

BOOK REVIEW SECTION

ADRIAN FRANKLIN. *Animals and Modern Cultures: A Sociology of Human-Animal Relations in Modernity*. London: SAGE. 1999. pp. 213.

I write at the height of what is proving to be the worst outbreak of foot and mouth disease ever to have struck the United Kingdom. For the vast majority of the inhabitants of these islands, myself included, this is unknown territory. It is clear, however, that public attitudes toward animal foods, the farming practices that produce them, and the farming countryside never will be the same again.

The media, for once, have been caught off guard. Most media people know little or nothing about animal husbandry and are as perplexed as everyone else about how this thing has hit us, what we can do about it, and what the long-term consequences will be. Even politicians have proceeded with uncharacteristic caution and have not queued up - as they invariably do in response to less ambiguous disasters - to be filmed on location, "seeing for themselves."

The reasons for the ambiguity are plain enough. Here is a disease that, thankfully, does not affect humans and that, for afflicted nonhuman animals, is no more life threatening than a nasty bout of flu would be for us. Almost all would survive and, in time, make a full recovery. Yet, tens of thousands of healthy animals suspected of having been in contact with the disease are being slaughtered and burned on huge pyres.

Yesterday, on a flight from London to my home in Aberdeen, I could see some of these smoking fires dotted around the countryside. It was an eerie sight. Had I been on the ground, I first would have been assaulted by what, according to local residents, is an appalling smell. I would have breathed smoke heavily contaminated by dioxins and other highly toxic substances produced by burning fires constructed from piles of old bitumen-coated railway sleepers and ignited with kerosene, creosote, and red diesel. Meanwhile, huge burial trenches are being dug to take thousands more carcasses whose rotting wastes are bound, in the course of time, to infiltrate ground-water supplies.

Apart from poisoning the environment, these experiments in the mass destruction of animals, along with largely pointless restrictions on human movement, are bringing hardship and misery to countless rural dwellers and farming families. Moreover, they have all but killed off the tourist industry, which, for years, has brought in vastly more revenue to the countryside and to the nation than has farming. Consequently, many small, rural enterprises will go out of business.

This, however, does not concern the dominant players in Britain's livestock industry. They will be compensated for their slaughtered animals on terms so generous that some farmers have been rumored - in hope of making a financial killing - to have deliberately exposed their stock to infection. Their one concern is to regain the "disease-free" status that qualifies their herds for the export market. Nothing - not the welfare of animals, nor the livelihoods of non-farming rural people, nor the composition of the rural landscape, nor the future health and well-being of those destined to live in it - is to stand in the way of this one, overriding, and purely economic objective. Not for the first time, the livestock industry, already heavily subsidized, holds the rest of the country to ransom. It is a spectacle that people who once made a living from other industries such as textiles, coal mining, iron and steel, and shipbuilding, which in their time also have been decimated but received no such support from the public purse, view with understandable bitterness. Why, they ask, should we have to pay such a heavy price to rescue the livestock industry from a crisis largely of its own making and fueled by its own greed?

Apart from farmers, only one constituency - yet more marginal in terms of wealth generation - stands to gain from the current crisis. I refer to academic social scientists. They must be rubbing their hands with glee at the prospect of more "environmentally relevant" research. In the next few years, applications for grants to study the perceptions, impacts, and consequences of foot and mouth disease may be expected to soar. Not since the death of Princess Diana has social science been handed such a bonanza! Anyone contemplating a study of this kind, however, would be well advised to begin by reading Adrian Franklin's *Animals and Modern Cultures* - from cover to cover. Although the book makes no mention of foot and mouth - published in 1999, it refers to literature up to two years previously - it anticipates with almost uncanny accuracy the simmering tumult of conflicting motives, fears, sensibilities, and passions that the foot and mouth outbreak has brought dramatically to the boil.

Many of these, of course, already were inflamed by continuing public anxieties over "mad cow disease" (BSE), the interminable debate over fox hunting with hounds, and the uses of animals in biomedical procedures. In the past, as Franklin shows, a carefully constructed barrier of state regulation, backed by tight legislation and an effective regime of controls and inspections, saved consumers from connecting living animals - grazing in the pasture or farmyard - with the meat they purchased, cooked and ate, thus preserving "a highly sanitized version of rural idyll and contentment" (p. 173).

