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### **The animal challenge to sociology**

Sociology has been slow to take up the animal challenge despite there having been calls for decades that sociologists attend to the ‘zoological connection’ (Wilkie, 2015b; Peggs, 2013). It has been pointed out that ‘there is virtually no area of social life that is untouched by animals’ (Bryant, 1979: 403) and that, ‘By focussing on differences between humans and other animals, sociologists have lost sight of all that we share with them’ (Murphy, 1995: 692). And, while Beck’s claim that society can no longer be understood as ‘outside nature’ suggests the need for a reconceptualisation of society (Beck, 1992: 80), it does not address the invisibility of other animals (Tovey, 2003). Some have attempted to address this invisibility, arguing that the entanglement of human and other animals in mutually constitutive social relations needs to be recognised by sociology in a way that is non-reductionist (see for eg. Benton, 1991, 1993). Furthermore, it has been suggested that the founding thinkers of the discipline would be a good place to start (Tovey, 2003). In this paper, we take up this challenge, arguing for a reconceptualisation of society that recognises that animals are constitutive of it rather than part of a ‘nature’ with which sociologists are unconcerned (Tovey, 2003). One of our key claims is that animals are agents entangled in relations with humans and that these relations are frequently ones of domination and exploitation. Our concern therefore is not so much with redefining what a sociological conception of nature might be, but with how a sociological conception of society could encompass human-animal relations.

In this context it is helpful to bear in mind the process outlined by feminist scholars for the relationship between feminism and the social sciences. They identified four phases: the first was the pre-feminist era<sup>1</sup> when women were not usually the focus of research unless ‘the family’ was being studied; the second was a critique of this neglect; the third was a growth in the number of studies of women in order to ‘add them in’ to existing studies; and the fourth consisted of ‘the full theoretical integration of gender into the discipline’ (Charles, 1993; Walby, 1988; Oakley, 1989). In relation to animals we suggest that we are experiencing the second and third stages with a critique of sociology’s lack of attention to non-human animals, on the one hand, and a burgeoning interest in human-animal relations and the growth of the interdisciplinary field of human-animal studies, on the other. We have not yet reached the fourth stage and, despite the pioneering work of a few sociologists such as Ted Benton, many argue that sociology is still neglectful of animals and marginalises those whose research takes human-animal relations as its focus (Wilkie, 2015).

The lack of sociological attention to animals has been illustrated by reviews of introductory sociology textbooks, where the topic of animals has appeared rarely and, when it does, animals are often portrayed inaccurately (Alger and Alger, 2003). Indeed, ‘to read most sociological texts, one might never know that society is populated by non-human as well as human animals’ (Tovey, 2003: 197). The invisibility of animals means that their significance to almost all aspects of social life is ignored (Bryant, 1979) and researchers are often complicit in reproducing this invisibility. For instance, in a paper which explored this silencing it was found that research participants’ attempts to talk about the significance of their animal

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companions for their health and well being were disregarded by interviewers (Ryan and Ziegland, 2015).

Other disciplines have been more responsive to the animal challenge. Thus in philosophy core concepts have been rethought: intersubjectivity has been reconceptualised in terms which do not exclude the animal 'other' (Despret, 2008); agency has been defined as a co-creation of a network of relations (an *agencement*) (Despret, 2013); and the human-animal distinction, so fundamental to the social sciences, has been deconstructed (Derrida, 2008). Animals are recognised as living beings rather than in terms of discursive representations of 'animality' (Wolfe, 2003) and have entered into the way we understand the place of humans in the world. Some sociologists have recognised that it is with and through animals that we become what we are (Porcher, 2014) and, we might add, that societies become possible (Shipman, 2011). These shifts, which begin by thinking 'from the animal' (Despret, 2015), challenge us to develop new epistemological positions which allow us to ask 'what matters for them?' (Despret, 2008; 2006), to recognise animals in all their variety and specificity, and to understand their importance as co-creators of the social world. Sociology has been slower than others to grasp the conceptual challenge posed by animals to the discipline even though it has engaged with human-animal relations as a (rather marginal) specialism.

In what follows we explore what it is about sociology that makes it resistant to the animal challenge and what it would look like if it really responded. We argue that sociology has had a fraught relationship with biology, that it is based on assumptions about human exceptionalism and that its emergence as a discipline has to be understood in the context of industrialisation and urbanisation, where human and animal lives are not so obviously interdependent as in rural societies (Berger, 2009; Bulliet, 2005; Tovey, 2003). We go on to suggest that sociologists need to reconceptualise 'society'; revise notions of agency, subjectivity and reflexivity; and reject the speciesism and anthropocentrism on which sociology is based. Finally we contend that continuing to direct the sociological gaze only at humans significantly limits the sociological imagination and is in danger of rendering it irrelevant in the age of the anthropocene.

