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## **Animals and Anthropology**

Anthropology encompasses four distinct sub-disciplines: biological anthropology, social anthropology (known as “cultural anthropology” in North America), archaeology, and linguistics. Beyond these basic four fields, one could further divide anthropology into a nearly endless array of specializations (primatology, legal anthropology, medical anthropology, and historical archaeology, to name just a few). Of course, all fields have their divisions, but anthropology’s sub-fields are unusual for their varying and complex ties to the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. They differ radically in their preoccupations, basic assumptions, research methods, and connections to other disciplines. This diversity and scope make assessing anthropology’s relationship to Animal Studies especially challenging. Consideration of anthropology’s diversity and scope is important, however, for understanding what anthropology brings to Animal Studies and the promise Animal Studies holds for a revitalized anthropology.

Animal Studies still is largely unknown among anthropologists. For various reasons (including misconceptions by no means unique to anthropology),

the very idea is apt to raise eyebrows. Animals, however, have long been central to anthropological inquiry. Whether investigating the evolution of humans as a species or attempting to understand humans' relationships with other humans and with their environments, anthropologists often have paid close attention to animals. In fact, the topic's antiquity makes it a convenient vantage point from which to survey the history of the discipline and many of its most important conceptual shifts and conflicts (Ingold, 1988; Mullin, 1999). That anthropology's animals offer new insights into the discipline's past and possible future should help Animal Studies scholars make a case for the legitimacy and importance of their work among colleagues who otherwise might not be receptive.

Although there is much continuity with earlier work, anthropologists' consideration of animals has been changing significantly in recent years, with many re-examining basic assumptions about animals and human-animal relationships. One of the changes is that human-animal relationships more often are considered a worthy focus in themselves, a change evident in the new courses being taught on the subject by cultural anthropologists, archaeologists, and biological anthropologists. Animals are less often perceived merely as a vehicle with which to explore a particular social formation or process, as might have seemed the case in classics of ethnography such as Geertz (1973); Levi-Strauss (1963) Evans-Pritchard (1950); or Ewers (1955). More focused attention to animals is not incompatible, however, with asking questions about other matters—including questions of interest to those who might be as much or more concerned with humans' relationships with other humans and with environments than in the more specific topic of human-animal relationships. For example, in a paper on Britain's foot and mouth crisis, Franklin (2001) pays close attention to sheep, but also uses, "the contagiousness of foot and mouth to ask questions about the kinds of connections and reconnections which are radically redefining rural Britain" (p. 2).

Anthropological research has long been associated with agrarian contexts and foraging peoples living in deserts or rainforests. Outside anthropology, such contexts still are apt to be characterized, in many ways misleadingly, as "traditional," and in opposition to "modern societies." Recent work on hunter-gatherers and herders, in addition to revealing the fallacy of simple oppositions between traditional and modern, has emphasized that the kind of

separation between nature and culture, human and animal that historians have described as becoming dominant in early modern Europe, has not been universal. Keeping in mind the historical contingency of humans' relationships with animals, anthropologists are beginning to explore how emerging forms of animal manufacture and management are redefining these relationships. While anthropologists consider the implications of genetically modified animals, patented animals, endangered species, xenotransplants, factory farming, cloning, and other developments, they join scholars from related disciplines in revisiting the topic of domestication, recently described by a zooarchaeologist as "the most profound transformation that has occurred in human-animal relationships" (Russell, 2001, p. 1). Some question whether understandings of domestication have been overly anthropocentric, assuming human intentionality and animal passivity in a manner that is unwarranted; others have stressed that even hunter-gatherers have "managed" other species in ways hitherto unacknowledged (Ingold, 2000, pp. 65-69). Although a wild/domestic dichotomy seems to be overly simplistic, domestication remains important for understanding key shifts in humans' relationships with other humans as well as with animals: In making animals property that could be reproduced and multiplied, humans made possible new kinds of inequality and differentiation (Russell; Ingold). An open question for anthropologists across the various sub-fields is the extent to which domestication should be considered an ongoing process, an aspect of present and future relationships between humans and other life forms, and whether new forms of biological control require that domestication be redefined.

