

Species Trouble?

Queering the Human Subject through an Analysis of Human-Animal Intimacies

Intellectual Context

In 'The Companion Species Manifesto' Donna Haraway (2003) develops the radical argument that humans and animals, rather than being essentially distinct and separate, are in fact the mutually constituted products of a long and complex historical co-evolution. And yet the role of animals in social life has only begun to be recognised as sociologically significant in the last 30 years. With deep and diverse historical roots in Ancient Greek philosophy, Enlightenment rationalism and religious ontologies, the entrenched binary between humans and animals has largely been reproduced in modern social scientific discourse (Noske, 1996; Sanders, 2006). Bryant's highly influential work on 'the zoological connection' (1979) marked a turning point, arguing that animals are deeply immersed in human culture and social life, and that a sociology which fails to consider the complex intertwining of human and non-human lives is therefore necessarily incomplete. More recent developments in the burgeoning field of human-animal studies have gone further, turning increasingly towards post-humanism, a theoretical heir to critical theory and poststructuralism, centrally concerned with disrupting the ontological, epistemic and ethical boundary between humans and animals that is intrinsic to humanist-modernist discourse (Wolfe, 2009). Post-humanist thought works through the implications of recognising that the boundary between humanity and its 'others' is itself a socio-cultural accomplishment which must be perpetually maintained and policed. Mary Douglas (1966) famously explored the role of notions of purity and taboo in the construction of boundaries, and the moral implications of 'boundary pollution' through engaging with forms of 'dirt'. I believe that this insight can be extended to shed light upon the ways in which the human/animal boundary is policed in order to maintain the purity of humanist notions of human identity. By critically engaging with those moments where the human/animal distinction is most strictly policed, the intricacies and inconsistencies of humanist categories can be brought to the fore.

Research Project Outline

Recent empirical studies point to nascent post-humanist relationships at work in the everyday practices of pet-keeping. Although the institution of pet-keeping is wrapped up with notions of ownership, the lived reality of human-pet relationships points to an ongoing intersubjective negotiation of human and animal identities (Fox, 2006: 526). For Rebekah Fox it is the uniquely 'liminal' position (2006: 526) of animals – and pets in particular – on the boundary between nature and culture, that makes this inter-species 'identity work' both possible and necessary. Yet Charles and Davies (2008) found that pet-owners are often reluctant to report the depth of their attachments to pets, an apprehension that can be understood as a struggle to manage the blurring of species boundaries in a public context and culture which maintains that the boundary is 'natural', non-negotiable and bound up with codes of morality and hygiene (Charles and Davies, 2008; Fox, 2006). Such analyses of human-animal kinship and the negotiation of the human/animal binary in pet-keeping are limited, however, as long as they fail to fully acknowledge that pet-keeping is itself located at the more socially-acceptable pole of a wider continuum of forms of human-animal intimacy (Knight, 2005).

In social studies of human sexuality, sex is viewed not as something discrete and bounded, but instead as intrinsically bound up with broader relations of interpersonal intimacy with which it overlaps, the boundaries between sex and 'non-sex' being ambivalent, shifting and contestable (Jamieson, 2011; Butler, 1990, 1993). Yet to follow through the implications of the same logic for close relations between humans and animals is highly transgressive, taboo, and very nearly unspeakable. Dekker makes explicit the troubling step that such illicit intimacies imply: '...if you drop the requirement that for sexual contact something has to be inserted somewhere...and it is sufficient simply to cuddle, to derive a warm feeling from each other, to kiss perhaps at times, in

brief to love, then bestiality is not a deviation but the general rule, not even shameful but the done thing. After all, who does not wish to be called an animal lover?' (Dekker, 2000: 149).

Indeed among online communities of those interested in sex with animals, a distinction is often invoked 'between animal abusers (bestialists) and those who are zoophiles' (Alvarez and Freinhar, 1991, cited in Jenkins and Thomas, 2004: 6), who portray themselves as 'harmless and caring' (Jenkins and Thomas, 2004: 2). Whilst such distinctions are by no means unproblematic, given that similar distinctions are sometimes made in an attempt to legitimise or excuse child abuse, they do nevertheless highlight and trouble the highly charged conceptual and moral boundaries between acceptable and forbidden intimacies.

