

## Introduction

### *Bringing Animals to the Center*

The commanding presence of nonhuman animals in our society is largely taken for granted. Most of us have observed that even the harshest people completely change their demeanor when speaking of a cherished companion animal, but we generally explain the inconsistency as a personal quirk, even a pathology (Oliver 2011). So information that gives some rough measure of our investment in animals is rather startling. What does it mean that more than seven hundred million people visit zoos worldwide, far exceeding the annual attendance at all the major U.S. professional sporting events combined (AZA 1997–2021; Gusset and Dick 2011), or that pet owners spend more on animal food than parents spend on baby food (APPA 2020; Bedford 2020)? In a time of sensitivity to how language shapes attitudes, one frequently hears people characterize others with animal images; think of the positive associations connected with calling someone a pussycat or teddy bear, or the negative (sometimes racist) ones that arise in calling someone a rat or a gorilla or a snake.

If animals have such a strong hold on our minds and hearts, what has accounted for social scientists' reluctance to engage with the meaning and uses of animals in modern life? Although there is an enormous literature about animals by novelists, journalists, philosophers, biologists, psychologists, and animal behaviorists, there has been little by our fellow sociologists until recently. In 1979, Clifton Bryant criticized his colleagues in sociology for having "often been myopic" and disregarding "the permeating social influence of animals in our larger cultural fabric and our more idio-

syncratic individual modes of interaction and relationships” (400). His advocacy of a “zoological focus” generated little response. In 1993, Ted Benton similarly argued that “any adequate specification of societies as structures of social relationships or interaction must include reference to non-human animals as occupants of social positions and as terms in social relationships” (68). Although interest in studying animals slowly increased through the 1990s, the resulting body of sociological research could “hardly be called a flood” (Arluke 2002, 370). However, by 2002 enough sociologists were studying the social roles of animals that the American Sociological Association officially recognized a section on Animals and Society—over the objections of some who disparaged it as “boutique” sociology (e.g., Perrow 2000; see Nibert 2003). This growing sociological interest was not confined to the United States. The Australasian Animal Studies Association was founded in 2005, and the British Sociological Association recognized the Animal/Human Studies Group in 2006.

Sociological research on animals now encompasses myriad subfields within the discipline. Sociologists study topics including human-animal conflict, animal-related occupations, animal abuse, animal agribusiness, and human-animal relationships. They have incorporated animals into research in criminology and deviance, law, domestic violence, social movements, representation, social psychology, and theory. Sociologists approach their research from the micro level to the macro level, using perspectives of environmental sociology, political economy, feminist theory, posthumanism, symbolic interactionism, and others.

Initially, the lack of interest seemed to be due largely to sociology’s belief that relationships (which require self-consciousness and understanding of others) depend on verbal facility and the use of language. But also playing a part in this reticence is the false belief that animals occupy a far less important place in advanced industrial societies than they do in nonindustrial ones. Here anthropological research provides a useful comparison. Mary Douglas (1966), E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1956), Edmund Leach (1964), and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) first observed that animals serve as useful instruments of culture because they are highly flexible symbols. Others followed their lead; in fact, it became a “thriving field” in anthropology (Shanklin 1985, 379) to study animals as a window into human thinking and needs (cf. Ingold 1988; Mullin 1999, 2002; Tambiah 1969; Willis 1974, 1990).

Take the case of cockfighting. To the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1972, 449), the Balinese people understand the cockfight as more than a bloody battle of “a chicken hacking another mindlessly to bits.” Just under the surface of the cockfight, a more symbolic action is occurring. Owners’

personalities are “mirrored” in their birds because owners so deeply identify with the birds, just as American cock owners have been found to express their masculinity through the fighting prowess of their animals (Hawley 1993). Beyond the cockfight itself, Geertz claims, is the understanding of the animals as metaphors of larger Balinese culture; the cockfight becomes a story the Balinese tell themselves about how their society is structured and what the structure means to them. The bird is so tied into their national self-perception that the Balinese even describe the physical shape of their island as a proud cock. What they see in the fight is a “status bloodbath” that “displays” deep concerns about human relationships in Balinese society that are unmentionable in everyday life.

