is "matter out of place" in a predominantly people-orientated sphere of the academy (Douglas 1966: 35). This highlights 'the double-edged nature of HAS. On the one hand, creative marginality affords its scholars an opportunity to engage in pioneering work; on the other hand, being associated with this politicized mixed-species field can tarnish their professional credibility' (Wilkie in press b: 3; Dogan, Pahre 1990). Since social science scholars tended to perceive a 'discontinuity between humans and animals' this contributed to the marginalisation of animals and interspecies issues within sociology and cognate disciplines (Noske 1993: 187; Tovey 2003). This academic legacy, and the politicised nature of HAS scholarship, means that those who study human-animal interfaces often have to deviate from established disciplinary norms and engage in different forms of 'academic dirty work' (Wilkie in press b). Having said this, crossing disciplinary and species boundaries has destabilised longstanding dualistic and disciplinary assumptions, and opened up

new lines of scholarly enquiry. As recently noted, ‘Recognizing the many ways in which animals influence human societies will enrich sociology by adding new ideas to old debates and open[] up new debates in turn’ (York, Mancus 2013: 89; Irvine 2008). Although the animal turn is augmenting ‘the sociological enterprise... [to] gain a better understanding of what it is to be human’ (Sanders 2007: 7), the extent to which this scholarly turn may also address Herder’s opening request for more complete accounts of social life remains to be seen.

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Key words: Human-Animal Studies, Animal Turn and Animal Sociology

Abstract

Human-Animal Studies (HAS) has opened up new lines of scholarly enquiry which is animalising our understanding of social life. This is a significant development because it reminds us of our longstanding co-existence with other species, and it draws attention to the myriad of interspecies contexts, networks and encounters that we continue to be embroiled in today. Although sociology is a relative newcomer to human-animal scholarship, HAS scholars question the largely human-centric focus in many social science disciplines. This paper will initially consider why animals and animal-related issues have increasingly registered on public and academic agendas in recent years. It will also trace the emergence of 'animal sociology' and highlight the tarnished status of human-animal scholarship within more anthropocentric wings of the academy.