



HAL
open science

The work of animals : a challenge for social sciences

Jocelyne Porcher

► **To cite this version:**

Jocelyne Porcher. The work of animals : a challenge for social sciences. *Humanimalia - Journal of human/animal interface studies*, 2014, 6 (1), pp.1-9. hal-02630023

HAL Id: hal-02630023

<https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-02630023v1>

Submitted on 27 May 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Jocelyne Porcher

The work of animals: a challenge for social sciences

“I am a human being: I regard nothing of human concern as foreign to my interests” wrote the poet Terence.¹ The human sciences speak *about* human beings, and *for* human beings. They do not extend to cows, pigs or dogs. The separation, incongruity, and irreducible otherness between man and beast explains the distance between the human sciences and animals.

For anthropologists, animals have always been part of human society, along with rites and folk tales, as well as in all that Man has produced for his own use. However, despite the progress that anthropology has made with regard to animals, the process of domestication is still analyzed for the most part as the process of appropriation and exploitation of nature and animals, which, far from dissolving the otherness of beasts, helps on the contrary to distance them. The cow is hidden by the herd, affection by interest, the gift by predation and by the accumulation of capital.

Yet we could consider — and it is on this that I base my proposition — that what we call domestication is above all the cooperative process of inserting animals into human society through work² which involves, as Marx wrote, elements of exploitation and alienation, but also, and more particularly, the prospect of emancipation.

My proposition is related to the applied social sciences in western societies. I consider — and it is without doubt a somewhat animist position — that human society is not a mixed or hybrid society that includes domestic animals — to describe it like this would not help me much — but that society is human *with* and indeed *through* domestic animals. Man, with a capital “M” in anthropology, is a man: a man who is also a woman, and is also, by a mysterious alchemy in our relations, a cow or a pig. That which we define as “society” includes *de facto* human beings and domestic animals. Together we form a *social corps*, less in the sense of Durkheim and a biological metaphor than in a political sense, even if the former is not without interest in understanding why we eat animals — or do not eat them — and carry out organ transplants. We participate in the same social environment. I will go further: I think that class struggle, a concept that has found a new actuality in our liberal societies, also concerns domestic animals very closely. Viewed in this light, domestic animals are not non-humans in Philippe Descola’s and Bruno Latour’s sense. I propose that the category of “human” without animals does not exist, even if animals, domestic or otherwise, need representatives.

Social sciences are directly concerned with members of the social organism, both known and unknown. Terence could alternatively have written, "I am a human being, and I do not regard the cow as foreign to my interests." Why? Because we have lived with animals for the past 10,000 years and we have developed as human beings in their company. "The cow" is not foreign to my interests, but in some ways only, as the cow has its world and we have ours. The world that we have in common, and on which the development and durability of our relations rest, is that of work. It is thanks to work that some aspects of the cow are known to us, and part of ourselves, as human beings, is known to the cow. Even though Sociology has already moved on from the idea that social sciences are only concerned with Man, the subject of the work of animals remains strangely undervalued. Yet above all, living with animals signifies working with them. The question of work is not a theoretical anecdote, it is at the heart of our lives and of the relations that we maintain with domestic animals (cows as well as dogs), and with certain "wild" animals, at work in animal parks, zoos, and circuses. What work do animals do? How do they change the nature of work?

Further, in the field of work, an attempt at a Derridian deconstruction of "the essence of Man" does not, in my opinion, complement anti-humanist animalism, which aims to give to animals with one hand what it is taking from human beings with the other. On the contrary, it is a question of returning to animals, and returning to ourselves, that which capitalism, scientism, and triumphalism have taken from us: knowledge of the broad but potentially profitable, intelligent, and sentimental composition of the ties between us. My intention is, on the one hand, to understand what position animals occupy at work in as concrete a way as possible, and on the other, to transform work with animals in a liberating direction. By doing this, I hope to assist in giving domestic animals justice — because it is time to give them justice before the wolves definitively wipe out the sheep —, and I hope to do justice to the extraordinary richness of our relations, and to the complex relationships that are incongruous from an evolutionary point of view, yet the most remarkable aspect of our existence.

