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COSMOECOLOGICAL SHEEP AND THE ARTS OF LIVING ON A DAMAGED PLANET

Vinciane Despret and Michel Meuret

…. Isabelle Stengers writes: "Whenever a being raises the problem of its conditions of existence, it lies within the domain of ecological approaches."[1] The ecological question is about the needs that ought to be met in the ongoing creation of rapports and connections. The question ecologists raise is not, therefore, does this being really exist, or is it not a representation? Rather, the questions are how does this being achieve the task of holding onto its existence, and what does this achievement require? This is why every ethology is first and foremost an ecology and, even more precisely, a cosmoecology. This is because we may never know, safely and reliably, either ahead of time or a posteriori, which beings will bear the consequences, or will enjoy the consequences, of the concrete attention we give to them.

These interconnected lives, each of them having their ever-evolving requirements and habits, have nothing to do with the balance of nature, a machine analogy that became central for ecologists around the 1950s together with the concept of the ecosystem.[2] It is better to remember here that no one, neither human nor gazelle, will ever meet an ecosystem. As Robert O'Neill has put it, "The ecosystem is not an a posteriori, empirical observation about nature. This is a paradigm, a convenient approach to organizing thought. Like any paradigm, it is a product of the human mind's limited ability to understand the complexity of the real world."[3] Over decades, environmentalists and researchers in ecology have been qualifying Homo sapiens as the major invasive pest on Earth, the one that almost constantly, if not deliberately, disturbs integrated, equilibrious, homeostatic ecosystems. But this is a myth—Homo sapiens is not an external disturbance; we are a keystone species within the system. In the long term, it may not be the magnitude of extracted goods and services that will determine sustainability. It may well be our disruption of ecological recovery and stability mechanisms that determines system collapse.[4]

Thinking about our life and behavior in distinct societies not as disturbance but as integrated parts of systems has great implications. We are invited to pay attention to the health of ecosystems from the inside. Throughout millennia, as a keystone species, humans have influenced the shape and functioning of most landscapes, from savannas to some rainforests as well as, of course, agricultural and urban ecosystems.[5]

A true politics of attention does not confine itself simply to taking another into account—it demands more. A true cosmopolitics requires us to expand the scope of obligations. Other beings obligate us, in the sense Stengers gives to the word obligation when she equates "being obligated by a situation" and "giving the situation the power to obligate you." And, she adds, "without guarantees. Never the slightest guarantee, neither the judgment of God, nor a conceptual guarantee. It's all about fighting against the demand for a guarantee, it's about compromising oneself."[6]

…. That is what led us to seek situations in which human and nonhuman beings become obligated through new connections. New shepherding practices, as they recently reemerged in the South of France, appeared to be a good example of this kind of cosmoecology, and in its complex political interactions we all might learn to craft new ways of being obligated and new ways of helping life to flourish.[7] These practices interest us in particular because of the way that these shepherds take an active role in what Tsing has termed the "arts of living on a damaged planet."[8]

Worlds to remember

Shepherding is a practice with long histories and traditions that in many parts of the world, including France, are often passed between generations of humans and of sheep. But the shepherds that fascinated us in this study are all of urban origin; none of them is the son or daughter of shepherds. As such, they were often left to learn on the job, with the sheep. We discovered with them that their practices fulfill multiple obligations that are not restricted to the well-being of their animals or their own livelihoods, however important these dimensions are. These additional obligations fall under the realm of ethical and aesthetic relations to the world, obligations that belong to cosmoecology as alter-politics: "a politics that grows not from opposition to or critique of our current systems but one that grows from attention to another way of being, one that involves other kinds of living beings."[9]

To talk about sheep when so many species have already disappeared or are at the edge of extinction might be seen nonsensical. However, extinction should not be restricted to the death of species, as Thom van Dooren so convincingly shows in Flight Ways. In relation to the cranes that are mobilized in a captive-breeding conservationist program, he leads us to ask, aren't these cranes that are supposed to keep the crane species among us in some ways already extinct? Do they still enjoy a life that is worth living as a crane? And will their offspring, and the offspring of their offspring?

(….)

