Social-Political Animals: Humans and Non-Humans in Early-Modern Society
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Presented at FORWARD Symposium, Nottingham Trent University, 28 May 2008.
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History: the human experience
Obtain a unique insight into the richness and variety of history via the human experience

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This is from the homepage of a history department.

History: the human experience.

To represent the human experience, there’s a bit of the Bayeux tapestry. But right there in the middle there’s a horse. It’s almost too convenient to be true…

This shows that animals are always there in history even if you try to ignore them. But it’s been all too easy to avoid mentioning them.
Non-human animals were a major part of early modern society and economy. That’s so obvious that it tends to be taken for granted. Taking things for granted is a necessary evil in writing history. We can’t write about everything all the time. Every work has to exclude more than it includes. But it’s not healthy if everyone takes the same things for granted. There was a time when most historians weren’t interested in race, class, gender, or sexuality. Those things supposedly didn’t need explaining because “that’s just how it was”. Now lots of researchers are interested in how differences between people were constructed.

The next step is to look at how differences between humans and non-humans were constructed. These differences aren’t necessarily obvious or natural. They can be just as ideological as race, class or gender.

Different cultures in different times have had very different views of the relationship between humans and animals. In early-modern Europe all non-human species tended to be lumped together into one big category. They were different from humans, and inferior to humans.

The most sophisticated form of this idea was the Great Chain of Being, which a lot of you are probably familiar with.
This doesn’t logically lead to a rigid physical boundary between human and non-human. There was supposed to be a scale of infinitely small gradations. The big division is between physical and spiritual beings. Everything above the red line has a soul. Everything below the line doesn’t. Humans are in a unique position because they’re physical and spiritual at the same time. They just happened to draw the line below spiritual and not above physical, which is quite convenient.
It’s debatable whether most people thought about the Chain of Being much or understood the philosophy behind it. But most people would have known from Genesis that god put man in charge of all the animals.

This opposition between human and animal was dominant in Europe, but things were different in other parts of the world.

Virginia Anderson has written a really good book on animals in early America. She suggests that Native Americans didn’t lump all non-human animals into one category. They don’t even seem to have had a word for “animal”. They made more of a distinction between different species but less distinction between the material and the spiritual. They still exploited animals, but their exploitation had different meanings and justifications. Some animals and their spirit guardians might be seen as equal or superior to humans. The biggest difference was that they had no concept of animals as private property. None of this is any more strange or wrong than what Europeans thought at the same time.

Cultural historians and literary critics have been increasingly interested in how the idea of the human was constructed. That fits in well with studies of how differences between humans were constructed. It’s not unusual to find every other kind of Other being compared to animals. In early modern England, women, children, foreigners, Catholics, and the lower classes could all be described as bestial. This is what Bruce Boehrer called relative anthropocentrism: that is humans are better than animals, but some people are more human than others. At the most extreme this becomes pseudospeciation: out-groups are treated as a completely different species.
It’s not really unusual to find different kinds of Others being mixed up. But mixing up animals and humans is arguably the most powerful form of Othering: they are not just different or inferior kinds of human, they’re not really human at all.

In early modern society the lower classes weren’t just described as animals or compared to animals. They were often treated like animals in practice. People of low status were subjected to corporal punishments like whipping. High status people usually weren’t. The gentry were very keen to exempt themselves from whipping. So poor people were being treated more like animals than like rich people.

Some punishments were very heavily gendered. The scold’s bridle symbolized the idea that women were like animals, because horses were made to wear bits and bridles. But there was also the practical effect that the bridle stopped a woman from speaking. Speech was said to be one of the main things that set humans apart from all other animals. By taking away her power of speech the bridle made a woman more bestial in practice as well as in theory.

In the chain of being, animals were used as symbols to represent order and hierarchies. It was used to justify human hierarchies as much as difference between humans and animals. The Chain of Being wasn’t necessarily talked about a lot in England. This picture is actually from Italy.

But there are similar arguments about natural hierarchies in the homily of obedience. The differences between kings and subjects, rich and poor, husbands and wives, were supposedly just as natural and god-given as the difference between humans and animals. If the natural order was broken the consequences would be disastrous. Nobody’s life, family or property would be secure.
To some people that seemed to have come true in the civil wars.

Here we can see animals being used to represent disorder.

But there’s more to this than symbols and metaphors. Karl Steel recently published an article called “How to Make a Human”. It’s mostly about medieval texts but there’s a really important idea in it that we might be able to apply to other periods: the human wasn’t just constructed by imagining differences between humans and animals. Humans needed to prove their humanity by dominating animals in reality. Karl mostly focused on hunting: the right to hunt animals defines
humans. If people are denied the right to hunt, their humanity is being taken away from them.

