Boria Sax

Jocelyne Porcher, an Introduction

A muscular man with a handlebar mustache enters the lion cage wearing trunks with a leopard skin pattern and holding only a whip. He cracks it; the big cats roar but always obey his command. The audience looks with a combination of awe, pride, and guilt. There is no more iconic an image of human dominance than the lion tamer in a Victorian circus. But the spectators are being fooled, for the lions, raised for several generations in a domestic setting, are hardly wilder than they. The tamer, who is also putting on an act, has worked out the routine in cooperation with his charges, whom he knows intimately, using sensitivity rather than force. Perhaps it is really the audience that is being dominated and controlled?

Many people now take it for granted that almost all relationships between human beings and animals in a household or a farm are based on dominance. This has been argued most systematically in Yi-Fu Tuan's book *Dominance and Affection*. Keith Thomas has shown in *Man and the Natural World* that symbolism of dominance pervaded English culture in the Early Modern Period, and Harriet Ritvo has demonstrated in *The Animal Estate* that this persisted through the Victorian era.

But one problem is that these authors do not define "dominance" very empirically, and that attribute may not be much more than a feeling. In narrative poetry of the European Middle Ages, the barnyard is often a site of merry adventures. The animals there are, by our contemporary standards, almost wild, and there is little or no suggestion of human domination. Human beings, at least in certain eras and places, may feel dominant, but does that necessarily mean they really are? And, by what criteria is dominance, if it is at all an objective condition, to be recognized or measured?

I myself more-or-less believed the dominance hypothesis for many years, but it now impresses me as a rather glib way to dismiss many complexities of human-animal relationships. In the view of many anthropologists, what we call "domestication" of animals such as the dog and sheep was originally not an assertion of human will but a symbiosis, which was probably mostly beyond the threshold of consciousness for all parties. In purely pragmatic terms, the initial benefits to the animals are far clearer than those to the human beings. The animals received a steady supply of food and protection from predators, but, when you consider the effort and resources we had to expend to maintain them, it is far less clear what was gained by people. If one can speak of "dominance" during the initial period of domestication at all, perhaps the animals rather than the people were on top.

Another development that places the dominance hypothesis in question is the digital revolution. Human beings may have created computers, yet they do not seem to elicit any sense of dominance in us. To the contrary, they are involved in decisions at every level, and we at

times feel that they are actually controlling our lives. What is true of machines might, at least in this case, be true of animals as well.

An alternative to the dominance hypothesis is provided by Jocelyne Porcher, an advocate of traditional farming. The idea that human identity is socially constructed around the imagery of animals ─ or, in the words of Paul Shepard, that "animals make us human" ─ is now almost a commonplace in anthrozoology. According to Porcher, the poetic construction of humankind is not accomplished simply through the contemplation of animals, but through the sort of intense, reciprocal interaction that takes place in traditional farming.

In the initial stages of the process of domestication, Porcher believes, what animals offered to human beings was primarily not a commodity such as food, but bestial companionship. Animals, for their part, received in addition to protection and food an opportunity to share some benefits of human society. The relationship was not based precisely on a "social contract" but more in the spirit of an exchange of gifts. Factory farming, in her view, is not an extension of traditional animal husbandry but a new phenomenon, in which relationships with animals have lost their reciprocity. Once mutuality is restored, however, the relationships between animals and human beings will not simply return to an earlier era but will continue to evolve, as they always have, in ways that reflect the creativity of all parties.

Some of these ideas may sound idiosyncratic to readers in the English-speaking world, but that is at least in part because they arise out of an unfamiliar intellectual tradition ─ anthropozoology (*anthropozoologie*). This is a discipline devoted to human-animal relations that developed primarily in France, parallel to, but largely independently of, anthrozoology/animal studies in the English-speaking world. The French discipline is probably a little older than its Anglo-American counterparts. Its major journal, *Anthropozoologica*, began publication in 1984, three years before *Anthrozoös*, which was the arguably first journal centered on human-animal relations in the English speaking world.

Much of the impetus for anthropozoology goes back to the work of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, and it was profoundly influenced by the work of historian Robert Delort. It has also been somewhat impacted by the work of American Donna Haraway, but by very few other thinkers of the Anglophone world. Anthropozoology also shows little direct impact of the more familiar authors that we in the English-speaking world associate with "French theory" such as Jacques Derrida and Michael Foucault. The most influential representatives of anthropozoology today include Bruno Latour, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Philippe Descola, along with Porcher herself.

My hope is that Porcher's ideas may inspire more investigation into human-animal relationships, including that of more traditional farmers with their livestock, which have received far less scholarly attention than the bonds between people and their pets. Whether or

not we agree with Porcher's ideas, I believe they could add vigor to the somewhat moribund state of animal studies today.

One big limitation of animal studies so far, as Richard Bulliet has shown in *Hunters, Herders and Hamburgers*, is that its foundation is profoundly embedded in the history, culture, and philosophy of the English-speaking world, to a point where it can often impress people elsewhere as an expression of cultural imperialism. If, as many anthropologists now maintain, culture consists not simply of relations among human beings but also animals and vegetation, we should be especially careful that, in eagerness to move beyond anthropocentrism, we do not unknowingly embrace an ethnocentric perspective.

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