### **Why has sociology not looked at animals?**

With the development of interdisciplinary Human-Animal Studies, scholars have not only begun to reflect on sociology's neglect of animals and undertake empirical research in an attempt to rectify this, but have also asked whether there is something about sociology that generates this neglect. Thus Alger and Alger argue that the centrality of Mead to the sociological tradition and his assumption that other animals are incapable of symbolic thought explains sociology's lack of attention to animals (Alger and Alger, 2003a; see also Wilkie and McKinnon, 2013). Clearly, the symbolic, as we discuss later, is central to sociology and poses particular problems for sociology's ability to respond to the animal challenge. Here, however, we wish to point out that the claim about Mead's influence is particularly salient for students of symbolic interaction and reflects the importance of symbolic interactionism to studies of human-animal relations in the US (see for eg. Sanders, 1999; Alger and Alger, 2003b; Irvine, 2004, Jerolmack, 2009).

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Other writers have pointed out that it is not only Mead's work but the whole sociological enterprise that, in common with other humanist disciplines, is based on human exceptionalism (see, for example, Despret 2013). Human exceptionalism refers to the idea that the human species is exempt from natural constraint (primarily because of its scientific and technological achievements) and evolutionarily unique (because of its capacity for language and the capacities for meaning making and cultural development that are emergent from this). In fact, 'the human' is usually defined in contradistinction to 'the animal' (Ingold, 1994a). This implies that 'mixed-species subject matter ... deviates from the human-centric focus of normative social research' (Wilkie, 2015a: 213) and is not seen as properly sociological.

Unsurprisingly, sociology is also resistant to considering animals as an oppressed group (Arluke, 2003) on the grounds that it devalues the notion of oppression (Hobson-West, 2007; see also Coetzee 2001; Spiegel, 1996).

In what follows, we draw together these debates focussing on the relationship between sociology and biology, the basis of the discipline in humanism, and the conditions of emergence of sociology in industrial capitalist societies. Having established why it is that sociology finds it difficult to incorporate animals we go on to ask how sociology needs to change in order to be able to do so and why this matters.

### *Sociology and biology*

In a paper published over thirty years ago, Benton considered the relationship of sociology and biology through a reflection on the impact of the 'new' social movements on sociology. In particular, he was concerned with the ways in which the feminist movement, the struggles for Civil Rights in the USA and the growing environmental movement challenged conventional sociological accounts of social stratification. Noting that these movements had 'called into question established ways of thinking and acting' (Benton, 1991:1), he nevertheless felt that they had not gone far enough, partly because they shared the 'biological blindness' that often characterised sociological accounts of social stratification. Indeed, for many in these movements it was precisely this blindness that made sociology an appealing resource. In denying the relevance of biology to the analysis of social inequalities, sociology offered a repudiation of a disreputable history of racism and sexism whilst encouraging a positive view of the political possibilities of social action.

The source of the 'biological blindness' of the social sciences, for Benton, lay in their efforts in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to elaborate and defend 'the autonomy and specificity of human social life' (Benton, 1991:12) and to establish sociology as a discipline with an object of study that would differentiate it from its rivals. For Durkheim, for example, sociology, unlike psychology, investigated not the individual but the irreducible and *sui generis* realm of social relations. These efforts prompted an emphasis on the central role of cultural processes in shaping social life, an emphasis that was buttressed by an array of dualisms - nature/culture, human/animal, mind/body - deployed to reinforce the singularity of the social. In significant ways, this deployment, as Fuller (2007, 2010) has pointed out, was directed against the influence of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. Social thinkers felt compelled to respond to the normative implications of Darwin's ideas particularly those of a naturalist ethics.

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In insisting that differences between humans and other animals were ones of degree rather than kind, Darwin pointed towards what Benton has termed a *comprehensive naturalism* which would involve a secular approach to morality and politics and a unified view of human beings as part of a complex and historically changing natural order (Benton, 2013). Comprehensive naturalism was also resistant to an elevated view of human powers and aesthetics. Its pull was thus towards a view of social life accountable in natural scientific terms. In contrast, Darwin's contemporary Alfred Russell Wallace, argued for a *restricted naturalism*, insisting that humans were culturally and spiritually distinct from other animals. In this way, Wallace sought to retain the possibility that human social and cultural progress was not subject to evolutionary laws and principles (a belief that was central to Wallace's socialism - see Benton, 2013 – and to sociology). Restricted naturalism, though, seemed to require abandoning the quest for a unified view of the place of humans in nature and of human nature itself