What the shepherds were confronted with, and what they resisted, were particular forms of extinction: not the form that makes a species, in the sense of quantifiable biodiversity disappear, but those that make worlds die, worlds that were hitherto shaped and characterized by practices, by modes of inhabiting, by landscapes that are no more. The sheep confined and fed indoor, or grazed within small plots of grass monoculture are, of course, still living. However, their world is so impoverished that it cannot be seen as what we call an existence, because to exist (exsistere) for a living being is to step "out of self," to be connected by multiple bonds, to compose a world, and to be associated with a world—as Gilles Deleuze translated the Umwelt of Jakob von Uexküll, "a world associated."[10] Extinction begins when the world to which an animal was associated is reduced to nothing, or almost nothing. Extinction begins when the ways an animal composes the world and composes with the world are ended, when the ways he or she makes a world exist, according to the ways his or her ancestors had created it, have disappeared.

This process of loss began in the 1960s in France, when a program of agricultural modernization began to promote so-called rational fenced grazing on cultivated grasslands and to suppress shepherding on natural meadows and rangeland.[11] More efficient animals, due to intensive selective breeding, were endorsed as key to producing meat or milk in abundance. These animals needed richer and steady diets, obeying new rules of standardization. Industrial foods replaced grass and other grazed plants for animals in sheepfolds, and for those that still enjoyed being outside, field crops and cultivated forages were being standardized. For decades, breeders would be advised to keep their animals in sheepfolds or in small fenced areas, in simplified and predictable environments. And so the world changed, and previous configurations, previous cosmoecologies slipped out of existence.

But in the 1990s this system met its own limits. The price of lambs dramatically dropped, due to competition from meat imported from other countries, especially New Zealand. Simultaneously, because of the influence of financial speculation in cereals, the feed price for livestock increased. Breeders went back to the practices of hiring seasonal herders, and sheep went back to hills and mountains, to rediscover cheap grasslands, abandoned fields, scrubby rangeland, and undergrowth. Together they tried to relearn the arts and practices of winter and summer long-range transhumance in mountains and hills of southern France.

Compared to last decades and centuries in France, conditions for herding have been often changed dramatically: more forested and encroached landscape, larger flocks, more food demanding animals, less human workforce, a series of environmental constraints. Herding practice has to be re-invented, and almost nobody, but some aged but still imaginative herders, knew how to do it. With the breach in transmission, most of the new shepherds were coming from urban areas. They chose this profession for different reasons than their predecessors. But they all say that they have always loved being with animals, and they all claim that the

world, as it was going, was becoming uninhabitable. These are political and ethical choices. Moreover, these choices are ethological, in the sense Deleuze gives to the word. In his teaching on Spinoza, Deleuze notes:

> Ethics is better known to us today under another name, the word ethology.
>
> When one speaks of an ethology in connection with animals, or in connection with [hu]man, what is it a matter of? Ethology in the most rudimentary sense is a practical science, of what? A practical science of the manners of being. The manner of being is precisely the state of beings (étants), of what exists (existants), from the point of view of a pure ontology.
>
> In what way is it already different from a morality? We are trying to compose a kind of landscape which would be the landscape of ontology. We are manners of Being in Being, that is the object of an ethics, i.e. an ethology.[12]

Deleuze clarifies what should be considered manners of being—ethology is the practical science that studies what beings can do: "Of what tests is it capable? . . . What does it do?" What is it capable of? In his book on Spinoza, he adds: "The Ethics is an ethology which, with regard to men and animals, in each case only considers their capacity for being affected." Ethology defines bodies, animals, or humans by the affects they are capable of, and "the approach is no less valid for us, for human beings, than for animals, because no one knows ahead of time the effects one is capable of; it is a long affair of experimentation, requiring a lasting prudence."[13]

According to this ethology, or practices of manners of being and manners of being affected, these shepherds cultivate an aesthetic in the sense of a practice that learns to compose with the world in various ways, in the sense of an ethos. They invent ways of inhabiting a world that is being destroyed while resisting, locally and actively, this destruction.

