books & ideas

The 'Animal Cause' and the Social Sciences

From anthropocentrism to zoocentrism

By Jérôme Michalon

How do the social sciences and humanities deal with human-animal relationships? Between epistemic and political aims, animals have progressed on either side of the Atlantic as legitimate subjects of study and even as political subjects in their own right.

This essay is an excerpt from *S'engager pour les animaux,* a book edited by Fabien Carié and Christophe Traïni and scheduled for publication in February 2019 in the Puf/Vie des idées collection.

'Obscurantism'. This was Jean-Pierre Digard's verdict on a large portion of recent social science and humanities (SSH) studies on human-animal relations. When asked by his colleagues to discuss whether anthropology had taken an 'animal turn', this domestication specialist explained that social changes in the representation of animals have had a direct impact on knowledge production in this regard. According to him, since the nineteenth century and the rise of animal protection, 'animalism' has grown by dint of progressively calling into question the idea that there is a radical boundary between humans and animals. From the 1970s onwards, intellectuals began producing normative theories on the human-animal relations and this then influenced the emergence of SSH research on the topic. In Digard's view, these theories called a second boundary into question: the boundary separating

science from activism. He clearly denounces the instrumental use of scientific research by supporters of the 'animal cause',[1] viewed as a symptom of pernicious obscurantism.

Is this indictment sufficient to describe the relations between the animal cause and the social sciences, though? The answer is probably not and I shall try to show here that the SSH focus on human-animal relationships has as much to do with factors internal to academia as with external factors and that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between what relates to epistemological justifications and what is, instead, a matter of pro-animal activism.

Influences

Let us look first at how the topic of how we relate to animals progressively entered the remit of SSH disciplines (while nevertheless remaining marginal to this day). In anthropology, since the 1960s and the work of André-Georges Haudricourt, the study of how we relate to animals (and to plants) has managed to evolve while enjoying full legitimacy and it has flourished, for example, at the Paris Museum of Natural History and within the Société d'Ethnozootechnie [the Ethnozootechnics Society]. Chronologically, it was history that first challenged anthropology's almost total monopoly over 'human-animal relationships' as an object of inquiry. The history of animals, pioneered by Robert Delort in the 1980s, went on to flourish thanks to works by Eric Baratay, Daniel Roche, and Michel Pastoureau. At the end of the 1990s, geography too experienced its 'animal turn'.[2] As for sociology, it was not until the 2010s that various calls emerged for the creation of a specific field of research around how we relate to animals.[3] This evolution, loosely described, can be connected to important changes in the intellectual landscape of the SSH. Bruno Latour and Michel Callon's work in sociology and Philippe Descola and Tim Ingold's work in anthropology[4] strove to credit non-human entities with a form of agency for which researchers need to account. Applied to the question of how we relate to animals, the redistribution of the capacity for action between

1 Christophe Traïni, La Cause animale. Essai de sociologie historique, Paris, Puf, 2011.
2 Nathalie Blanc, Les Animaux et la ville, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2000); Jennifer R. Wolch and Jody Emel (eds.), Place, Politics, and Identity in the Nature-Culture Borderlands, London/New York, Verso Books, 1998; Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert (eds.), Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations, London/New York: Routledge, 2000.
3 Albert Piette, 'Entre l'homme et le chien. Pour une ethnographie du fait socio-animal', Socio-anthropologie 11 (2002) accessible online: http://socio-anthropologie.revues.org/141; Dominique Guillo, Des chiens et des humains, Paris, Editions le Pommier, 2009; Emmanuel Gouabault and Jérôme Michalon, 'Les relations anthropozoologiques', Sociétés 2, n°108, 2010; Dominique Guillo and Catherine Rémy, 'Les Sciences sociales et les animaux', L'Année Sociologique 2, n°66, 2016; Jérôme Michalon, Antoine Doré and Chloé Mondémé, 'Une sociologie avec les animaux : faut-il changer de sociologie pour étudier les relations humains / animaux ?' SociologieS [online], 2016.
4 When Jean-Pierre Digard talks about the 'animal' turn in anthropology, he is referring, in particular, to these studies.

humans and non-humans[5] resulted in a shift from a symbolic approach to what could be called an 'agency-based' approach. In the first, animals are viewed essentially as material and symbolic 'props' for human societies, illustrative of how the latter function, or as vectors for social and political power. In the second, animals are not simply considered as objects shaped by human societies: the aim is to understand the active role they play in social dynamics. This shift in perspective in the French-speaking world echoes international developments in the Animal Studies community (the epicentre of which lies in the Anglosphere).