This strategic dilemma about the extent to which human development was subject to evolutionary laws was central to the expansion of the social sciences (Meloni, 2014). Initially, Darwin's theory was re-engineered for the purposes of social explanation in the Frankenstein form of Spencer's Social Darwinism. Although Spencer's work was not without influence, a more significant effort to provide a scientific account of human society that accorded with Darwinian biology was eugenics. Galton, its chief early populariser, regarded eugenics as 'practical biological knowledge' needed in the struggle of nations (Porter, 2004: 267). The novelty of the eugenicist position, as Porter points out, lay in its insistence that cultural progress and civilization were "the expression and not the antagonist of biological progress" (Porter, 2004: 280). This winning marriage of science and social progress would, according to its supporters, challenge ignorance and provide a practical political programme for elite-led social engineering (Desrosieres, 1998). The association of biological explanations with eugenics and racism eventually led the discipline of sociology to distance itself from any consideration of the social influence of biology and centred it even more firmly on the social, the cultural and the human.

### *Industrialisation and urbanisation*

A second factor in accounting for the invisibility of animals within sociology has to do with the context within which the discipline emerged. As countless textbooks have pointed out, sociology has its origins in the investigation of modern industrial capitalist societies. These societies emerged from a set of conditions found mainly in Western Europe (see Bayly, 2004 for a fuller account of these conditions). Unsurprisingly, the attention of the classical sociologists was drawn to the nature and origin of these conditions and their impact on the social relations of contemporary (mainly western) society. In particular, they were concerned with their consequences for social order and political stability.

The focus on western European societies and the question of social order carried a number of consequences. Firstly, as post-colonial writers have pointed out (see for example Bhabra, 2007), the entanglements between western societies and those others subordinated to them prior to, and as a direct result of, capitalist development were

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obscured, overlooked and often denied. The calls for the adoption of a post-colonial, or 'southern' perspective towards sociology seek to redress this. Secondly, the conception of the social order prevalent in the work of the founders of the discipline is one that takes human social action as the chief constituent of that order. This is not to say that authors like Marx, Weber or Durkheim did not consider non-human animals, or failed to consider humans as organisms. Indeed, Halewood (2012, 2014) has argued that the classical theorists (amongst whom he includes Simmel in addition to Marx, Durkheim and Weber) had complex and ambiguous ideas about the place and role of non-human animals in social life. Rather, their concern with other animals, and with human-non-human animal relations, was subordinate to their larger interest in the social and political order of urban, industrial capitalist societies. And in this type of society urban dwellers experience themselves as increasingly remote from most other animals.

Urban, industrial societies are societies where the processing of animals for food and their use as draught animals have been gradually removed from the daily experience of most of the population (Philo, 1998). This contrasts with the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when, according to Ritvo (1987):

'the English would have been surprised to hear themselves praised for special kindness to animals. They were surrounded by evidence to the contrary in a society that exploited animals to provide not only food and clothing, but also transportation, the power to run machinery, and even entertainment. The streets of London were crowded with horses and dogs that served as draft animals and beasts of burden, in addition, passers-by often encountered herds of cattle and sheep being driven to the Smithfield live-stock market.' (125)

In the UK and the US, animals farmed for food were removed from cities during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and horses in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup>. The resulting absence of large animals contrasts with rural societies where 'the centrality of animals to economy and society, and the continuing sense among rural residents that they are organically embedded in a larger than human world, are among the main elements which continue to distinguish rural from urban life' (Tovey, 2003:197; see also Berger, 1973). The contribution of animals and even their centrality to processes of industrialisation are erased in sociological conceptions of the social despite the fact that 'most animals are 'social creatures', embedded within and shaped by human social institutions and relationships' (Tovey, 2003:208) and despite the fact that animals played a key role in processes of industrialisation.

To take one example, Greene demonstrates how the horse was critical to 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialisation in the USA. She notes that horses are 'biotechnology, or organisms altered for human use. Through the process of domestication, horses became living machines' (Greene, 2008: 4). Horses were bred for sport, war, work, transport; they stimulated the development of an array of technologies and devices: vehicles, equestrian equipment, breeders' logs; and horse power reinforced other sorts of power - military, political, religious, sexual. 'All these things,' Greene points out, 'are part of the technological network that horses represent' (Greene, 2008: 5). Clearly, it makes little sense to view horses simply as non-human animals, irrelevant or peripheral to the social world. Equally, it would be a partial account of the social world that

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obscured or overlooked the contribution of the horse (and other animals), not only to industrial capitalism and its division of labour, but to the whole colonial project (Isenberg, 2000; Swart, 2010; Anderson, 2004).