Research without a subject. When I started to approach the question of animal work some years ago, I found myself facing the same sorts of problems that I had encountered while researching the love between farmers and animals. I was faced with scientific subjects that did not exist in terms of questions asked, as well as with an absence of adequate concepts to construct a research question. We lack an intellectual framework that would enable us to describe the communication, and love, between

farmers and their animals. How should one think about the implications of animals at work without a theory of work which is not, as understood since Marx, anthropocentric?

Currently, there are no theories that can support sociological research into an animal's work without attracting immediate criticism — that is to say, research into an animal's subjective investment in work. The work of an animal is work without subject. The sow functions as a machine, but it functions in a sentient fashion, it is a living machine; we can't walk all over it, but we can, in the pig farm itself, electrocute it in a box that capable engineers have designed for the purpose, and leave its body to compost in the farmyard, also using equipment designed for the purpose.

Donna Haraway has broadened our perspectives into our relations with animals as companions, and, practically speaking, into our relations with farm animals, for example, in reference to respect. That is a priority for our dog or for a laboratory mouse, in relation to work. Haraway, however, because she is a philosopher, does not look for the answers to such precise questions as mine, questions that concern zootechny and the sociology of work: What does “work” mean to an animal?

Because I have researched the very specific aspect of “becoming with” animals, suffering in the field of work, and more particularly the sharing of suffering between humans and animals, I think that the theoretical framework which I have used to understand the subjective relationship between humans and work, the psychosociology of work, and more precisely the psychodynamics of work, could help to explain the relationship animals have with work, in particular its ties with psychopathology and psychoanalysis. It was no accident that my research into the love farmers have for their animals led me to the psychodynamics of work; labor with animals involves joy and pain, but also more elusive aspects of the self, and supports the idea that “the ego is not master in its own house,” as Freud put it (perhaps, incidentally, because the house has many more occupants than Freud envisaged).

The psychodynamics of work and animals. For Christophe Dejours, work psychodynamics is not only concerned with Man but with work, and not only with the organization of work but also with more specific situations and their dynamics. It does not, then, exclude animals from an analysis of work.

What are the key concepts in the psychology and the psychodynamics of work? How are they keys to access the answers to my questions? I cannot here develop an entire theoretical corpus, so I will limit myself to certain terms:

Subjectivity. Supported in particular by Michel Henry's research, subjectivity refers to affectivity, or to the life experienced by the living body, the suffering body. It does not see itself, it feels itself. This definition of subjectivity as affectivity is how farmers on the whole describe their relations with animals. The inter-subjectivity between animals and humans is a co-constructed affectivity, a shared approach to life — I would say to "true life".

Living together. Living together is a founding rationale of work. The position that I have developed uses multiple work rationalities in animal farming work as evidence: relational, concerning identity, economic, technical, moral... Living with animals is the first rationale for their vocation for most of the farmers that I have encountered. Economic rationales serve this purpose, and not the other way round. Animals do not serve just to generate income; it is income that serves cohabitation with livestock. This primacy of work cohabitation is in evidence today in the destruction of farms, where suicide is becoming a frequent response to the dismantlement of human-animal partnerships by management. Note that the partnership of man and animal is also to a large extent being decimated in agriculture, where there is a tendency for isolation to become the rule, and where the issue of suicides can no longer be ignored. (There are three times as many suicides amongst agriculture workers as amongst management.)

Centrality of work. Work is central to the construction of identity and to the construction of social relations. I have observed to what extent work can construct or deconstruct men and animals in farming, how much it can sensitize or desensitize them. This defeat of social ties is not an unhappy chance; it represents an objective in itself, as is evidenced in this affirmation that *le patronne des patrons*³ addressed to journalists — "life, love and health are precarious, why should work be an exception to the

rule?” As Marx said, the two main pillars that support our lives are love and work. And as Dejours emphasizes, love is by definition unstable, and that is exactly why work must be a sustainable pillar. The sustainable pillar, with love, in our relations with animals is equally work and this is why it is important that it be solid and well-understood — so that we can make sense of our relations.