Put simply, these shepherds had to learn the practices of herding.[14] They had to learn how to lead the sheep along circuits that motivates the appetite, how to understand other modes of living, how to teach their sheep what is edible and what is not, and how to form a flock. The sheep had to learn how to compose with dogs and humans, to acquire new feeding habits, a new ethos, and moreover, new ways of living in an enlarged world. These practices cannot be reduced to a livestock economy: shepherds consider herding as a work of transformation and ecological recuperation—of the land, of the sheep, of ways of being together. And they had to teach their sheep to live a very different life. It was hard and painful. They told numerous stories. One recalled that when he came with his car, on the first day, the sheep tried to get in—they were used to traveling by truck. Another recalled that when the young ewes were out of the sheepfold for the first time, they seemed to wonder, what world are we in? They were scared to walk on fresh grass. Some were afraid of the wind shaking the trees, others of crossing a slope surrounded by bushes. All of them were scared of humans on foot and of dogs. Some, coming from a different sheep farm, did not want to become part of the newly formed collective flock and instead wanted to live their lives on their own, sometimes taking advantage of the mist to hide. It took this shepherd and his dog two long and exhausting months running everywhere in the mountains to find them and convince them that it was better and safer to stay nearby.

When asked how they learned, most of the shepherds answered with stereotypical responses like "practice makes perfect" or "you have to do your craft." This is an example of what the sociologist Marcelle Stroobants recognizes as the sign of a metamorphosis: one does not remember when one did not know.[15] She notes that learning experiences that belong to the sphere of know-how transform the ones who go through them so deeply that the memory of the former state is effectively erased. The learning of reading illustrates this clearly: once you can read, you cannot help but do so. You do not know how you do it; you just do it. This is the hallmark of metamorphosis.

Of course, they remember failures and difficulties: the lost sheep, the ones that were caught by wolves, the flock that got lost. They especially had to learn what should not be done. They also say that they had to unlearn what they had been taught in their agricultural schooling.[16]

And all this was possible because they learned to observe. To learn is to learn how to see and to pay attention. This is a transformation of ways to feel; the shepherds learned a new way of being in the world. What

Stroobants calls the metamorphosis resulting from this learning happens to be, as she suggests, "the creation of a new relation to the world and to another world, a way to inhabit a new milieu."[17]

Learning New Savoir Vivre

This is also what Stengers, relaying Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, refers to as involution. Stengers writes: "Involution is neither progression nor regression, since these judgments relate to an evolution by the means of descent and filiation, be it about species, disciplines, or technics." According to her, involution creates, between heterogeneous critters, a relation that brings into play their hereditary identity, that is, "the ways they 'naturally' differentiate themselves from each other."[18] We choose the term involution to refer to the achievement of the shepherds because it highlights the ways this metamorphosis was noticeable to us.[19] We noticed while rereading transcripts from the interviews, at some point, that the shepherds were talking about their sheep with a very particular syntax. They were using the personal pronoun I or we and speaking from the sheep perspective: "I eat a plant and crickets are jumping on my nose"; "I see the dog, I pant, and I kick"; "It is a nice place here, let us rest"; "Oh no, this doesn't interest me, I'll lie down and wait for something better."

The shepherds did not become sheep, but they did begin to talk with them and for them—they became with them, and they now form a flock. One of the shepherds gave a very interesting definition of the flock as a "character." He then added: "The flock is a memory, a collective memory of the sites and a collective memory of itself, as a flock." Another says that he forms a "body" with the sheep.

In talking about involution, we aim to avoid tired psychological interpretations in terms of identification or symbiosis and instead stress the transformation of various identities as a result of the creation of the flock. Identities are transformed but not confused: each critter still differentiates, but differentiates differently—this is involution, an ongoing process. There is a flock, a collective memory, because a human became shepherd in relation to these sheep and because the sheep had become a character in relation with that shepherd. They differentiate differently in the process of creating trust. They became others with other others, and they differentiated otherwise.

What has changed is the way they created a relationship with time and space. They inhabited another time and another space. Time is of the utmost importance when one creates a flock. A common time, different from the previous flow of time, is established, and this common time, this shared time creates the flock—it is a herding time. Moreover, they changed the way they inhabited the space, the way they composed with the space. We say compose with because to inhabit is at once to be transformed by the environment and to transform it. Herding a flock is one of these ways of inhabiting and so composing with a place, a space in time.

