

Lynda Birke

Species and Power

Erika Cudworth, *Social Lives with Other Animals: tales of sex, death and love*. Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave, 2001. 210 pp. £58/\$85 hc.

A sheep named Bonnie gazes out from the front cover of *Social Lives*. Bonnie, unlike almost all her conspecifics, lived to the age of fifteen. The photograph is striking: Bonnie's eyes keep watching you, and the image invites us to look at such animals and "to ask ourselves *who* they really are and how we might respond" (184). Yet sheep do not usually fare so well; most, on the contrary, do not live beyond a few months, living and dying within the processes of food production.

That sums up our highly ambivalent, and complex, relations with other species. On the one hand, many of us do indeed wonder who they are, and often single out specific individuals with whom we might have close relationships; on the other, the same species might meet (at best) with callous disregard from humans, or outright cruelty. And individuals move all too easily from being doted on to being discarded, if their behavior or appearance somehow does not fit human wants. And that was brought home to me when I read recently of one of the effects of economic recession — a significant increase in the number of "companion" animals being maimed or murdered for "owners'" to claim on insurance.*

Human-animal relationships are indeed complicated. Like other theorists in human-animal studies, Cudworth is concerned to unpack some of this ambivalence and to move away from our belief in our own exceptionalism. But, crucially, she takes issue with the view (apparent in some theoretical writing about humans and other animals) that boundaries between "the human" and the "nonhuman animal" are collapsing. On the contrary, her point here is that our primary relationship with other animals is and remains one of social domination: rather, *species* — and especially the human/nonhuman species boundary — is an effect of social power, which produces the marginalization and exploitation of other animals. "We will not," she argues, "see justice for animals by deconstructing species" (13). That emphasis on social power is a central tenet of her book: while she recognizes the importance of emphasizing that nonhumans, as well as humans, constitute and produce social relations, this does not go far enough precisely because it does not take into account relations of power.

Social Lives begins with an exploration of sociological ideas around species, beginning with a critique and moving on to consider the influence of complexity theory. Human relations with other species, suggests Cudworth, operate through systems of domination which she calls “anthroparchy.” In her analysis of sociological concerns with species, she considers several theoretical positions that challenge our entrenched anthropocentric beliefs, albeit in rather different ways. To take one example, she discusses several theorists drawing on some version of social constructionism. That how we construct ideas of “animals” is crucial to our treatment of them matters, she argues, but it does not go far enough to address material relations. For that, we need a political language. However, the extension of concepts of rights and liberation to nonhuman animals is also fraught with difficulties, not least because they are, ultimately, rooted in humanism.

One source of fruitful ideas comes, Cudworth suggests, from recent feminist scholarship on intersectionality (e.g., Nash, 2008; Walby, 2009). This is concerned with ways in which different, but overlapping, discourses constitute and shape each other — racism, sexism, colonialism, for example. But to this literature should be added a concern with species, how discourses of species produce notions of difference, and — importantly — how they produce structures of power. This goes beyond discussions of speciesism, which, she suggests, homogenizes species and does not adequately account for different forms of human exploitation of animals. This is, for Cudworth, the central question for sociological analysis: how can we “account for species as discursively and materially constituted, as a system of power relations which is intersected by forms of intra-human difference and domination” (54)?

To move toward such a sociology she suggests drawing on complexity theory, which focuses on connections and interplay between systems. These could, for example, be populations of organisms within a wider ecosystem. While the application of such ideas in sociology has been contested, it can offer a useful framework for “those of us trying to understand the relationships of species as political, and to see the social as something which is not exclusively human” (66). In this quest, Cudworth proposed the term *anthroparchy*, to describe a social system in which humans are privileged. She defines it as “...a social system, a complex and relatively stable set of hierarchical relationships in which ‘nature’ is dominated through formations of social organization which privilege the human” (67). Such privileging takes many forms — using “nature” as resources in production, exploiting animals’ reproductive processes, domesticating them, destroying them or their habitats. She discusses these ideas through three case studies of human-

animal relations: the consumption of animals for food; the industrialized production of animals for agriculture; and the keeping of companion animals in the household. It is these three examples which underpin the subtitle of her book — sex, death, and love.

The first case study thus focuses on meat-eating, seen as carnal desire (the “sex” of the title). Here, she draws on Carol Adams’s work on the sexual politics of meat (Adams, 1990), illustrating the discussion with examples from British meat culture, and extending Adams’s argument to include the cooking of meat. “Foodwork” — preparing food and cooking — is gendered. To give one example from Cudworth’s analysis of food/cookery texts: recipes for boiling meat tend to utilize narratives of care (as do many of those for vegetable eating), while recipes centered on roasting or grilling convey masculinity, and are more likely to be sexualized. They are, moreover, heteronormative, conveying messages of heterosexual virility associated with meat consumption. Real animals are (disturbingly) sometimes seen in recent representations of cooking; they are no longer “absent referents,” in Adams’s phrase, when celebrity chefs murder them and eat them for television audiences. Here, too, there are strong links to gender, as slaughter is constructed as a quintessentially masculine endeavour.

Consumption of meat in Western culture is eroticized and gendered; it also entails the mass production and killing of enormous numbers of animals — the “death” of the subtitle. Species relations in intensive agriculture are, Cudworth argues, “co-constituted with systemic relations of capitalism and colonialism [as well as] through gendered relations” (109). Colonialism has long been apparent in meat production, as allegedly “superior” European breeds were used to usurp native breeds in many colonized countries; its current manifestation is in the new “cattle colonialism,” which facilitates the destruction of enormous swathes of rainforest. It is also manifest in the way that animal exploitation shifts between countries; as European legislation requires (marginally) better ways of keeping chickens, so economics will ensure that more chickens elsewhere will be kept in the worst and most industrialized conditions.