We can apply this model to property rights as well as hunting. Owning and controlling animals was part of what it meant to be human. Focusing on animals helps us to see property rights as something arbitrary. It opens up questions about how they were constructed.

Property is an important part of social-political history. Competition for resources has a big influence on societies.

Animals were part of this competition in three ways:

- First, they were exploited as resources themselves. Domestic animals were owned as property. Wild animals were hunted and killed.
- Second, their labour helped humans to produce and transport resources. Horse power was a huge part of agriculture and industry. Jason Hribal has even argued that animals are part of working class.
- Third, they competed for resources because animals needed to eat too. Domestic animals had to be fed. Wild animals and birds might eat crops or kill domestic livestock.

Because of this competition for resources, animals were often at the centre of disputes over enclosure. There were different ways it could work, depending on what kind of enclosure it was.

Often common pastures were enclosed to make private arable fields for the benefit of wealthier farmers. Poorer cottagers and their animals lost their grazing rights. One way
that enclosure rioters could strike back was by driving their animals onto the enclosed fields. Steve Hindle provides some good examples of this from the dispute over Caddington Common in Bedfordshire in the 1630s. In this case some fairly large farmers were opposed to the enclosure. At times they drove over 100 sheep onto the fields. This signified the idea that these fields should be common pastures. It also had a serious material impact. Grazing animals destroyed growing crops. Losing crops had a financial impact on the landowners. But there’s also the fact that these sheep needed to eat. Disputes over rights and tradition were also disputes over resources. The rioters gained by feeding their sheep on resources which the landlords claimed ownership of. So it’s not just semiotics: the fields effectively had been turned back into common pastures for a short time.

Another way that rioters attacked landowners was by cutting the harnesses of their plough horses. That denied the owners control of their horses in real and symbolic terms. And it made it more difficult for them to plough the land.

In other places things were different. Landlords sometimes enclosed common arable fields and turned them into pastures. Land that was previously used to grow food for people was now being used to feed sheep. Steve Hindle’s work on the Midland Rising suggests that the rioters resented being treated worse than sheep. There was obviously a symbolic dimension to this: privileging sheep over people upset the Chain of Being and dehumanized the commoners. But it was closely linked with material things. There were real sheep occupying the land and literally taking food out of the commoners’ mouths.
Wild animals could also be at the centre of disputes. The right to hunt deer was restricted to the elite in theory. Inviting people to hunt on their land or giving gifts of venison were special favours. That reinforced social networks and hierarchies. Hunting is the very thing which Karl Steel points to as defining humanity. So it could be said that by controlling access to their deer the elite assumed the authority to make people more human or less human. But controlling deer was easier said than done. In practice it was very hard to stop poachers.

Poaching was an obvious competition for resources. Elite landowners tried to deny lower class people access to venison, but poachers took it anyway. Some incidents were much more destructive than normal poaching. Dan Beaver’s article on the Great Deer Massacre is all about a feud between the Earl of Middlesex and his neighbours. The feud culminated with the killing of hundreds of deer on the Earl’s land. This was a calculated insult to the Earl. Deer and hunting were linked with honour and status. So attacking the deer was a way of undermining the Earl’s status. As part of this symbolic attack, the deer were rounded up and slaughtered en masse like cattle instead of being hunted. On the material side, the deer were dead and the Earl couldn’t benefit from them any more. That undermined his position in a very real way by reducing his wealth and power.

It’s important to note that although there was a lot of disorder in early-modern England, it was quite rare for rioters to physically attack members of the elite. They might say that they wanted to, but they very rarely did it. There are lots of possible reasons for that but I’d like to suggest an extra one. It could be that by attacking the landlord’s animals but not the landlord himself, rioters were trying to shift the animal-human boundary back in their favour. I don’t want to push
that idea too far. There are lots of examples of gentry taking
the lead in poaching and deer massacres. Native Americans
carried out revenge attacks on colonists’ livestock even
though they probably had very different concepts of animals.
But just maybe when poor people in England did it, part of
the message was “we’re just as human as you”.

The civil wars added an extra dimension to the competition
for resources. Now there were rival armies trying to get
resources from civilians.

Horses were a big part of the struggle.

On the left there’s a war horse. Armies needed horses to
mount cavalry and dragoons. And they needed draught
horses to pull artillery and wagons. For example, the establishment of the New Model Army in 1645 included over 8,000 horses.

And on the right there’s a mill horse, because horses were a major part of the civilian economy. Horses were linked with status as well as wealth. Peter Edwards pointed out that a person on a horse could quite literally look down on other people.

There were lots of horses in England, but getting hold of them was potentially a big problem.