The Animal Studies community currently presents itself as including academics from the natural sciences and from the SSH who are interested in human-animal relations. Animal Studies also lay claim to a form of commitment to improving the condition of animals and, for this reason, also include animal welfare associations and pro-animal activists. Typically, members of Animal Studies locate the origins of their community in the publications of the philosophers Peter Singer and Tom Regan, establishing 'anti-speciesism' and the theory of Animal Liberation, in the case of Singer, and the notion of 'Animal Rights' in the case of Regan. This genealogy suggests Animal Studies represented a form of activism from an early stage. Another genealogy points to the fact that Animal Studies also emerged thanks to a prior field of research, namely 'Human-Animal Interactions'. [6] In the 1970s, studies appeared focusing on the beneficial effects on human health of interactions with animals,[7] bringing together veterinarians, actors from the pet food industry, and animal welfare and humane organisations alike. These groups were all interested in promoting a positive image of animals and their companionship and therefore encouraged research giving substance to the idea that treating animals well presented substantial psychological, social, and health benefits. This gave rise to the journal *Anthrozoös,* which became the principal publication outlet for such research. *Anthrozoös* published the first work by researchers interested in what, in the 1990s, began to be called 'Human-Animal Studies'. The journal *Society & Animals* went on to establish this term. In this new publication, the emerging Animal Studies community critiqued the scientific neutrality that had prevailed in the field of Human-Animal Interactions and went so far as to suggest, progressively, that this field should be abandoned. The editorial line of *Society & Animals* openly acknowledged the activist dimension to the research it published and emphasised its debt to work conducted on animal ethics in the 1970s. The greater prominence it gave to the social sciences also indicated a desire to construe the animal issue as a social and political issue – to show that the condition of animals was problematic and could and should be acted upon. This imperative became an increasingly structural part of the Animal Studies community, so much so that it was theorised in the notion of the 'scholar-activist' (Shapiro & De Mello, 2010) and became the leitmotif of

5 Sophie Houdart and Olivier Thiery (eds.), Humains, non-humains. Comment repeupler les sciences sociales, Paris, La Découverte, 2011.

[6] Jérôme Michalon, 'Les Animal Studies peuvent-elles nous aider à penser l'émergence des épistémès réparatrices ?', *Revue d'anthropologie des connaissances* 11, n°3, 2017, pp. 321-349.

[7] Jérôme Michalon, *Panser avec les animaux. Sociologie du soin par le contact animalier*, Paris, Presses des Mines ParisTech, 2014.

Critical Animal Studies, a 'radical' branch that emerged in the 2000s in direct connection with organisations dedicated to Animal Liberation (Best, 2003).

By discussing how human-animal relationships came to be included in French-language social sciences and by describing, in parallel, the development of Animal Studies on a more international level, my intention has been to reveal a contrast: in one case, the decision to include 'how we relate to animals' as an object of inquiry seems to have been debated purely in scientific terms, whereas, in the other, the political and activist dimensions seem omnipresent. On the one hand, the aim is to determine what studying 'animals' can bring to our understanding of social dynamics. On the other, the purpose is to analyse social dynamics in order to render them beneficial to animals. This contrast, deliberately accentuated here, has served as the foundation for the criticism directed by certain French academics at the reasons underpinning their colleagues' decision to address human-animal relationships.