This, however, was not the view incorporated into sociology as it was becoming an established academic discipline (see Osborne et.al., 2008, Collini, 2006, Fuller, 2010). 'Society' became an investigable domain whose boundaries stabilised around the dualisms that have, until recently, characterised the discipline. This outcome was not inevitable. Nevertheless, by the early years of the twentieth century the belief that the object of sociology was the study of human society and that this object was primarily shaped by culture, with meanings and values at its core, was widely established. This belief was reinforced by sociology's disciplinary struggle with behaviourism (Camic, 1986), in which sociology emphasised the rational, reflexive nature of social action as involving an assessment of means to ends (intentionality). Consequently, sociologists largely relinquished their interest in allegedly 'non-rational' forms of action, such as habit, which were seen to be too closely associated with psychological reductionism (Camic, 1986:1072). Reflexivity is precisely what allows humans to transcend the habitual (often regarded as a characteristic form of 'animal' behaviour). The door was firmly shut, therefore, on beings and objects defined as unable to participate in meaning making and cultural production. Animals, in particular, were defined as the concern of biology rather than sociology, despite their importance to the constitution of societies.

### *The social, the cultural and the human*

By the early 1930s, sociology, at least in its institutional form in the USA, had not only identified a credible object of study - the social and cultural life of people - but had also identified the features which radically distinguished it from the objects studied by the natural sciences. Principally, these were features held to be characteristic of people as *human* beings, features that allegedly marked them out from other animals. The precise nature of these features, the extent to which they were shared with other animals and the degree to which possession of any of them moved a being along the human-animal continuum, varied historically and culturally. At their core, however were claims about consciousness, subjectivity and reflexivity and, in particular, the belief that the human achievements of language and culture - the two accomplishments that appeared to be most fundamentally constitutive of the human - were possible only because human beings were self reflexively aware. They were beings whose actions were therefore purposive and meaningful and rested on a capacity for the interpretation and management of symbols, seen as a distinctively human quality: social interaction was a reflexively negotiated affair.

Interpretivist approaches were not only based on human exceptionalism but also emphasised a particular view of what it meant to be human. However, as Osborne and Rose (2008:553) have pointed out, 'for the first half of the twentieth century at least... there was ...no agreement on the objects of sociology or on the problems to which it should address itself.' Assembling a stable object of sociology required, firstly, a coherent notion of what constituted the social and, secondly, an apparatus of methods capable of recording data about this object. Halewood has recently made a plausible case for seeing Parsons as the key figure in attaining the first objective (Halewood, 2014). For Halewood, Parsons is the first major sociologist to hold a conception of the social that defines it unambiguously as the realm of *human* interaction; after Parsons,

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the question of what constitutes the social rarely surfaces. Moreover, this is a notion of the social from which the non-human (other animals, technologies, things) has been expelled. This, in effect, is the origin of what Latour refers to as the ‘modern constitution’, an arrangement in which the natural and the social are regarded as discrete realms: the one composed of objects, the other of subjects; the one the legitimate domain of science, the other the legitimate domain of the humanities; the one dealing with causality, the other dealing with meanings; the one dealing with animal life devoid of meaning and the other dealing with meaningful human life (Latour, 1993; Crist, 2000).

### **What happens when sociologists look at animals?**

As well as asking why sociology is reluctant to incorporate animals into the sociological enterprise we also need to ask why it is important for it to do so. The answer to this question involves recognising that ‘any adequate specification of societies as structures of social relationship or interaction must include reference to *non-human animals as occupants of social positions and as terms in social relationships*’ (Benton, 1993:68 our emphasis; see also Carter and Charles, 2013). Viewing non-human animals as involuntarily embedded in social relationships is a key step in developing what Tovey has termed ‘a political economy of nature’ (Tovey, 2003: 206).

If, as we have argued, other animals have been, and continue to be, an integral part of the development of human societies and of what it means to be human, how should sociology respond? Regarding animals as ‘occupants of social positions’ makes it easier to see that societies would not take the form that they do had it not been for human connections with other animals. Thus it is widely agreed that tool making, the development of language and domestication have shaped the development of human societies, but not so widely recognised that other animals have been an intrinsic part of these developments (Clutton-Brocke, 2007; Shipman, 2011; Bulliet, 2005). Moreover, different societies are characterised by different forms of human-animal relations, with egalitarian relations of trust typifying hunter-gatherer societies and relations of domination predominating in pastoral and other societies based on food production rather than food collection<sup>ii</sup> (Ingold, 1994b; Tapper, 1994). Similarly, draught animals were critical to processes of industrialisation; indeed the horse was an essential ‘prime mover’ of industrial development before it was finally superseded by the automobile in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Greene, 2008). It could therefore be argued that a failure to take animals into account leads to a misapprehension of what societies are and how they are constituted.

