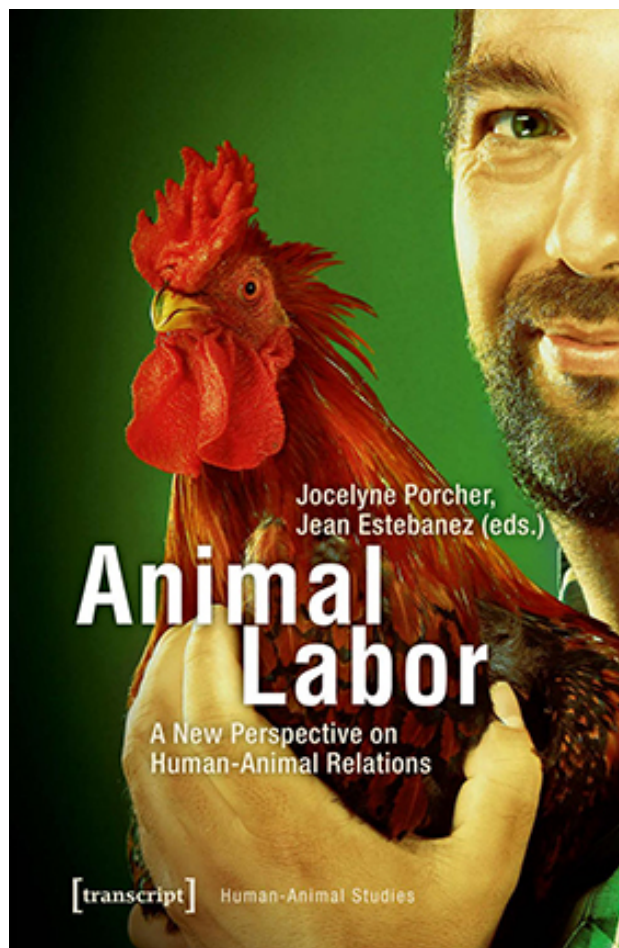


Reviews

Boria Sax

Shared Creation of a Not-So-Human World

Jocelyne Porcher and Jean Estebanez, eds., *Animal Labor: A New Perspective on Human-Animal Relations*. Bleilefeld, Germany: Transcript Verlag, 2020. 200 pp. \$87.49 (hb).



Relationships with animals are difficult, often just about impossible, to explain to those who do not share them. Birdwatching is among the most popular recreations in Britain and the United States, yet many people find it utterly bizarre. “Sure, I like birds...,” they may think, “... but what is the point of all those crazy lists?” Hunters at times describe their activity as an ecstatic union with the natural world, and some vegans talk in

similar terms about giving up meat. After several years as a rather perplexed observer, I have concluded that all parties are generally sincere. There is very little dialogue among them because we lack the conceptual tools, and consequently an adequate vocabulary, to discuss them.

It is common among many animal activists to make little or no distinction between animal husbandry and industrial farming. On one level, this is simply a historical mistake. While it had a few predecessors in the hatcheries of ancient Egypt and the henhouses of Rome, industrial farming is a modern phenomenon, in its more extreme forms a historically very recent one. Centralized abattoirs began in Napoleonic France. Victorian breeders altered varieties of cows and pigs to provide the maximum amount of meat in the shortest time. Herds of cattle greatly increased in size when the American Midwest was opened to settlers at the end of the Civil War. But the greatest push towards industrialization of animal husbandry only began around the end of World War II with the development of the modern broiler chicken.

Whatever our political and social views may be, we are just about all products of Capitalism. That institution has not only formed us but also the institutions that govern our lives to a point where it is difficult to imagine anything else in either the past or the future. It takes not only knowledge but a considerable effort of imagination as well to conceive of human-animal relations in the pre-Capitalist, pre-industrial world. That is why it is not surprising that people may see traditional agriculture as an early version of industrial farming.

Jocelyne Porcher has argued for decades that the two are entirely different phenomena in terms of both their goals and organization. The essays in *Animal Labor* develop a key concept, named in the title, for making this distinction. To some extent, the authors in the volume take the concept of “labor” articulated by Marx and apply it to animals, though they do not share Marx’s enthusiasm for capitalist productivity.

Our word “work” comes from the Old English and retains something close to its original meaning, though the epithet “worker” suggests a lack of status. The common synonym, used in the title of this volume, is “labor” (“labour” in British English). This goes back through the Old French to the Latin *labāre* meaning “to slip,” suggesting stumbling under a burden. We speak of a woman giving birth as “in labor,” which suggests both pain and promise. The French synonym *travail* comes from the Latin *trepaliare*, meaning “to torture.” Used in both English and French, *travail* suggests a painful and laborious effort. The generally negative connotations of these words that

have made people reluctant to extend the concept of work to animals, but Porcher and her associates use the term in an overwhelmingly positive sense.