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NOTES

1. Stengers, Isabelle. "Penser à partir du ravage écologique." In *De l'univers clos au monde infini*, edited by Emilie Hache, 147–90. Bellevaux: Dehors, 2014. p. 154.
2. Odum, Eugene Pleasants. *Fundamentals of Ecology*. Philadelphia: Saunders, 1953.
3. O'Neill, Robert V. "Is It Time to Bury the Ecosystem Concept? (With Full Military Honors, of Course!)." *Ecology* no. 82 (2001): 3275–84. /3276.
4. Ibid.
5. Provenza, Frederick D., Michel Meuret, and Pablo Gregorini. "Our Landscapes, Our Livestock, Ourselves: Restoring Broken Linkages among Plants, Herbivores, and Humans with Diets That Nourish and Satiate." *Appetite*, no. 95 (2015): 500–519.

6. Stengers, Isabelle, Brian Massumi, and Eric Manning. “History through the Middle: Between Macro and Mesopolitics—an Interview with Isabelle Stengers.” *Inflexions*, no. 3 (2009). www.senselab.ca/inflexions/volume_3/node_i3/PDF/Stengers_en_mesopolitique.pdf.
7. This article rests on the survey materials that one of us (M.M.) collected while conducting interviews with shepherds in the South of France. For complete story, see Despret Vinciane and Meuret Michel. Composer avec les moutons: lorsque des brebis apprennent à leurs bergers à leur apprendre. Avignon: Cardère, 2015.
8. Title of a conference that Tsing and her colleagues organized at the University of California Santa Cruz, May 8–10, 2014: “Anthropocene: Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet.”
9. Kohn, *How Forests Think,* 14, relaying Ghassan Hage.
10. Deleuze, Gilles, and Claire Parnet. *Dialogues II,* rev. ed. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 61.
11. Hubert, B., C. Deverre, and M. Meuret. “The Rangelands of Southern France: Two Centuries of Radical Change.” In *The Art and Science of Shepherding: Tapping the Wisdom of French Herders*, edited by Michel Meuret and Frederick D. Provenza, 27–43. Austin, TX: Acres USA, 2014.
12. Deleuze, Gilles. “Lectures by Gilles Deleuze: On Spinoza,” deleuzelectures.blogspot.fr/2007/02/on-spinoza.html (accessed February 22, 2016).
13. Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Translated by Robert Hurley. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988., 27, 125.
14. Jallet, M., M. Labreveux, and O. Bel. “Herding Schools: Upgrading Herding as a Skilled Occupation.” In *The Art and Science of Shepherding: Tapping the Wisdom of French Herders*, edited by Michel Meuret and Frederick D. Provenza, 27–43. Austin, TX: Acres USA, 2014., pp. 295–325; Meuret, Michel, and Frederick D. Provenza. “When Art and Science Meet: Integrating Knowledge of French Herders with Science of Foraging Behavior.” *Rangeland Ecology and Management*, no. 68 (2015): 1–17.
15. Marcelle Stroobants, “Transduction. L’apprentissage comme metamorphose.” In *Gestes spéculatifs*, edited by Didier Debaise and Isabelle Stengers, 305–24. Dijon: Éditions du Réel, 2015. “Transduction,” 311.
16. Of course not in herding schools. (France has five schools; see note 14)
17. Stroobants, “Transduction,” 311. Stroobants, Marcelle. “Transduction. L’apprentissage comme metamorphose.” In *Gestes spéculatifs*, edited by Didier Debaise and Isabelle Stengers, 305–24. Dijon: Éditions du Réel, 2015.
18. Stengers, “Penser à partir du ravage écologique,” 178. Stengers, Isabelle. “Penser à partir du ravage écologique.” In *De l’univers clos au monde infini*, edited by Emilie Hache, 147–90. Bellevaux: Dehors, 2014.
19. For an inspiring story that led us to feel the importance of this concept, see Hustak, Carla, and Natasha Myers. “Involutionary Momentum: Affective Ecologies and the Sciences of Plant/Insect Encounters.” *Differences* 23, no. 3 (2012): 74–118.