Increasingly, ethnographic inquiry is multi-sited, involving animals in a wide variety of contexts—including rural, urban, and cyberspace—and in relation to such topics as biotechnology, cities, the industrialized food chain, ecotourism, new social movements, global capitalism, the history of science, and the construction of national identities. Sessions on animals at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association in 2000 and 2001 included papers on animatronics, Dolly the sheep, Darwin's pigeons, Native identities and the disappearance of the abalone in California, dog breeds, racehorse pedigrees, gender talk about horses, the political economy of the pet food industry, and the extinction and imagined resurrection of the Tasmanian tiger.<sup>2</sup> Despite the prominence of contexts and animals not typically associated with anthropology, older concerns with kinship and other classification systems

remain relevant. Nearly a half century ago, Levi-Strauss (1963) urged anthropologists to acknowledge the ways in which animals provide humans with an important conceptual resource (animals, he argued, are “good to think with”), while anthropologists of a more materialist sensibility attended to the ways that animals serve as sources of power, wealth, and inequality (Shanklin, 1985, Mullin, 1999, pp. 207-208). Recent work has rejected a material/conceptual divide and argued the importance of exploring the linkages between semiotic and economic aspects of human-animal relationships.

Although anthropology’s animals still are approached with an eye toward better understanding humans, there has been movement away from the more thoroughly anthropocentric approaches of the past—approaches that depicted animals as passive objects of human agency. Earlier studies allowed little room for human or animal agency but human actors have gained attention much more readily than animals.

Recent anthropological inquiry also is often more willing to engage, albeit cautiously, moral and political questions regarding animals. It is possible, however, that anthropologists might vary more than Animal Studies’ scholars from other disciplines in the degree to which they are motivated by concern for animals. Anthropological work in general is apt to emphasize the historical, contextual specificity of any particular human-animal relationship and of how categories, including those of “human” and “animal,” are not inevitable or universal but shaped in particular contexts and in different ways by actors with often conflicting perspectives and interests.

In ways important to Animal Studies, anthropologists in various sub-fields have been rethinking the concept of culture (Fox & King, 2002). In cultural anthropology, where many once recognized culture as their primary object of study, the past 15 years have seen much questioning of the utility and validity of the concept. The reasons are complex but include a sense that culture has functioned as part of a system of problematic hierarchical dualisms: culture/nature, human/animal, mind/body, male/female. At the same time that cultural anthropologists have sought alternatives to the culture concept, biological anthropologists—primatologists in particular—have been revising assumptions that culture is uniquely human, and many have embraced it as an object of investigation.<sup>3</sup> Charting hundreds of behavioral differences (typically involving grooming, gesture, or food processing) among primate pop-

ulations of the same species, behavioral differences that do not appear inherited or the result of ecological conditions, cultural primatologists have established a new specialization. King (2001) who studies communication and gesture among captive bonobos and gorillas, sounds a note of caution and asks whether,

the anthropological relationship with great apes has become not about what makes them great apes—not-humans—but just how much like us they are. Or, more properly, just how much like us we can construct them to be. And constructing them like us increasingly has come to mean emphasizing that great apes have culture. (p. 1)

These developments and controversies among primatologists have kindled interest in the historical forces that have shaped the study of primates differently in different countries and that seem to have encouraged Japanese primatologists to pioneer concepts and methods only later adopted by researchers elsewhere (De Waal, 2001, 2000). For primatologists worldwide, the imminent extinction of non-captive great ape populations, expected within the next 20 to 50 years (King, 2001, p. 4), encourages consideration of political and ethical dimensions of scientific investigation and human-animal interconnections (Fuentes & Wolfe, 2002). In this and in many other lines of inquiry, anthropologists should find valuable new opportunities for collaboration and dialogue. Anthropology's sub-disciplines, stretched as they are between art and science, maintain marked differences. Anthropologists dispersed among them can be expected, at least at times, to struggle to find a shared language and common goals. Even working separately in their sub-fields, anthropologists have much to offer Animal Studies. With a little tolerance for the diversity among them, they can collaborate and make a greater contribution to both Animal Studies and anthropology.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Correspondence should be sent to Molly Mullin, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Albion College, Albion, MI, 49224. Email: mmullin@albion.edu
- <sup>2</sup> The sessions were entitled "The Animal Turn" and "Anthropology's Animals" and were co-organized by Molly Mullin and Sarah Franklin for the Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association held in San Francisco in 2000 and in Washington, D.C. in 2001.

- <sup>3</sup> Only some primatologists are anthropologists; many have been trained in zoology or psychology.

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