In farming, however, this centrality of work is defeated by the livestock production industry, which reduces man and beast to their behaviors and standardized means of functioning. It is equally defeated by theories of animal liberation, which reject the question of work. I stress this because this seems to me to be important. Why do animal liberators, many of whom claim to be political, even revolutionary in their doctrines, ignore the question of work, which is the political question par excellence? I believe it is because a political analysis of work with animals evidences the extreme closeness of man to beast, and the objective of animal “liberation” is in fact to separate them. Work recognition is a recognition of ties. It is thus effectively revolutionary; too revolutionary without doubt for the followers of animal liberation, amongst whom some are more sensitive to the sirens of the bio-technical industry than to communal emancipation.

Real and prescribed work. In the psychology of work, this distinction between what determines the organization and effectiveness of work, which defines what work can be achieved, is particularly visible in work involving animals, for example in industrial swine production. Workers (human) do not always do what they are supposed to do (for example, slaughtering a runt piglet) any more than workers (animal) do (for example, being a good mother; there is no lack of sows in industrial systems who refuse to be good mothers). It is flexibility of work procedures that allows individuals to keep on working, but at the same time to remain focused on work objectives, work objectives for individuals, which are not necessarily the same as those of the management.

Intelligence at work. One works first and analyzes later. This engagement of work intelligence demonstrates the pre-eminence of intuitive intelligence, as described by Damasio, which moves more rapidly than our capacity for formalizing it. I think that animal work intelligence is precisely intuitive. Cows do not tell themselves “here’s the farmer, he doesn’t look like he’s in a good mood today, I had better park my carcass out of his way.” They are not in a position to tell us all of that, but they do manage to communicate, because, after having observed the farmer, they organize their movements so as to avoid him, if he is in fact in a bad mood. This intelligence in action can be observed even if the work is invisible. It is invisible precisely because it is situated in the interstices of the prescriptions: there is work where there are no procedures.

As a consequence, work is never simply its execution. There is always some conception, even when it is most taylorized. This has been demonstrated in our research into dairy cows in a system with a milking robot. Even if the robotic system can apparently organize everything — sensors, animal selection and circulation, distribution of feed — there remains an interstice in which, however small it may be, animals can find some liberty of action. Faced with constraint, this freedom of action manifests itself as a capacity for resistance, by, for example, the possibility of jamming the machine. Indeed, we have seen a cow blocking the way to the milking robot by stopping in the doorway, nothing more, without moving except for increasingly stepping on the other cows who wished to go into the robot. The force with which this cow resisted took up a good half hour.

Cooperation, confidence, rules of work, collective... All these terms bring us back to the world of collective living at work. No work collective is efficient without the coordination that stems from procedures, but, additionally, no collective is effective without cooperation. Cooperation cannot be imposed, it is conditional on individual freedom. An animal that does not want to cooperate cannot be constrained to do so. It can be forced by threats or by violence, but it can obey, as industrial farm workers know very well, while refusing acquiescence.

Recognition. Work can only reach its potential if it is recognized. I have demonstrated the necessity in farming of a double recognition that has passed unremarked: that is, the animals' recognition of their farmers, and the farmers' recognition of their animals. For if the animals are engaged in work, according to my hypothesis, they have a need that is not entirely natural, a need for recognition. It is with speech and petting that the farmers recognize their animals, and it is with trust and proximity that animals recognize their farmers.

Recognition, in the context of my research, is set both in the field of work (the dynamics of recognition), and in a more general field, that of Mauss and his successor's gift theory (Caillé). To explain the point, I will briefly refer to the preface that Alain Caillé wrote for my most recent book (Porcher). On the subject of Fukushima, he tells us, we have heard lots of things that concern us all, but the fate of the animals who lived in that zone has received little attention. There were cows in Fukushima, pigs no doubt, and chickens, dogs, and cats. The farmers were displaced but their animals stayed in the barn. Yet despite the risk of contamination, Caillé stressed, farmers returned to feed their animals, risking their own lives. This facilitates our understanding of the gift theory in our relations with animals — attachment and responsibility. The farmers cannot abandon their animals to radiation, any more than shepherds can abandon their ewes to wolves.