Various attempts have been made to integrate animals into the sociological enterprise. Some have suggested that sociology’s neglect of animals is deeply ‘ironic, given the discipline’s willingness ... to consider the plight of virtually every human minority’ (Arluke, 2003: 26) and to make links between different forms of oppression. Thus it has been argued that capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism as systems of oppression and exploitation are linked to speciesism and the oppression of animals (Adams, 2010) and terms have been coined to encapsulate this intertwining (Cudworth, 2011). This approach highlights ‘the entangled oppression of humans and other animals’ and, in some forms, argues that ‘ideologies, such as sexism, racism and speciesism, legitimate the exploitative economic relations typical of capitalism’ (Nibert, 2003:5).



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Thus sociology has a moral and political duty to attend to animals in the same way as it concerns itself with oppressed human groups (Nibert, 2003; Peggs, 2013).

Others take a different approach, developing existing concepts in such a way that they extend to (some) animals. Thus Leslie Irvine (2004) argues that animals have a sense of self and that, *contra* Mead, human-animal relations are characterised by inter-subjectivity (see also Despret, 2008), while others explore how human-animal relations are affected by changing social relations and associated sensibilities. Adrian Franklin, for example, expands Giddens's and Beck's arguments about the nature of modernity to argue that, in Western societies, the human-animal relations typical of post-modern cultures differ from those which predominated in late modernity (Franklin, 1999).

Yet another response is to insist that sociology is not up to the job of incorporating other animals and needs to be replaced by post-humanist theories which emphasise the key place of the non-human in social ontologies. Actor network theory, for example, in the work of Latour, Law, Callon and others, investigates the hybrid nature of the social world and the complex ways in which humans and non-humans (animate and inanimate) are entangled. Similarly, the work of 'new materialists' such as Mol, Barad and Braidotti urges a move away from what they see as conventional sociological ontologies, with their anthropocentric restriction of the social to the human. They advocate 'post-anthropocentric' ontologies in which theory, in Braidotti's words, is 'about coming to terms with unprecedented changes and transformations of the basic unit of reference for what counts as human' (Braidotti, 2013:104).

While recognising that these theorists raise important concerns, we shall offer another response to sociology's exclusion of non-human animals, one that suggests that the discipline is capable of accommodating the non-human. Our starting point is the argument that animals are already involved in social relations; they have always been an integral part of the political economies of human societies and these societies would not have developed in the ways they have were it not for the crucial role of animals. This presents sociology with both a challenge and an opportunity. It is an opportunity to develop a social ontology able to encompass humans and other animals, enabling us to get to grips with the complex forms of their entanglement. The challenge lies in how to do this. We argue that only a reconfiguration of a number of sociology's key ideas will enable this, much in the way that feminism has insisted is the case with gender. Here we focus on two concepts in particular: society and agency. These ideas are core to sociology and a full consideration of either one of them would be well beyond the scope of a journal article. However, our ambition is to identify the difficulties associated with using these terms in a contemporary context and to suggest that the sociological imagination cannot confine itself to the investigation only of human activity and interaction. This is an argument, then, for the continuing relevance of the discipline once it rejects core assumptions about the human.

### *Society*

The view that society comprises mainly, or even wholly, what people do has been challenged from several quarters. Halewood, for example, has pointed out the slippage in the writings of Marx, Durkheim and Weber in the uses of the terms

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'social', 'society' and 'societal', suggesting that all three found the object of sociological enquiry difficult to pin down. A more sustained assault has come from two other sources: the 'new materialism' of writers such as Jane Bennett (2010), Karen Barad (2003) and Diana Coole (2012), which draws inspiration from the work of Donna Haraway, Marilyn Strathern and Isabelle Stengers, and the actor network theory associated with Bruno Latour. There are some sharp differences of approach between these authors, but they nonetheless share some common features. To begin with, sociologists are in a minority amongst them: Bennett is a Professor of Political Science, Barad completed her doctorate in theoretical physics, Haraway completed hers in biology, whilst Strathern is an anthropologist and Stengers's background is in chemistry and philosophy. Coole is the only figure who could be regarded as part of the sociological mainstream. This is not a question of disciplinary purity, but it is to point out that challenges to sociological conceptions of the social are frequently led by those outside, or peripheral to, the discipline itself. In addition, with the exception of Latour, they are all women. It is interesting to reflect that it was women, such as Jane Goodall, who were marginal within the natural sciences, who were influential in the reshaping of ethology and challenging scientific forms of human exceptionalism (Haraway, 1989). Indeed it is thanks to their pioneering work that it is now accepted that animals such as chimpanzees, bonobos and whales (to name but a few) have cultures which are peculiar to specific social groups and persist across generations (de Waal, 2001). These developments pose a problem for sociology's assumption that culture is uniquely human.