Unveiling

The anthropologist Jean-Pierre Digard, mentioned in the introduction, has proved especially critical of the way Anglo-American theories about relationships to animals have been imported into the French intellectual world. It is true that, having remained marginal for many years, Peter Singer's reflections on anti-speciesism and animal liberation have gained a great deal of visibility in the French intellectual landscape in recent years. In 1992, the philosopher Luc Ferry described them as dangerously anti-humanist.

A few years later, Catherine and Raphaël Larrère also voiced their objections, pointing to the fact that liberationist thinking and zootechnics (of which industrial breeding is the direct application) share the same ideological foundations, namely utilitarianism which, they argue, cannot provide a solid basis for improving our relationship to animals. After such rejection came questions, with the publication in 2009 of a special issue of the journal *Critique*[8] entitled '*Libérer les animaux ?*' [Liberating animals?]. The question mark in the title attested both to the perplexity with which these theories were still received in France at the time and the interest they were beginning to garner. The same year, the Presses Universitaires de France published a synoptic work on animal ethics prefaced by Peter Singer, marking the first step in academic acceptance of anti-speciesist theory.[9] Since then, judging by the rise in publications on the topic, this acceptance seems increasingly widespread.

8 Special issue 'Libérer les animaux ?', Critique 747-748, 2009.
9 Jean-Baptiste JeangèneVilmer, L'éthique animale, Paris, Puf, 2015 [2009].

Digard has denounced this progressive 'conversion' of the French intellectual world to 'animalist' theories in several texts.[10] He points to the close ties between certain philosophers and animal protection movements, referring to active lobbying by these movements that have been brought over from Anglo-American countries in order to impose an anti-speciesist vision of the animal issue. And indeed, Digard is a founding member of the association ProNaturA France, which has the explicit aim of 'fighting "philosophical" representations conveyed by extremist ecology, including theories of "Animal Liberation"'.[11] However, above and beyond this unveiling of an academic world 'instrumentalised' by animal advocacy, Digard also expresses a critique of the empirical foundations on which animalist theories are based. He underlines the difference between *actual* anthrozoological relationships as studied by sociologists and anthropologists and the *fictional* anthrozoological relationships used by 'animalist' thinkers. On the one hand, researchers observe and document human-animal relationships using precise methodologies that lay claim to a certain neutrality. On the other, he argues, the data is partial and produced by activists seeking to foreground relationships of exploitation between humans and animals. In other cases, animalist philosophers 'imagine' these relations and, in order to build a logical argument, use examples from their own experience or 'typical ordinary' situations that are clearly fictitious.[12] Here, the criticism takes on a more 'corporatist' or at the very least 'disciplinary' aspect: it challenges the legitimacy of philosophers claiming to marshal a reality of which they only have an abstract and partial knowledge, if any at all.

In a similar vein, Jocelyne Porcher, a sociologist at the INRA [National Institutes for Agronomic Research], has denounced the 'lack of animal literacy' of 'animalist' philosophers who discuss human-animal relationships without backing up their arguments with fieldwork and without any real knowledge of the animals in question.[13] Arguing against equating animal husbandry with the industrial scale exploitation—or even the enslavement—of sentient creatures, Porcher draws on her own work to show that such husbandry also involves affect, attention, and care from breeders towards their livestock.[14] The title of one of her articles exhorts not to free animals: according to her, giving up on breeding would mean turning our backs on an age-old relationship to animals that is a constitutive element of our humanity and that is only just beginning to be explored, particularly thanks to studies in the SSH. From this perspective, the influence of animalist theories is scientifically harmful because it obscures a whole facet of reality that has yet to be explored. In this sense, this influence does not help

10 Jean-Pierre Digard, 'Raisons et déraisons des revendications animalitaires. Essai de lecture anthropologique et politique', Pouvoirs 4, n°131, 2009, pp. 97-111.

11 See: http://www.pronatura-france.fr/pronatura-se-presente [accessed 15/02/2018]

12 Peter Singer uses a lot of these 'fictionalised' examples to illustrate bioethical dilemmas. Peter Singer, 'L'éthique appliquée', Les Cahiers antispécistes, n°4, http://www.cahiers-antispecistes.org/lethique-appliquee/ [Accessed 07/03/2018]

13 Jocelyne Porcher, 'Ne libérez pas les animaux ! Plaidoyer contre un conformisme "analphabête"', Revue du MAUSS 1, n°29, 2007, pp. 575-585. The author plays on the French word for 'illiterate' (analphabète) and one of the French words for animal ('bête').

