

The Human Question in Recent Social Thought

Presentation Notes

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Canadian Sociological Association Annual Meeting 2009
Carleton University, Ottawa

<http://www.theoria.ca/research/files/csa-human-notes.pdf>

Not so much a theoretical argument, but more of an argument *for* social theory, especially critical social theory and, more generally, critical sociology.

Context: this presentation comes out my dissertation and will likely find its way into the meta-theoretical introductory chapter. The dissertation itself is tentatively entitled “The Human and Its Others in Early Modern Social Thought.” My goal in the dissertation is to understand how the concept of ‘the human’ was developed in relation to the concept of ‘the animal.’ For now, the core of the dissertation consists in four substantive chapters:

- * An analysis of the meaning of the words ‘order’ and ‘well-ordered’ in seventeenth century apiculture texts, most notably Charles Butler’s *The Feminine Monarchie, or A Treatise Concerning Bees, and the Due Ordering of Them* (1609, 1623, 1634, 1637, 1673, L1682, E1708) and the ‘royal beemaster,’ Moses Rusden’s *A Full Discovery of Bees: Treating of Their Nature, Government, Generation & Preservation of the Bee* (1679, 1685, 1688);
- * An analysis of the difference between nature and artifice in Thomas Hobbes and how the political community depends upon expelling ‘the animal’ from ‘the human’;
- * An analysis of John Locke’s theory of property, which is based upon the donation of dominion to Adam at Genesis 1:28 - incidentally, presenting this in a session immediately following this one;
- * And an analysis of the relation between vice and order in Bernard Mandeville’s *The Fable of the Bees* (1705, 1714, 1723, 1724).

Why Animals? a legitimate question immediately arises: why focus on ‘the human’ in relation to ‘the animal’ and not something else? Why not look at divisions within the concept of ‘the human’ - for instance, between savagery and civilization, between Europeans and others? between whites and others? between men and women? There are a number of responses to this:

- * distinctions within the concept of ‘the human’ are more often than not related to the distinction between animals and humans such that the ‘less-than-human’ is justified as being ‘less-than-human’ because it is more animal than human. Three examples work here:

* the Nazis had an incredibly complex and interesting relationship to animals. As is well known, Hitler was a vegetarian in large part because he felt a deal of sympathy for animals. He enacted both the Nuremberg Laws, which dehumanized Jews, and another set of animal welfare laws - at the height of its power, Nazi Germany was likely the most 'humane' society in the world and the most 'humane' society for many decades after. What is interesting here is that the defense of animal welfare was articulated through an attack on both Judaism and Christianity: the interests of animals are second to the interests of humans because it says so in the Bible (e.g., Genesis 1:28). Hence, to defend animals was at once to attack Jews - to remove animals from the tyranny of Jews. Now, at the same time, Nazi propaganda was filled with films comparing rats to Jews - their behaviors, their facial features, their psychology, and so on. Other comparisons are, of course, possible: for instance, the death camps were modeled on the 'disassembly lines' at the Chicago stockyards (Ford's 'assembly line' was also inspired by the stockyards, but in reverse).

* while it has a long history, we are seeing it again more frequently since Obama's candidacy for President: the comparison between African-Americans, especially males, and non-human primates. For instance, the recent cartoon in the *New York Post* showing two police officers gunning down an ape with the caption, "They'll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus bill." Needless to say, this particular comparison has a very long history going back centuries, but has took on new life following the advent of social Darwinism, which justified racial hierarchies on biological grounds within the human species through comparison to non-human primates.

* going in another direction: the pervasive sexism and misogyny of many welfare activists, most notably PETA who spread their message on the bodies of naked women.

* there are other ways to approach the question of 'why animals'? I say the following in full knowledge of what just happened in Sri Lanka, of Darfur, of Rwanda, of the Holocaust, of the two World Wars, of African slavery - in full knowledge of the absolute glee humans get in slaughtering other humans for the most trivial of reasons and in the most horrible ways. The modern and contemporary usage of animals is *by far* the most pervasive and brutal system of violence and misery ever devised by humans. Worse, it is also one of the most invisible systems of violence and misery ever devised. And even worse, this is in spite of laws that claim to protect the interests of animals. Intellectually, we know where our meat comes from; emotionally, we don't actually want to know. And, perhaps still worse, everyone is more or less happy with that: consumers, producers, legislators, etc. Statistics are incredibly hard to collect on animal use, in large part because of how animals are defined under the law (a topic I cannot get into today), but it would seem that a conservative estimate suggests at least 53 *billion* animals are *killed* by humans *annually*, as of the early twenty-first century. This number does not include fish and shellfish - which are measured by the ton - and doesn't include a significant number of animals used in research (a rat bred to be used in research is legally not an animal