Our point here goes beyond the empirical claim made earlier that animals do not figure in sociological accounts of the social world. Rather, it is our contention that much of the conceptual vocabulary of the social sciences is configured around assumptions about the human. When sociologists use this vocabulary, they exclude animals and the non-human more generally. In an analogous way to the arguments of queer theory and feminists that sociological concepts are hetero-normative, and those of anti-racists that they embody a 'white' normativity, we are suggesting that social theory is anthro-normative. It is also unsurprising that these forms of normativity are commonly bound together leading to the argument that different forms of oppression are linked (Adams, 2010). Let us illustrate our case by considering one of the core concepts of sociology, that of agency.

### *Agency*

One of the claims made by human-animal scholars is that animals exercise agency (Carter and Charles, 2013). There is debate about the meaning, scope and relevance of notions of agency within the social sciences, partly prompted by the emergence of actor network and assemblage theory and further stimulated by the work of the 'new materialists'. Writers such as Barad, Bennett, Braidotti and Coole have argued for the agency of non-human animals and objects and suggested a radical recasting of human-animal relations. The situation described by Emirbayer and Mische in 1998, that 'The concept of agency has become a source of increasing strain and confusion in social thought' (1998:962) remains the case.

The term agency has a long history in western thought, where it is associated with deeply rooted assumptions about self-conscious, individual self-transformation and the 'emancipated subject'. Keane traces the history of the concept as a moral value in Christian theology and humanist thought, arguing that the notion of agency is central

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to the ‘moral narrative of “modernity”’ (Keane, 2007: 42). Other writers have identified the source of this meaning more specifically in the work and influence of Descartes and his distinction between the rational subject and inert matter. In the Cartesian view, the human subject is active (and therefore exercises agency) whilst the non-human object is passive, a distinction that favours a view of ‘nature’ and nonhuman animals as available for human exploitation.

This conception of agency, one that broadly speaking identifies it with purposive social action and as chiefly a property of human beings, has come under critical scrutiny in recent years as various authors have sought to refashion and challenge Cartesian dualism and offer other ways of grasping the relations between humans, other animals and things. Classical social theorists such as Marx, Durkheim and Weber drew attention to the ways in which material things mediate the realisation of human subjects, as they become objects of human actions, acquisition and consumption. However, as Keane has pointed out, ‘If you take objects to be of interest in so far as they offer insight into human subjects, you tend to give privileged attention to the artefacts of human production, among material things’ (Keane, 2006: 3). Objects in this perspective are relevant only in so far as they allow a grasp of human purpose and meanings. In themselves they are uninterpretable, unknowable and irrelevant. A similar claim might be made for the significance of non-human animals: within sociology, other animals have rarely been the focus of attention in their own right but rather for the insights they may provide into human social and cultural worlds.

This view of agency has not gone unchallenged. The philosopher A.N. Whitehead, for example, queried the notion that all agency is human. For him, notions such as reason, consciousness and agency are often treated as though they were objects in the world; we become human through the possession of them. Against this, ‘Whitehead’s solution to the problem of viewing the world as comprised of objects and subjects, with the associated lapse into the bifurcation of nature,’ notes Halewood ‘is to focus on the experience of subjects as the primary basis of reality’ (2011:27). Here existence is not made up of objects, or subjects and objects, but is constituted by the experiences of subjects. Furthermore it is ‘The materialised location of all bodies [that] is key to the having of an experience’ (Halewood, 2011:50). In this way Whitehead’s view of agency does not distinguish the human from the non-human, but sees agency as an effect of experience made possible by the material ‘location of all bodies.’

This dynamic sense of agency runs counter to more conventional ideas about agency and avoids seeing it as specifically human. From Whitehead’s perspective, agency cannot be selectively distributed amongst beings and objects. Instead it is the constant accompaniment of material existence, the dynamic and relational outcome of the engagement with the world of all things, human and non-human. This approach shifts us away from thinking in reified terms about agency, but is insufficient for a sociological account of it (see Harman, 2016 for the limits of Whitehead’s relational view of agency). Such an account would need to consider the social nature of agency, what Ahearn terms the ‘socioculturally mediated capacity to act’ (Ahearn, 2001:112), and also to incorporate our biological bodies, our physical selves, the material basis of life that Whitehead points to. Ahearn’s view is that a distinction between action and agency is an important starting point. We would take this further and suggest that this

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distinction is the basis for developing a notion of agency that accommodates the non-human in a fully sociological manner and that recognises that humans cannot be understood apart from other animals (or things).

### *Social action*

The sociological concept of social action has tended to exclude the non-human and it is not hard to see why this should be the case. For sociology, social action has broadly referred to the actions of people in social settings and at its core have been ideas of intentionality - people do things with a purpose - and meaning - people do things for a reason. Meaning and intentionality, like agency, have often been assumed to be peculiarly human qualities. This is partly because the capacity to reason has been seen as confined to human beings (and for long periods of human history, only to certain groups of human beings); and partly because reasons and intentions were viewed as socially generated, that is as arising from social interaction, and therefore could only be said to properly apply to human beings in some form of social interdependence. In so far as sociality was seen as a distinctively human accomplishment it excluded other-than-human animals.