One of the effects of the foot and mouth outbreak and, before that, of the BSE scare, has been to focus public attention on what goes on between the green field and the

dinner table. Many were shocked by what they saw: animals fed with swill that included offal, bone-meal, and leftovers from local restaurants and school kitchens; pumped with growth hormones and antibiotics; transported over long distances squashed together in trucks and trailers; and slaughtered in abattoirs that routinely flouted basic rules of hygiene. They saw a run-down and under-resourced veterinary service and inspectorate unable to stay abreast of the problem. Behind all these was the relentless drive of large supermarket chains to deliver ever-cheaper meat to consumers.

Until now, the majority of consumers have been ready to bury their misgivings and take advantage of the cut-priced foods available. This is about to change. With better access to information, an increasingly discerning public no longer equates eating meat with health and vitality, and meat competes for attention with a host of other culinary delights on a greatly diversified palette. As Franklin observes (p. 174), meat has “reverted to the status of an indulgence food,” much as it was for the people of medieval Europe.

In the wake of the BSE crisis, eating meat (not just beef, but any kind) is seen as an inherently risky enterprise. Of course, risk is an obsession of our time. People have little faith in scientists who claim to know what is safe for them to do and even less in politicians who profess that they act on these scientists’ advice. Across contemporary western societies, the promulgation of certainties, authorized by science and enforced by the state, has given way to risk identification and assessment. Naturally, the more one tries to identify risks, the more risks one finds. This multiplication of risks has been matched only by the contraction or collapse of the regulatory institutions for keeping them at bay. This combination of risk proliferation and regulatory attrition leads to successive crises of the kind experienced today.

Within the space of a generation, the image of farmers as the custodians of a wholesome way of life and of valued rural landscapes has given way to their representation as destroyers of the countryside who - armed with heavy machinery, toxic chemicals, and, most recently, genetically modified strains - have ridden roughshod over the order of nature in a desperate battle to realize a marginal profit for their businesses. As a result, questions once thought unthinkable now are asked openly. Why do we need all these animals anyway? Why does the countryside need to be populated by such large numbers of cattle, sheep, and pigs?

To be sure, were the animals removed, much neatly cropped grassland soon would revert to scrub and secondary forest. Tourist managers in the English Lake District, one of the country’s most scenic regions, have expressed alarm at proposals for a

mass cull of sheep to control the spread of foot and mouth, already rampant elsewhere in Cumbria. They predict that the grassy valleys and hillsides admired by countless visitors soon would disappear for ever, replaced by an ugly tangle of woodland and thorny vegetation. Of course, there is nothing "natural" about these present landscapes. They are, as Franklin notes (p. 59), "eroded and wasted" and look beautiful to us only because we are heirs to a Romantic movement that developed an aesthetic taste for bare and rugged hills.

A younger generation who - brought up on Darwin instead of Wordsworth - experience nature largely as roadside cuttings, industrial wasteland, and unkempt back yards, might find more interest and enjoyment in a tangled bank than a grassy hillside. I remember such banks from my childhood, sources of endless fascination and alive with creatures, several of whom are now rare, eliminated by the ruthlessly homogenizing practices of modern agribusiness. Indeed, many urban environments may now be home to a greater diversity of animal and plant life than rural ones. An abandoned countryside - devoid of farmers and their livestock, their chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and their heavy machinery - might look messy but would be incomparably richer in the variety of its fauna and flora. If Franklin is right, and I think he is, this "messy" view of nature is more in line with contemporary sensibilities than the carefully manicured rural landscape of old, in which interactions with animals were confined to a rather narrow range of species, each with its allotted role to play in the overall, picturesque scene.

People want more, not fewer, contacts with animals, but they want these contacts to be with as many different kinds of animals as possible, not just with traditionally "loveable" varieties. A need for stable companionship in a world where people face chronic "ontological insecurity" in their relationships with human others fuels this aspiration. In addition, it is driven by a genuine curiosity and concern to appreciate animals for who they are - as animals, not as surrogate humans (p. 86).

Much has been written of the modern and, some say, increasingly relentless tendency to treat animals anthropomorphically - a symptom of the ever-widening gap between humanity and nature. In reality, Franklin suggests, the trend may be in just the opposite direction. People are increasingly aware of the extent to which they share their life-worlds with members of other species. They recognize that the needs and interests of these creatures - though different - may not necessarily conflict with their own, and they are actively exploring possibilities for empathy, mutuality, and coexistence. This runs directly counter to the kind apartheid preached by some advocates of animal rights - based on the misanthropic premise that any form of immediate human participation in the lives of animals is bound to be destructive for the latter.