14 The sociologist has just contributed to a INRA dossier aimed at refuting one by one the arguments of vegetarian/vegan movements against eating meat: http://www.inra.fr/Chercheurs-etudiants/Systemes-agricoles/Tous-les-dossiers/Fausse-viande-ou-vrai-elevage [Accessed on 15/02/2018]

SSH research on animal relations to flourish, as it is too burdened with implicit normative stances to produce any 'objective' understanding of these relations.[15]

It is worth noting that some of these criticisms resemble the arguments used in conflicts between pro-animal activists and their opponents (hunters, in particular[16]): 'animalist' activists are depicted by their adversaries as irrational, devoid of objectivity, and generally speaking lacking any real knowledge of animals and what connects them to humans.[17] Moreover, while these criticisms claim to be objective or scientifically neutral, they also include a normative stance towards the relations that humans should have with animals. Responding to the animalists' normativity with their own, these critiques therefore contribute to making it mandatory to address ethical and political issues in any reflection on human-animal relationships and to establishing a dividing line in relation to which all researchers must first position themselves.

Pairings

How can the relationship between the social sciences and the animal cause be addressed without having to take one's place either side of this dividing line? How can we avoid using critical vocabulary about activists exploiting scientific knowledge or, conversely, avoid considering as self-evident academia's subservience to moral imperatives? Once again, a comparative approach can prove fruitful here, particularly in order to show that the dividing line between the scientific and the political is not at clear as it might seem.

Viewed from the French standpoint, the cases for the inclusion of 'animals in the social sciences' were mainly made in epistemological terms: it was above all a matter of shedding light on a little-known aspect of social dynamics—that of human-animal relationships. In short, the aim was to document an incomplete social reality. There remained some ambiguity, however, concerning what needed to be included in descriptions of this reality: animals themselves or their relationships to humans? For many, the first option was the right choice, as it seemed to make the most radical break with the symbolic approaches that had prevailed thus far. In a programmatic article, Albert Piette also suggests studying human-dog relationships by shifting the investigator's focus to the dog (given the inherently

[15] Like Jean-Pierre Digard, Jocelyne Porcher regularly engages in exercises of revelation, aimed at denouncing the objective alliance between 'animalist' activists and academics, on the one hand, and economic interests on other. She has, for example, devoted several articles to the links between the development of *in vitro* meat, vegan movements, and certain multinationals: http://jocelyneporcher.fr/articles-de-vulgarisation-de-jocelyne-porcher/ [Accessed on 07/03/2018]

[16] Rachel Einwohner, 'Bringing the Outsiders in: Opponents' Claims and the Construction of Animal Rights Activists' Identity', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 7, 2002, pp. 253-268.

[17] It is important to mention the gendered aspect to these conflicts: 70% of pro-animal activists are women (Emily Gaarder, 'Where the Boys Aren't: the Predominance of Women in Animal Rights Activism', *Feminist Formations* 23, n°2, 2011, pp. 54-76) and their opponents are very often men who denounce the emotional side to pro-animal activism and its excessive empathy.

asymmetrical nature of this relationship).[18] Marion Vicart then applied this method through what she called an 'equitable phenomenography' aimed at documenting dogs' specific mode of presence whether or not they were interacting with humans. [19]

Continuing in this vein, several researchers went on to defend the heuristic benefits of applying the tools and methods of the SSH to studying animals 'among themselves'.[20] Learning more about animals by applying the specific lens of the SSH became a running theme, a cognitive imperative towards which it was necessary to take a stance. As anthropologist Florent Kohler[21] explains, 'the issue at stake is using the tools at our disposal to reach a point of view that is not that of humans' and here he is following in Eric Baratay's footsteps, whose aim was to produce a 'history from the point of view of animals'.[22]