However, it is hard to sustain the exclusion of at least some animals from the category of social action. There is increasing evidence of sophisticated social life amongst higher primates and marine mammals, and many animals, such as corvids, act with purpose and intent (Cheke and Clayton, 2012). So sociologists need to think 'other animals' when talking about social action; other animals are social actors. Furthermore, if agency is regarded as 'the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act', in what sense might this be applicable to nonhuman animals?

Along with Archer and other realist writers, we take the view that action and agency refer to different sorts of things, the one to a being's capacity to act, the other to the contextual conditions which generate an array of possibilities, some of which are facilitated, others of which are obstructed or obscured, but any of which might be pursued.

In this view, agency is an emergent product of the engagement between purpose and the contextual conditions of action relevant to that purpose (see, in particular, Archer 2000 and 2003 for the basis of the view of agency developed here). Purpose here should not be taken to refer only to reflexively generated, cognitive evaluations of different courses of action. Burkitt (2015), for example, has argued that this is a feature of Archer's approach. He rejects her view of agency on the grounds that it is primarily a cognitive one in which reflexive individuals confront structural and cultural emergent properties and make choices according to their concerns. The problem with this approach, for Burkitt, is that it sees individuals as singular and their relationship with emergent properties as a 'purely *mental* one' (his emphasis). This is because, according to Burkitt, the social conversation between people is secondary to Archer's 'internal conversation', which cannot therefore be 'truly dialogical or intersubjective' (Burkitt, 2015:4).

'My main point... is that we never confront social structure as a single individual, we are always nested in some aspect of social relations... This has implications for agency because how we act, the powers we accrue or the constraints upon us, do not rest on our relation to structure but on the nature of

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our interdependence with others and how this shapes our mutual interactions.’  
(Burkitt, 2015:10)

Thus Burkitt maintains that ‘agents (in the singular) should be re-conceptualized as interactants or interdependents and that agency appears only among people in their relational contexts. Here...I am defining agency in the wider sense of *action that produces an effect on the world and on others*, rather than in the narrow sense of reflexive choice in situations where people could have acted otherwise, the latter being one element or moment of agency’ (Burkitt, 2015:11, our italics). Whilst Burkitt acknowledges that agency is relational, he also conflates agency and action, and in doing so misses an important element of Archer’s realist notion of agency.

Agency is not about the exercise of choice, nor we would suggest, about producing an effect, but about the possibilities available to us and how these are shaped by the sort of agent we are. These possibilities do not confront us as an objective array, since what counts as a possibility will to some extent depend on us and our actions. However, the success or otherwise of the actions we<sup>iii</sup> take will in some measure depend on the resources – material, cultural, biological and psychological – we have available to realise them. These resources are, in turn, greatly dependent on our location as social agents. This can be illustrated by the situation of the wolf in Europe.

The agency of wolves is powerfully shaped by their relations to humans (but not only these). On the one hand, they are legally protected within the EU; on the other hand, exemptions can be made to allow humans to kill them. Furthermore, these agential conditions of life and death shift according to national boundaries, a shift of which the wolves themselves will be unaware. Agency thus has a spatial dimension (which agential conditions are relevant will depend on where you are and the ways in which the space inhabited is transversed by human categories and ambitions): in Sweden wolves are protected but in the north, where the Sami live, they can be killed because they might threaten the Sami’s herds of reindeer; in Norway, which shares the same population of wolves, they are not protected by EU legislation and each year thousands of hunters apply for licenses to hunt them. The agency of wolves therefore changes depending on whether they are in one or another national jurisdiction.

The relational forces connecting human and non-human here are complex and contingent and, as is the case with all living beings, individual wolves are not reducible to their relational co-ordinates as, say, a member of a protected species, a symbol of the wilderness, or a legitimate target for hunting. In this account, agency is also: inchoate and without definite empirical limits; intractable, partly because it is co-authored and because it exists only in entanglement with the agency of others; and constrains or enables actions. Thus it is possible to agree with Burkitt that a relational ontology ‘must begin to contemplate the full complexity of agency whereby this can no longer be conceptualized as an absolute power’ (Burkitt, 2015:15). In other words, agency is not an attribute, or property, of humans or other animals or things, but an emergent product of the relations within which all things are placed.