The animals in the zone have since been destroyed. I am a great reader and admirer of Jiro Taniguchi, the Japanese manga author whom Proust would have appreciated, who describes the relationship with animals in a style that is both accurate and touching. I thought about him while hearing about what was going on in his country, and I wondered if he thought that, as a farmer quoted by Caillé explained, animals could understand us.

The challenges facing this research. One of the most important challenges of this research is to remove domestic animals from the exclusive domain of the so-called "natural sciences," where they do not have a great deal to do or to say. Contrary to Morgan's canon of ethology — or the principle of parsimony, which advocates, as the

term implies, not giving too much to animals when you can give them less — and contrary to the zootechnical canons, which hold that the more stupid the animals, the more profitable they are, and leads to enclosing cows and then going and cutting the grass to distribute to them in the trough — I propose placing the bar high enough to be of interest to both humans and animals. Because, evidently, in zootechny, stupid animals go with stupid farmers, and when cows rediscover the pleasures of the pasture, the farmer rediscovers the skills that tie him to his land and his animals.

Integrating domestic animals into social and humanistic disciplines gives them a public, scientific chance to be what they already are for their farmers: to be emotional, intelligent, and endowed with compassion, tenderness, and humor. It also allows us to reconstruct work with animals by betting on the increase in our sensibilities, developing our potential for relations and for creations — that is to say by keeping to the promises of work. What are these promises for animals? What would “work” mean for an animal? That is the question.

But there is also another corollary: What place does death have in work? Can the death of animals be the ultimate end of work with domestic animals, both for them and for us? I do not have the answer to this question, and I think it should not be posed in too hasty a way, as if we already know the reply, as for example those intellectuals of whom I have spoken above do, for whom it might be preferable to propose eating *in vitro* meat to the general public rather than killing animals, because it is decreed at the very heart of our love for animals that we should liberate them, and become vegetarians.

This question, in view of its difficulty, should only be researched in stages. We could pose, for example, this question: What possible economic, emotional, and social life expectations are there for a dairy cow? How does the death of a dairy cow matter? What kind of society must we construct to enable cows, pigs, and chickens to have a worthwhile life? What society can we construct so that *we* can have, alongside them, a life that reaches our highest expectations?

From a political perspective, it is really this question that drives our research: we and domestic animals are working as one for industrial capitalism and finance, just as a simple peasant and his beasts worked as one for the bourgeois in the 19th century. We will not elevate domestic animals from their condition as beasts of burden without elevating ourselves. It doesn't mean giving up our place on the podium; it means

making space for those who helped us to ascend there. It may make us appear less big, but to my mind, we will grow.

Notes

1. From “The Self-Tormenter,” trans. Henry Riley (1874), 1.77.
2. The aim of our research is to conceptualize animal work that is to understand what work means for animals. See : <http://www1.montpellier.inra.fr/anr-cow/index.php/fr/>
Translator’s note: President of the *Mouvement des entreprises de France (MEDEF)*, the largest employers’ trade union in France.

Works Cited

- Caillé, Alain. *Théorie anti-utilitariste de l’action. Fragments d’une sociologie générale*. Paris: La Découverte/MAUSS, 2009.
- Damasio, Antonio. *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York: Penguin, 2005.
- Dejours, Christophe. *Travail, usure mentale*. Paris: Bayard, 2000.
- Descola, Philippe. *Beyond nature and culture*. Trans. Janet Lloyd. Chicago: U Chicago P, 2013.
- Haraway, Donna. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003.
- Latour, Bruno. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004.
- Porcher, Jocelyne. *Vivre avec les animaux: une utopie pour le 21ème siècle*. Paris: La Découverte, 2011.