My thesis will take a critical and post-humanist approach to the phenomenon of bestiality in order to trace and problematise the normative assumptions surrounding human-animal intimacies. The focus will be upon exploring how discourses of morality, purity and 'the natural' operate in order to regulate, discipline and police human interactions with animals. The central contention underpinning the project is that in order to understand bestiality as a socio-cultural phenomenon which is the subject of extremely powerful taboo – and where the policing of the human/animal boundary is therefore at its sharpest – it is necessary to situate it not just in terms of deviance but instead within the wider context of human-animal intimacies. The thesis should not however be misconstrued as advocacy for bestiality, but instead as an agnostic attempt to trace how notions of human autonomy and superiority are affirmed through practices of simultaneously physical, biological and moral boundary-maintenance. The 'hard case' of bestiality also promises to reveal how the human/animal boundary is intricately bound up with the discursive and bio-political regulation of human sexuality, pleasure and desire (Foucault, 1976/1984).

Post-humanist theory will inform my analysis, which will fall primarily into the interdisciplinary field of human-animal studies and the sociology of human-animal relations. However, the research will also draw upon broader influences, such as Judith Butler's deconstruction of sex/gender binaries and her analysis of their 'performance' as 'natural' (1990). As Brown and Rasmussen point out, 'Examining the discourses around bestiality queers the boundary between nature and culture and the role that the current rhetoric surrounding bestiality plays in the construction of human superiority' (2010:172). My thesis will therefore be situated in the empirical and theoretical gap that currently exists between studies of human-animal relations and studies of personal relations, intimacy and sexuality. As such it will draw upon currents from the sociology of intimate relations and personal life as well as the sociology of human-animal relations.

Methodology

Due to the powerful taboo surrounding bestiality, ethnographic and observational methods would present too many ethical and methodological problems to be useful in this study. My primary methods for accessing the discourses surrounding bestiality will therefore be documentary historiography, discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis. I will conduct a critical post-humanist analysis of a range of documentary sources. Media sources such as newspapers will be useful in assessing the way in which cases are framed such as to contribute towards the moral panic that almost inevitably surrounds reports of bestiality. Further, a critical examination of laws around bestiality and their temporal and spatial variations will also enable me to explore the role of law in regulating human-animal intimacy and policing the species boundary. Finally, as hinted by Charles and Davies (2008), viewing fairytales and myths as social artifacts can provide interesting insights due to their tendency to experiment with the species boundary. For example, intimacy between species is sometimes portrayed in such cultural forms as transformative or restorative (kissing a frog), or the embodiment of animal features are seen as an integral part of the sexual power that certain supernatural beings possess over humans (sirens). A critical examination of these different types of documents will allow

me to trace the operation of social discourses of bestiality on different cultural levels, helping me to explore their overlaps, tensions and contradictions.

It will also be important to include an historical dimension to the research, exploring how socio-cultural changes in the conceptions of animals evolved into those held today. I will gather historical as well as contemporary documents in order to facilitate this. Finally, I will also use qualitative interviews to examine how human-animal intimacies are experienced and spoken about by pet-owners, accessing participants through a purposive sample of respondents recruited through pet-centered spaces such as pet shows, clubs or shops. Selection will be guided by the principles of theoretical sampling, aiming to ensure that selected participants are enthusiastic about their pets and likely to experience the sorts of intimacy that would be useful and revealing in a post-humanist analysis.

Research Environment

The sociology department at the University of Manchester is an exciting research environment for me, as it is through engaging with the teaching and research of Dr. Richie Nimmo that I have been able to develop my interest and ideas at undergraduate level. His ongoing contributions to post-humanist thought and the sociology of human-animal relations have provided fertile ground for me to develop a fascination with an area of research that I consider to be able to offer valuable contributions towards the development of sociology. In his book 'Milk, Modernity and The Making Of The Human: Purifying The Social' (2010), Nimmo explores how historical attempts to eradicate disease in the dairy industry were bound up with a wider socio-cultural effort to purify the category of the 'human' and maintain the modern distinction between culture and nature, human and animal. Further, the Morgan Centre at the University of Manchester specialises in the sociology of personal life and intimate relations, which again is highly relevant for my proposed project. I understand that Professor Jennifer Mason has previously supervised an ERSC Quota Award funded PhD project involving human-animal relations to successful completion; Rebecca Tipper's 'Creaturely Encounters: an ethnographic study of human-animals relations in a British Suburban Neighbourhood'. Being part of such an appropriate research environment will prove invaluable in nurturing my theoretical and methodological capabilities and in helping me to negotiate the challenging sociological territory marked out by my project.

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