Drawing on interviews and textual analysis of people and organizations in meat production, Cudworth explores the interlinked ways in which agricultural animals are oppressed. She notes that the “intersection of capitalist, colonialist and patriarchal relations is particularly marked in the meat industry” (136), examining in particular the gendering of meat animals and human dominance. Not only is there a prevailing sexualized discourse among slaughterhouse workers, but there is a strong belief that it is a job for men; any woman doing so has to be “not like a woman at all,” as one informant told her. But this is only one aspect of the enormous machine that comprises

the global exploitation of animals for food. As Cudworth notes, at the same time that discourses of welfare proliferate around agricultural animals, so too do opportunities for greater oppression — the practice of intensive dairy farming is now being imported to the UK from the US practices of keeping cattle in enormous feedlots.

Her third case study concerns “love” — what many of us believe we feel in our close relations with companion species; these are animals whom we tend to treat as kin, whom we see most easily as “like us.” Many of these animals are cared for, treated respectfully — although many are not. And that goes to the heart of our ambivalence towards other animals: ultimately, we have power over these whom we claim to love — the power to create identities, the power to control their lives, and the power to take their lives away. Cudworth notes how our relationships with companion species in our households have changed historically, and draws on her own studies of humans living with dogs.

Although here, too, these interconnections are threaded through with wider exploitative relations, there are, she argues, important differences between companion and agricultural animals. Keeping animals is certainly a form of domination, but it is also one in which it can be easier to acknowledge the mindfulness of animal others. She suggests that

Companion species relations may be messy, compromised and fraught with relations of power which are not benign. However, whilst companion animals may be legally defined as property, there is much that goes on *in spite of the law.*” (151; emphasis in original)

Her point here is that in many accounts of the domination of companion animals, there is little possibility for their agency, little way of understanding (for example) how dogs themselves sought contact with humans and co-construct the daily relationships we have with them. Even training animals — a process which at one level may entail domination — needs animal cooperation for it to work well, a process of “training-with” rather than training-of.

People living with companion animals are living in mixed-species communities — cross-pack relations, in the words of Donna Haraway (2008) — which require those involved to make accommodations. And humans adjust as well as dogs, even if they do hold more power. In my household, a new arrival — a rescue lurcher called Honey —

means not only adjusting social dynamics between various humans and canines, but also physical adjustment in the form of higher shelves to hide grab-able food items. Like Cudworth's interviewees, we readily accommodate our house, and blame ourselves if our lunch goes missing. Like them, we all try to build cross-species communities in the house, or when out walking in the woods. Like them, we try to understand the mindedness of these nonhumans who share our lives.

And we can also share a recognition that our relationships with these dogs is indeed one enmeshed with structures of domination. "I am very much aware," said one of her interviewees, "that I have the power, I have the power in this relationship.... I don't want to abuse that power" (184). There can be love and companionship in our relationships with companion animals, just as there is a darker side, in the form of abuse and cruelty. Cudworth recognizes that not all readers will agree with her argument that some human-animal relationships can include affectional ties. But, she points out, it is vital that we understand that domination is not homogeneous — it can take different forms:

an adequate sociological understanding of systemic domination cannot elide different forms of domination and degrees of exploitation and oppression. Not all domination can be understood as the same quality. Negotiating species in daily lives, the dogs and humans in my study practise companionship.... [Perhaps these] relations between some humans and dogs are a glimpse of what can and might be, and a small opening into a world of potentially fruitful species co-habitations. (172)

Sociological inquiry has both elided forms of domination and paid insufficient heed to differences of species. Recent scholarly interest in human-animal relationships goes a long way to redressing this legacy... but does it go far enough? Throughout the book, Cudworth references Haraway's recent work on companion species, because of the way this prioritizes the "sticky knots" of our intertwined lives with these animals. Haraway's work is fundamentally important, Cudworth argues, because it emphasizes the social co-constitution of interspecies being.

Yet she is also throughout the book quite critical of Haraway, on the grounds that the latter's emphasis on naturecultures seriously underestimates the constitution of power, which structure our lives with other animals. She argues that Haraway

tells a partial story [in which] the wider context of human species

domination is left untheorized.... Domesticated animals exist in a context of dependency and social structures of human domination that Haraway significantly underplays both at the macro and micro level — co-constituted relations may also be those of inequality and oppression. (148)

There will inevitably be many readers who disagree with this critique, or who take issue with Cudworth's use of complexity theory. There will also be those for whom her relative optimism regarding human relationships with companion species is anathema, as she acknowledges. Yet for me, her detailed discussion of how our dominance of other species is constructed is critical. Relations of power are indeed fundamental to thinking about human relationships with other animals — even if, like Cudworth, we feel that some relationships also include affectional ties. On this point, I concur wholeheartedly, that we need to find more nuanced ways of understanding different forms of oppression and the circumstances in which they play out. Developing a sociology which is properly sensitive to species is crucial — social life is never, and has never been, exclusively human. But it is also a social life profoundly shaped by inequalities and suffering, appearing in myriad forms. This is why we need more inclusive sociology — and a more inclusive politics. Sex, death, and love do indeed permeate all our relationships with other animals: we kill many, we cause immense suffering — but sometimes, we look into animals' eyes and wonder just who is gazing back.

Note

*While that occasionally happens to humans, it is the apparent discardability of animals that I want to emphasize here.

Works Cited

Adams, Carol. *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. Cambridge: Polity, 1990.

Haraway, Donna M. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2008.

Nash, Jennifer C. "Re-thinking intersectionality." *Feminist Review* 89 (2008). 1–15.

Walby, Sylvia. *Globalization and Inequalities: Complexity and Contested Modernities*. London: Sage, 2009.