Although anthropologists’ interest in animals initially focused on traditional societies, animals play an equally important symbolic role in the lives of people in industrialized societies as they do in Bali. The intellectual mandate of sociology—to understand the relationship between private experience and the wider society—positions it perfectly to examine this role. Methodologically, too, sociology is well equipped for the task. Contemporary sociological ethnography, or the description of a group’s way of life, has moved beyond the study and representation of the traditional, clearly defined “other” and into more diverse and novel milieus. Because nonhuman animals are removed from most researchers not by class or ethnicity but by biology, research on human exchanges with animals breaks new academic ground, which we discuss in Chapter 1. But this research is also rooted in traditional sociological ethnography. Exploring the human-animal relationship is similar to the perspective of the work of the University of Chicago fieldworkers who, in the 1920s and 1930s, studied groups outside the bounds of middle-class society—gang members, hoboes, dance-hall girls, and other unfamiliar groups. Our project is similarly unconventional and no less exciting.

For practical and scholarly reasons, we believe that undertaking this work is important. As concern mounts and consciousness changes—about, for example, mass extinction or preventing the next animal-borne pandemic—sociological research will contribute to the reasoned and informed arguments in what are often emotionally charged and highly polarized debates over public policies regarding animals. Studying animals and human interactions with them enables us to learn about ourselves as social creatures. It shows us, among other things, how meaning is socially created in interaction, even with nonhumans; how we organize our social world; and how we see our connection (or lack of it) to other living things. It may even reveal our most essential conceptions of social order and our most authentic attitudes toward people.

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This book, then, is not about animals per se but about how humans regard them in modern Western societies. When we look at these attitudes, one of the most glaring inconsistencies is inconsistency, or what Andrew Rowan calls the “constant paradox” (quoted in Herzog 1993, 347). Veterinary students become upset when they “sacrifice” certain mice but not others (Herzog et al. 1989). A nursing student reports that she enjoys dissecting dogs in biology class but could never dissect her own pet. A woman decides to have her adored pet dog killed like an “animal” after it bites her sister (Hickrod and Schmitt 1982). At one moment, hunting dogs are the subject of proud boasting because they have keen tracking abilities; at the next, they are kicked hard enough to crack their ribs because they have gotten in the way (Jordan 1975). A journalist is repulsed by the carnage he witnesses in a midwestern slaughterhouse but later finds his own experience of firing a steel bolt into the head of a steer to be “as easy as hitting pop flies to the outfield” (Lesy 1987). When public outrage over the killing of one lion surpasses the reaction to the killing of African Americans by police officers, the writer Roxane Gay (2015) is moved to tweet, “I’m personally going to start wearing a lion costume when I leave my house so if I get shot, people will care.” Inconsistent behavior toward animals is omnipresent in Western society.

Rather than adding to a litany of examples or decrying its moral and emotional consequences, we want to understand it sociologically. From the sociologist’s perspective, what is most interesting is not to identify such contradictions or reveal the assumptions underlying them—a task more ably served by philosophers—but to understand better what it is about modern society that makes it possible for people to shower animals with affection and to maltreat or kill them, to regard them as sentient creatures and as utilitarian objects. How is it that people seem able to balance such significantly conflicting values and live comfortably with such contradiction? How is it that instead of examining these conflicts, so few people are even aware of them?

We take this ordinary ambivalence toward animals as a sign that social forces must be working successfully—so successfully that, in modern societies, many people do not experience these contradictions as a problem. As sociologists, our task is to identify some of the key social forces behind the capricious treatment of animals and show how they operate. Our large goal, though, is to make a plea for the value of sociological analysis in popular and academic discussions of animals in contemporary Western life. How we undertake such analysis is the subject of the first chapter.

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## **Part I**

The Human-Animal Tribe

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