under the US *Animal Welfare Law*), nor does it include animals used to produce eggs and dairy or animals used for entertainment. To put this number into context: that is roughly ten animals killed per living human per year. But this is a little misleading: there is a tremendously strong correlation between wealth and animal use - poor societies cannot afford to use animals, especially as food, on the same scale as rich societies. More than 720 million animals were used - 98% of them for food - in Canada in 2007. That works out to roughly twenty-four animals per Canadian. Another point of comparison: more than 10 *billion* animals are used annually in the United States, and nearly all for food, which works out to about 33.3 animals per American. This can be put in yet another perspective: the twentieth-century was the most violent and destructive century in human history we know of - the Holocaust, two World Wars, the Spanish Flu, the Russian and Chinese Revolutions, and so on. Fewer than 180 million humans died in these events, even if we extend numbers from deaths directly caused by war or violence to include famine, environmental destruction, disease, and so on. At our worst to one another, in an entire century we only managed to slaughter forty million more humans than we slaughter animals in *a single day* (180 million vs. 140 million). As an aside: biology and neurology has basically conclusively determined that all vertebrates feel and experience pain in more or less the same way - if you think a practice is cruel, violent, and painful on humans, an animal feels it in basically the same way. These practical/ethical/political (ethical in both the ancient sense of a practice of self formation and in the modern sense of morality) concerns form the basis for my theoretical interest in studying the concept of 'the animal' and the relations between humans and animals more generally.

The Theoretical Problem? Ultimately, my proposed title - "The Human Question in Recent Social Thought" - is incorrect. I should have proposed the title "The Animal Question in Recent Social Thought." As social theorists, how do we fit into this problem? What are the questions we should be asking? How should we go about answering those questions once we know what it is we are asking?

* The first problem I would identify is that we, as social theorists specifically and sociologists in general, do not talk about animals enough. To borrow Slavoj Žižek's terms, we - and I am speaking generally here in reference to ourselves as both sociologists and every day inhabitants of Canada - we only see animals in "subjective" cases: such as the listeria outbreak, the Swine and Bird Flu epidemics, the tiger that killed the zookeeper in New Zealand this week, the seal hunt, Michael Vick, and so on. We utterly fail to see animals as part of an "objective" background of violence: the ways in which our societies are structured around the use and exploitation of animals and how this relates to our use and exploitation of humans. If you want an easy way to bring this objective background to the foreground, try going just seven days without using an animal product or by-product or a product tested on animals. It is easier to go a week without having contact with other humans.

* The second problem: as a consequence of this, we have not yet begun to develop theoretical tools for analyzing human/animal relations. At present, the most developed area in "animal studies" is analytic moral philosophy - a tiny specialty within applied ethics which itself is a small area of moral philosophy which is itself a secondary domain

of philosophy as a whole and philosophy is itself a fairly marginal discipline. There are two basic positions: utilitarian (e.g., Peter Singer) and rights-based (e.g., Tom Regan, Gary Francione, Julian Franklin). Ultimately, two basic questions are posed: (1) given our use of animals, how should we treat them (this is animal welfare and Peter Singer) and (2) should we use animals at all (this is animal rights). This leads into another problem - is the framework of the liberal metaphysic of rights (in the broad sense that includes utilitarian animal welfare positions, such as Singer's, and liberal animal rights positions, such as Francione's and Regan's) even the appropriate way to approach the question? If we move out of the domain of moral philosophy, there is not much else. (Donna Haraway in sociology and some historians are important exceptions.) Here questions are stuck in a problematic of anthropomorphism (i.e, the projection of human mental life onto to animals; paradigm case: Disney) and anthropocentrism (i.e., should the world be understood from the perspective of humans?). Even if we get beyond these questions, the next best set of theoretical resources we have center around humanism, anti-humanism and post-humanism - positions, as their names would suggest, that remain caught in the problematic of *the human*.

Conclusion: I come to an unfortunately pessimistic conclusion. Social thought or, better, critical social theory is presently is ill-equipped for posing the questions we need to ask. Worse, it does not look like this will change at any point in the near future. There are presently no tenure-stream positions in Canadian sociology in the broad area of "animal studies." The only search I am aware of in this area was cancelled. None of the major doctoral programs in Canada with specialties in social theory (Alberta, Carleton, York) offer expertise in animal studies and none even offer special topics courses in animal studies. The situation is not much better outside sociology: while some law schools are beginning to offer courses in animal welfare law, this is but a tiny step; and, in general, animal welfare research - note: welfare, not rights! - is concentrated in the veterinary colleges, especially the departments of agricultural medicine.