

**Boria Sax**

**“Listen to the Animals”: A Manifesto on Animal Husbandry**

Jocelyne Porcher. *Vivre avec les animaux: une utopie pour le xxi<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris: Éditions la Découverte/M.A.U.S.S., 2011. 162 pp. 15 €.

Today, in the words of Eric Eliason, “By any economic or physical health measures, the benefits to humans of domestication have been dubious at best, as any cat owner who racks up hundreds of dollars of veterinary and food bills a year, or any tourist watching thousands of cattle range unmolested at will downtown in any Indian city, or any vegetarian activist or college nutrition textbook reflecting on the relative calories per acre efficiency of any protein-rich crop plant versus any livestock species will tell you” (Eliason 34-36). If human beings are truly the “dominant animals,” why did they enter into relationships that, by any pragmatic measure, demanded so much and offered them so little?

Porcher's explanation in *vivre avec les animaux* is that the relationships in domestication, specifically in animal husbandry, are not utilitarian. This was, and remains, a way of life founded on reciprocity between people and animals. It was made possible by killing and eating animals, but that was not its major purpose. It offered people the satisfaction of living with the animals, communicating with them, and participating with them in common endeavors, while the animals gained a steady supply of food, protection against predators, and human companionship. The relative security enabled the animals to participate in human society, thus developing feelings and modes of perception that were previously inaccessible to them. The awareness of animals and their ways of responding, in turn, permeated human society.

If that seems paradoxical, it may be a bit less so if we consider that, as Porcher points out, virtually all domestic animals, including dogs and cats, are killed eventually by people. It is only being eaten that distinguishes pets from farm animals, and the act of eating a creature can entail a certain intimacy. In addition to enabling people to care for larger numbers of animals, use of animals as food brings a certain reciprocity to their relationship with people, which may be lacking with many pets. Perhaps most importantly, it acknowledges the integration of both people and their animals into the cycle of life and death, a subject that has now become repressed in much of human society.

The idea that the self is not entirely unitary is now commonplace, yet it is still usually developed only in highly abstract terms. Very few thinkers have explored the implications of that view with as much specificity as Porcher, who examines the consequences of intersubjectivity and distributed consciousness for human-animal relations. She does not take the individual for granted as the ultimate unit of fairness and reciprocity, nor as the only possible bearer of rights and obligations, and points out how those who work closely with animals, particularly non-industrial farmers, often feel at one with them.

One startling example of the bond between farmers and non-industrial animals is given by Alain Caille at the beginning of the introduction to Porcher's book. He reports that after the nuclear accident at Fukushima all people were ordered to evacuate the surrounding area, leaving 100,000 animals of traditional Japanese farmers. The farmers then, at very considerable risk to their lives, returned to feed their animals, knowing full well that none of the meat could be sold. The animals had originally been destined for the dinner plate, but abandoning them to starvation would, the farmers felt, be a violation of the reciprocity that lay at the heart of their relationship.

Porcher's vision of human animal relations governed by intersubjectivity has some resemblance to theories of a social contract, since much of its foundation lies in reciprocity. The underlying metaphor of a social contract, however, is a legal document, where terms are written out in specific detail and fixed until there is a formal modification. A relationship based on intersubjectivity, by contrast, is, like a human friendship or marriage, subject to continual change. For those who work very closely with animals, there can be a fusion of identity between human beings and their non-human companions.

Industrial farming was, in Porcher's view, not an extension of traditional animal husbandry but a new phenomenon. It mirrors and contributes to the objectification of both human beings and animals in the modern era. The industrialized farms are directed not toward producing animals but producing flesh, a goal that will find its ultimate consummation in the development of in vitro meat. Though they speak in the name of liberation rather than efficiency, many animal activists in promoting the development of in vitro meat align themselves with agribusinesses, to foster an industrial model and sever the bond between animals and human beings.

Porcher does not mention it, probably because her subject is farm animals rather than pets, but this parallels a development with companion animals. Digital animal

companions such as tamagotchis, petz, foopets, furbies, paroes, and so on, which their advocates claim can alleviate loneliness and improve health in much the same way as real ones, are gaining in popularity. Despite the increased attention given to human-animal relations by scholars over the past few decades, our bonds with animals are becoming increasingly remote, and could disappear entirely.

Yet Porcher remains optimistic. Since it is not the culmination of any particular logic of history, industrial agriculture may prove to be a transitory phenomenon. In an era when human beings often feel increasingly dependent on, and even dominated by, their machines, people may look increasingly to animals for emotional and spiritual support. As in the past, we will enter into new partnerships with other creatures, the terms of which are unpredictable. But the fundamental creativity, of both animals and human beings, at work in the development of these bonds gives ground for hope.

Porcher recommends that we abandon the distinction between nature and civilization, and with it the subsidiary distinctions between wild and domestic animals, as well pets, working animals, and livestock. These impose artificial structures on our relationships with other creatures, which prevent them from developing organically. Almost all other utopian visions are based on the assumption that human beings can control their own destiny, at least if they can summon sufficient force of will. This one, on the contrary, is based on the idea that we should give up control or, rather, the illusion of control. We should acknowledge that we are not, have never been, and never will be dominant. Our relations with animals and the environment are reciprocal, and we should “listen to the animals” for guidance.

And yet, like almost all other utopian visions, this one is open to charges of oversimplification, naiveté, and excessive romanticism. There are good reasons to believe, though Porcher suggests otherwise, that industrial reforms or vegetarianism may improve the lot of farm animals. A plausible case can be made for the usefulness of in vitro meat and, for that matter, digital pets. Though her analysis is quite specific in other respects, those who are drawn to political activism may regret the lack of a detailed program.

For anthrozoologists who are attracted to Porcher’s vision yet have reservations, this book will at least suggest a course of further study. A massive amount of scholarship over the past few decades has been devoted to the relations between people and pets, yet bonds between farmers or herders and their animals are widely assumed to be utilitarian and, therefore, ignored. Porcher has shown that these relations can be fully

as intimate and complex as those between human beings and “companion animals,” and, therefore, equally worthy of investigation.

### Work Cited

Eric A. Eliason, “Great Plains Coyote Coursing: Biofacts and a New Folkloristic Understanding of Animals,” *Wild Games: Hunting and Fishing Traditions in North America*, eds. Dennis Cutchins and Eric A. Eliason (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press: 2009).