In the summer of 1642 the English parliament invited voluntary contributions of horses and money to help build an army. That was very successful at first as you can see from this bar chart [there's a new version of this based on slightly better data in my book Horses, People and Parliament in the English Civil War (Ashgate, 2012) as well as much more discussion of horse contributions.]:
But then it dropped off quite drastically in the autumn. In October and November parliament started putting pressure on people to contribute by taxing, disarming and imprisoning them. But as the graph shows, that didn’t have much effect. The contributions kept going down. I think that proves that it was actually very difficult to force people to give up their property if they didn’t want to.

This is when competition between military and civilians really got going. As voluntary contributions went down armies had to resort to taking horses by force. But they found that power didn’t grow from the barrel of a gun. There were lots of ways that civilians could try to protect their property rights. Some soldiers were taken to court for horse theft during or after the civil war. Members of the elite sometimes got their horses back by appealing to parliament or the county committees.
In 1643 the MP Henry Marten was commissioned to raise a cavalry regiment. He caused a lot of trouble by taking horses from the Countess Rivers. She complained to the House of Lords, which ordered Marten to give the horses back. But the House of Commons said that he should keep them. They said that the Lords had breached privilege by giving orders to a member of the Commons. Countess Rivers was Catholic. She was one of the main targets of the Stour Valley riots in 1642. Henry Marten and his allies in the Commons saw her as an enemy of the state. But the majority in the Lords seems to have still seen her as one of their own because she was a Countess. The Lords maintained that it was a breach of privilege to take horses from peers, and their wives and servants, even if they were Catholics or supporters of the King.

It looks like there were elements of class, religion, high politics, and maybe gender in this dispute. And horses were right at the centre of it. There was competition for resources: Henry Marten needed horses to mount his troopers. The Countess needed her coach horses to get around. Her coach and horses also symbolized her social status. By taking them away, Marten was insulting her and the House of Lords.

Getting enough soldiers could be just as difficult as getting enough horses. Armies often had to resort to impressment. In 1645 parliament imposed quotas of impressed men and draught horses on counties to build up the New Model Army. When men were rounded up and sent to the army they were being treated like animals.

One way that soldiers could exercise agency was by deserting. But horses could run away too. In October 1642, a group of draught horses was being taken from London to join
the Earl of Essex's army. Some of them ran off more than once, and so conductors had to claim extra expenses for men to help catch them.

Horses added an extra unpredictable element to battles. This is what the royalist officer Sir Richard Bulstrode wrote about the battle of Powicke Bridge:

"This was the first Action I was ever in, and being upon an unruly Horse, he ran away with me amongst the Enemy"

Even in peace time out of control animals could cause problems. An extra motive for deer massacres was that deer sometimes escaped from parks and damaged people’s crops. Rabbit warrens were another source of friction. It was hard to keep the rabbits from escaping and eating up other people’s fields. Again, this is about competition for resources.

At this point you have to ask whether animals can really exercise agency in the same way as humans. That brings us up against the question of free will: what is it? Does it exist? This is a huge philosophical and scientific problem which us historians shouldn’t really be tackling on our own. Just to sum up various positions in the debate, decisions might be:

- free, whatever that might mean
- They might be simply determined by external stimuli or biological instinct
- They might be determined in a more complex way in the unconscious mind
- Or they might be totally random
For the purposes of history we don’t necessarily need to worry about this. Repressive structures and dominant ideologies are supposed to restrict any and all of these things. Biological instincts, conscious decisions, unconscious decisions, randomness. They’re all enemies of order and hierarchy. We know that sometimes people do and say things that they’re not supposed to, even if we don’t know why.

Looking at things that way, animals are no different. They don’t always do what they’re supposed to do. Their minds are just as unknowable as human minds.

The big problem with studying animals in the past is that we can only see them through traces left by humans. Whatever we find is always going to tell us more about human culture than about the animals themselves. There isn’t much answer to that except that it’s a problem with all history. We always have to use imperfect traces that are full of the cultural assumptions of the people who created them. Women’s history, and history from below show us that the dominant elite can’t ever erase all the traces of disobedience.

Even if history ultimately is just The Human Experience, we need to know what it meant to be human. Identities are often formed through opposition, so we need to know as much about both sides of the opposition. We can’t understand the human without understanding the non-human. But binary opposition between human and animal might be too simple.

Gender isn’t just a male-female binary. Alexandra Shepard found that masculinity was constructed from a combination of gender, class, age and marriage. We can’t understand it by taking any one of those things on its own, because they interact. Histories of identity used to specialize in one identity
and privilege it over others. For Marxists it was class. For feminists it was gender. That was necessary to begin with, but now the parts are all coming together. Animals are at least another part of the problem. It could be that what all identity histories are working towards is the construction of the human. It’s about who gets to be human and who doesn’t. It’s about which kinds of human get the power and resources. That affects everything.

Bibliography

• Jason Hribal, “”Animals are part of the working class””, *Labor History*, 44 (2003), pp. 435-453.