Thus, under the influence of a sort of epistemological inflation (what approach will prove more innovative than the last?), the desire to 're-enrol animals in the social sciences' has drifted from redressing the balance by taking a less anthropocentric perspective in order only to describe animals and document their point of view. This change has led some to claim that all these recent studies addressing how we relate to animals aim 'fully to position animals as an object of empirical research in their own right'.[23]

It is striking to note what these changes in the French-speaking context have in common with the path taken by Animal Studies internationally. Indeed, along with the progressive assertion that science and activism should draw closer together (as described above), Animal Studies has also given a central focus to generating thought about animals and animals alone. The widespread use of the term 'Animal Studies' in the 2000s to replace 'Human-Animal Studies' is no simple linguistic shortcut. It testifies to the community's concern with breaking away from an 'all-powerful' anthropocentrism and giving prominence back to animals, even if only symbolically, by refocusing the scientific gaze on them. The imperative here is both cognitive and ethical: neglecting animals in descriptions of social dynamics inflicts further harm upon them and exacerbates a condition already defined by a lack of visibility and a high level of objectification.

It is necessary to do justice to animals' contribution to social dynamics but also to account for their subjective experience of the world.[24] The culmination of this logic is the

[18] Piette, 'Entre l'homme et le chien'.
[19] Marion Vicart, *Des chiens auprès des hommes. Quand l'anthropologue observe aussi l'animal*, Pétra, 2014).
[20] Véronique Servais, 'Faut-il faire la sociologie des singes ?' *SociologieS* (2012. Online: accessed 14/10/2015. URL: http://sociologies.revues.org/4054; Florent Kohler, 'Blondes d'Aquitaine : essai de zooanthropologie', *Etudes rurales* 189, 2012, pp. 155-174.
[21] Kohler, ''Blondes d'Aquitaine', p. 155.
[22] Éric Baratay, *Le point de vue animal. Une autre version de l'histoire*, Paris, Seuil, 2012.
[23] Dominique Guillo, 'Quelle place faut-il faire aux animaux en sciences sociales ? Les limites des réhabilitations récentes de l'agentivité animale,' *Revue française de sociologie* 56, n°1, 2015, 155.
[24] Kenneth Shapiro and Margo DeMello, 'The State of Human-Animal Studies', *Society and Animals* 18, 2010, 307-318.

advent of Critical Animal Studies and the conceptualisation of Animal Standpoint Theory,[25] which, following the example of feminist epistemology, [26] foregrounds the cognitive and political benefits of adopting the standpoint of animals.

Thus, the comparison of these two contexts brings to light a similar dynamic, namely a shift from anthropocentrism to zoocentrism.[27] In both cases, it is a matter of asserting that animals are legitimate subjects (subjects of study and/or political subjects). This convergence between epistemic aims and political aims, achieved via the notion of 'animal standpoint', invites us to investigate the relationships between social science and the animal cause as more than simply relationships of influence (in which one of the two terms has ascendancy over the other). To my mind, the term 'pairing' is more appropriate when it comes to accounting for this convergence, through which the boundary between the scientific and the political is eroded and both cognitive and normative aims are achieved alongside each other. Described in this way, the coupling of the animal cause and the social sciences becomes a sociohistorical phenomenon and, as such, is endowed with an element of contingency, as well as with its own logic, being in no way inevitable and potentially the topic of peaceable discussion.

First published in *laviedesidees.fr*, 13 November 2018.
Translated from the French by Lucie Garnier with the support of the Institut français.
Published in *booksandideas.net*, 11 February 2019.

[25] Steven Best, 'The Rise of Critical Animal Studies: Putting Theory into Action and Animal Liberation into Higher Education,' *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 7, 1, 2009, 9-51.
[26] Sandra G. Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, New York/London, Routledge, 2003.
[27] Adrian Franklin, *Animals and Modern Cultures: a Sociology of Human-Animal Relations in Modernity*, London/New Delhi, Thousand Oaks/Sage, 1999.