Popular support for animal rights organizations does not, according to Franklin, reflect any widespread enthusiasm for this position. It indicates merely a willingness of people who are fond of animals, to “go out of their way to assist those who appear to be fighting on their behalf” (p. 188). People want to form closer, more meaningful ties with animals, not keep a respectful distance from them.

Along with risk and ontological insecurity, Franklin regards misanthropy as one of three tendencies that frame postmodernity. On this score, however, his account is inconsistent. The view, as he puts it (p. 3), that “humans are a destructive, pestilent species, mad and out of control,” while “animals are essentially good, balanced and sane,” is not new. It has been around for generations and was firmly established in popular consciousness long before the first cracks began to appear in the edifice of modernity. If anything, Franklin’s findings point in the opposite direction: Namely, people no longer are prepared to abide by simplistic moral dichotomies but are seeking more creative, diverse, and flexible ways of relating to the world around them - including its animal inhabitants. Misanthropy, while reversing the moral valence of humanity and animality, sustains and reinforces the boundary between them. As Franklin convincingly shows, however, this boundary and, with it, the division between society and nature, are being challenged and dismantled in the postmodern world.

Inevitably, a book such as this is situated in, and contributes to, the very social and historical movement it seeks to analyze. Its studied reflexivity chimes with the self-absorption of the age. Future scholarship will look back on the book as an index of how changing attitudes to animals and to nature in general have fed into the discipline of sociology and influenced its theories and concepts.

For me, this was most apparent in Franklin’s critique - which appears sporadically throughout the book - of the doctrine of social constructionism. Relations with animals and the meanings that people claim to find in them, according to this doctrine, are but symbolic projections, onto animal others, of an order whose source lies in the domain of human relations. To take such a position, however, is to deny that people can engage in any deep, meaningful, or genuinely affective way with the animals with whom they share their lives and, often, their homes. It is to deny, conversely, that animals can have similarly intense experiences of their engagement with humans. Animals, in this view, cannot participate in the constitution of the social world but only can stand in, metaphorically or metonymically, for human social realities. Whereas humans construct, animals are constructed. Social constructionism, it appears, is just another way of shoring up the society/nature dichotomy. Yet, if the latter is to be dismantled, in line with the contemporary critique of modernism, then the logic of the former also falls apart. The implications are radical. A future sociology will have to

recognize (as social anthropology has already begun to do) that social relations are not, exclusively, *human* relations.

This book is not, however, conceived primarily as a contribution to theory. Although Franklin singles out certain authors for criticism, he has no theoretical ax to grind. Rather, he presents a balanced and informed account of the ways in which animals have been observed (in zoos and safari parks), kept (as companions), hunted or fished (for sport and recreation), farmed (for meat) and championed (by advocates of animal rights). He focuses almost exclusively on western societies, primarily in Britain, North America, and Australia. Very different stories, I suspect, might be told of the development of human-animal relations in other, nominally “modern” societies, for example, Spain, Argentina, Russia, or Japan.

Despite an historical introduction, largely based on the works of Thomas, Elias, and Ritvo, the temporal depth of the book is shallow. Admittedly, as Franklin recognizes (p. 32), the impossibility of witnessing the past *practice* of human-animal relations hampers their historical study. We can access them only indirectly, as reflected in theological, scientific, philosophical, and ethical writings. However, it would be unfortunate if a myopic concern with the supposed demise of modernity in the western world toward the close of the twentieth century were to eclipse a more long-term and geographically inclusive vision. In recent years, the discipline of sociology virtually has reinvented itself as the study of the transition from modernity to postmodernity in western cultures, and Franklin’s book is no exception. Yet, what it seems to show is that this much-vaunted transition is little more than a cover for the realization that, on a more fundamental level, none of us ever were truly modern in the first place.

Within its limitations, however, and despite a virtually useless index, this is a very good book. The author is exceptionally well informed. He writes incisively in a style that - refreshingly free from the usual sociological jargon - will make his work accessible to a broad inter-disciplinary readership. Even when touching on some of the most emotive topics of contemporary debate, Franklin manages to keep his head. As anyone who has entered these muddy waters knows, this is no mean achievement.

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