Porcher and Jean Estebanez explain in their introductory chapter entitled “Animal Labor” that work is a shared activity that is structured by rules and imperatives around some sort of purpose. It has a directional quality, which distinguishes it from games, but its significance is by no means confined to a single goal. In the process, it can create meanings, relationships, values, and dignity, as well as alienation and humiliation (21). Though Porcher and Estebanez do not explicitly say so, “work” as they use the term seems to refer to the communal creation by human beings and other creatures of a shared world.

The main argument of *Animal Labor* is that this shared endeavor can produce kinds of intimacy and understanding between human beings and animals that cannot be achieved in any other way. Contemporary pets are usually exempted from any work beyond perhaps offering companionship to human beings. This could lead to an impoverishment of the relationship for all parties. Perhaps we are afflicting animals with the feelings of purposelessness that have pervaded human civilization throughout the modern era.

According to Porcher and Estabanez, “work is the primary source of our relations with animals, and the motor that has driven the process of domestication. Our relations with animals are not primarily founded in domination ties, but in the freedom offered by shared work” (24). Perhaps since our emergence as a species, or group of species, humankind has, in other words, been defined by reciprocal relations with other animals. The boundaries are marked by intersubjectivity, as humans and animals act according to understandings that are often not articulated. As animals involved in activities such as farming and building are gradually replaced by machines, animals as food are replaced by substitutes such as *in vitro meat*, and animal pets are replaced by robotic or digital substitutes, what happens to human identity? It is impossible to predict.

The other major theoretical essay in the book is “From desolation to the creation of a common world” by Estelle Deléage. She argues that prior to the modern world the perception of time and space was experiential. Both were in practice generally measured in terms of tasks achieved, in other words by labor. This changed with the manufacture of watches in the eighteenth century. Time became a scale according to which labor was measured. The demand for ever greater productivity took precedence

over, and began to overwhelm, all other values (148-9). Deléage concludes that, “in industrial agriculture where ‘animal production’ occurs, human — and animal — work has been reduced to an ephemeral and perishable activity, which must constantly be renewed” (157). Rather than generating or reaffirming values and relationships, work itself becomes a means, as well as an object, of consumption.

The other essays in the book explore practical consequences of these ideas. In “Elmo and Paro” by Porcher, the author argues that, due to the absence of shared subjectivity, her concept of labor does not apply to robotic or digital pets. In “Horses in the Laboratory,” Porcher and Sophie Nicod discuss how working with horses involves constant reciprocity and develops new sensitivities for all parties. In “Are screen animals actors?” Estebanez, Porcher, and Julie Doune argue that animals in film and related media are clearly engaged in work, in part because their careers involve the trajectory of professionalization, specialization, and retirement. It also involves simulation and play as the activity of their human counterparts. In “For a new conservation paradigm,” Nicolas Lainé looks at the social role of working animals in India and East Asian countries. Sébastien Mouret analyzes the intimacy and reciprocity in relations between seeing-eye dogs and the blind in “Guide Dogs.” In “The wolf and the Patou dog,” Porcher and Elisabeth Lécrivain argue that canids do not necessarily forgo freedom in domestication. Life in the wild is not, contrary to what is often supposed, one of absolute freedom, since wolves and other animals are constrained not only by the struggle for survival but also the social structure of the pack. The situation in domestication may involve sacrifices but it also opens new goals and opportunities for accomplishment. That theme is elaborated in more specific contexts in “Military and Police Dogs” by Mouret, Porcher, and Gaelle Mainix. Finally, in “Draft horses in vinticulture,” Chloé Mulier and Hanna Müller argue for the reintroduction of draft animals, in place of machines, in French vineyards.

Running through these essays is an assumption that work is characteristic of the human realm, and this is one point on which I think there is room for further research and analysis. Should the building of nests by birds or dams by beavers be considered work? What about cooperative hunting practiced by many animals such as wolves and Harris hawks? What about cooperative activity across lines of species, for example when various small birds work together to mob an owl? The honeyguide, a bird of Central Africa, has developed a relationship with human beings, where it leads them to source of honey in return for a share of the find. The bird also has developed an analogous relationship with badgers. Which, if any, of these various relationships should we consider “work”? If it turns out that what the authors in this volume refer to as “work”

is an extension of cooperative activity among many species in meadows and forests, that would not greatly impact most of their analysis except to place it in a broader perspective.

Some American readers may find the Continental style of argument, with its relatively high level of abstraction, hard to get used to. I have found very similar sentiments expressed in many conversations that I have had with sheep farmers and shepherds in the Northeastern United States, who work closely not only with sheep but also guard dogs and guard llamas. In less abstract, though sometimes poetic, language, they speak of how traditional farming puts them more closely in touch with natural rhythms of life and death. *Animal Labor*, however, provides a more sophisticated defense of traditional farming, as well as other employment of animals, than anything I have found in the Anglo-American world.