
Book Review

ARNOLD ARLUKE AND CLINTON R. SANDERS

Regarding Animals

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Arluke and Sanders begin *Regarding Animals* by noting correctly that sociologists have been largely silent on issues of nonhuman animals and society. This silence is particularly problematic, given that the discipline is sometimes considered subversive for its propensity to debunk commonly accepted interpretations of social relations and challenge established power relationships (Giddens, 1987). Although sociological analysis has illuminated the nature and etiology of the oppression of devalued groups, its single focus has been the human animal. The commonly accepted definition of sociology as “the scientific study of *human* social behavior” (Theodorson & Theodorson, 1969, emphasis added) reinforces Noske’s contention that the social sciences are blatantly anthropocentric (Noske, 1992). It is thus important that Arluke and Sanders have stepped forward to consider human approaches to animals from a sociological vantagepoint.

Although Arluke and Sanders criticize the fact that most sociological research is anthropocentric, their exploration of human-animal relationships focuses on how humans interpret their relationships with animals. “This book ... is not about animals *per se* but about how humans regard them in modern Western societies” (p. 4). While the authors “bring animals to the center” (p. 1), *homo sapiens* thus remains at the core.

The authors spend considerable time discussing the value of ethnographic research, and they suggest that the ethnographic method may be a valuable tool for examining the subjective experience of animals. While they do not carry out such studies here, they emphasize that the interpretations of the subjective experiences of animals that their human subjects offer are important and valid.

The first of several essays based on ethnographic research takes the reader inside a veterinary hospital and examines ways in which people give voice to their dogs’ afflictions and interests. While many scientists deny the existence of evidence of an animal mind, people with companion animals clearly view animals

as having consciousness and engaging in purposeful behavior. (Sanders notes that such human efforts to understand and convey the experience of animals have obvious benefits in assisting a veterinarian in diagnosis and treatment.) The essay then takes the reader to a guide dog training program, where the trainers view the dogs in a dualistic fashion. On the one hand, a dog is “a machine that runs on objectifiable behavioristic principles” (p. 74). On the other hand, however, in the course of training, each dog is recognized as an individual possessing a personality -- an acknowledgement that is important if each dog is to be trained effectively. Arluke and Sanders maintain that such contradictions are common in human approaches to nonhuman animals.

This theme reappears in the next chapter, which explores how employees of an animal shelter interpret and cope with the most difficult facet of their job -- euthanasia. Shelter employees are not unsympathetic to the plight of the large numbers of cats and dogs whom they routinely kill. By emotionally distancing themselves from the animals and focusing on being technically proficient, they try to make the death of each animal as comfortable as possible both for themselves and for the animals. The staff blame the killings on the “owners” who act in irresponsible ways by discarding the animals and allowing them to breed.

The next essay chillingly chronicles the pathology and brutality that arise from the extreme inequality of power in a research laboratory. Social scientists familiar with the characteristics of what Goffman calls the “total institution” (1961) might well consider whether animal research laboratories should be added to the list. Arluke’s examination of a second research laboratory shows that a sensitive laboratory manager and a carefully selected, trained, and supervised staff can ameliorate some of the overtly cruel treatment of the animals.

In a historical study, Arluke suggests that one of the most blatant examples of contradictory human attitudes towards animals was the Nazis’ promulgation of animal protection laws at the same time that they were torturing and murdering millions of human beings. Arluke uncovers anecdotal evidence that some high-level Nazis cared greatly for animals, particularly their dogs, and thus supported animal welfare. However, he also suggests animal protection laws served as ideological tools to elevate the perceived moral status of the Aryans while maligning the Jewish people, who were characterized as the enemies of animals. Due in part to Arluke’s numerous examples of the Nazi devaluation of people of Jewish descent through comparison with animals, this reader came away believing Nazi concern for animals was only superficial.²

In sum, *Regarding Animals* represents a good step into interspecies relations for sociology. The authors provide important insights into the underlying sociological dynamics of animal-human relations and the ensuing power imbalance and oppression. However, due to the the book's focus on humans' experience of animals, the full potential of sociological analysis is not brought to bear. A broadening of the discipline's exclusive focus on human relations to include a non-anthropocentric approach to relations between human and nonhuman animals would spark the sociological imagination and vastly enlarge the scope of the the field.

Notes

1. Direct all correspondence to the author at the Department of Sociology, Wittenberg University, Springfield, OH 45501.
2. This essay first appeared as a commentary in *Anthrozoos* (Arluke & Sax, 5, [1992], pp. 6-31), and sparked a number of related commentaries, both supportive and critical (see *Anthrozoos*, 6, [1993], pp. 72-114).

References

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- Theodorson, G.A. & Theodorson, A.G. (1969). *Modern dictionary of sociology*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, p. 401.