This placement is, in an important sense, involuntaristic, and our practical engagement with the conditions of our agency precedes intentionality (Archer, 2000). Our intentions emerge from our practical engagement with agential conditions which is another reason for distinguishing between agency and action: our actions may

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change our agential conditions. For example, getting a university degree will shift one's location in the web of agential relations, making some things possible – being eligible for a better job - whilst closing others off – perhaps it becomes more difficult to get on with one's poorly-educated parents. One's agential location will also be modified involuntarily or objectively (Archer, 1995, 2003). As one ages one's agency states shift: you become a pensioner with a reduced income, a person likely to suffer from deteriorating health or growing physical infirmities. Each of these changes in one's condition (which are a result of biological processes shared by other species) moves one into different agential relations with other agents, such as companion animals, those with a wage or a salary, or the healthy.

Agency therefore is not context, not a stable set of conditions which constrain or enable choices: it is always agency in relation to other agents (and often this is multiply so: getting old becomes a concern not only in relation to the young; getting old when you are poor enfolds another dimension of agency); and it is only realised at the empirical, phenomenal level of experience when action is undertaken. Agency is thus not a matter of private thought or reflexive intentionality only, but above all it is a matter, as Malafouris has it, of 'actual practice and being-in-the-world' (Malafouris, 2008:30). We only begin to discover the contours of this ever-present web of contextual conditions *through* action, feeling our way around it as it were. Such topographical knowledge is necessarily partial and incomplete because every step we take alters the tension, extent and alignment of the enmeshing relations (Ingold, 2010).

On this view of agency, non-human animals are agential beings. They are entangled and enfolded in all sorts of relations with humans (many of which are fatal for them) and thus will find that their agential conditions are modified involuntarily (sheep do not decide when they are to be slaughtered; chickens do not decide to live in cramped and insanitary battery cages; wolves and pheasants are unaware of the shooting season<sup>iv</sup>) and that their choices, when they are exercised, are already circumscribed (the caged chicken cannot walk freely and the pheasant cannot fly safely within range of armed humans). Let us give an example of these entanglements.

A pheasant shoot in the UK involves human and animal actors. As well as the pheasants themselves there are dogs and their handlers who are either beating (flushing out the pheasants) or picking up (retrieving them once they have been shot and 'despatching' - i.e. killing - those that are not dead). The pheasants themselves are an introduced species. Unlike some other introduced species, such as the grey squirrel, they are not regarded as vermin but are bred in their hundreds of thousands so that they can be shot. A shoot is thus a complex entanglement of social actors from various classes, genders and species all of whom are enmeshed in overlapping webs of agential conditions (to do with power, status, gender, technologies, notions of 'a sporting life', the 'place of animals' and so on) and all of whom therefore are agents *as well as* actors: as actors, we are not reducible to our agential entanglements. To see these examples as simply about human interaction is to miss the ways in which animals are social agents.

### **The social is animal**

In this article we have argued that the conditions within which the discipline of sociology was established entailed a difficult relationship with biology and the natural

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sciences more generally. In particular, in so far as sociology defined itself against the natural sciences, it excluded non-human animals not only as a topic of interest, but more importantly from its core concepts. Ideas about what it means to be human, about what society is, about what the limits of the social might be taken to be, and about the sustainability of life on a planet shared with other species change once they no longer presume human exceptionalism. In putting certain notions of the human at the centre of the sociological enterprise, sociology has rendered other animals invisible, impoverished its conceptual vocabulary and muted its ability to speak about the global crises of the anthropocene age.

In our view, therefore, there is much for sociology to gain from incorporating other-than-human animals. *Contra* Latour and others, our argument is that responding to the animal challenge does not require us to abandon sociology, rather it requires a reworking of its foundational concepts. In considering animals as social actors and agents we have provided an example of how this might be done. We have sought to develop a non-anthropocentric conception of agency in which animals are regarded as social actors constitutive of society. Furthermore, human and other animals are entangled in all sorts of agential relations, with different animals being incorporated into social relations with humans in different ways (see for e.g. Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011). This suggests that social relations are structured and that animals are incorporated into them on the basis of difference and inequality.

This, then, is more than a call for sociologists to take a greater interest in studying animals. Nor is this animal advocacy. It is rather, in ways analogous to the arguments advanced by feminist and post-colonial scholars about women and the subaltern, that taking seriously human-animal relations entails a revision of sociological vocabulary and understanding. To put this more directly, the social *is* animal. In earlier periods in European societies this claim was perhaps less startling, since animals were visibly critical to industrial development and urbanisation. Yet in the contemporary world animals remain a crucial (if usually invisible) part of human life as dietary components, as objects of experiment, as companions, and as co-inhabitants of a shared planet.

We might also ask what is lost by assuming that sociology is only about human beings. It is not only that a sociology that does not include non-human animals will be partial; it will also find it difficult to acknowledge that human beings are also animals. The reluctance to address the animality of the human has made inter-disciplinary diplomacy difficult between the natural sciences and the social sciences. A fuller recognition of what humans and other animals have in common, that social life and culture are not uniquely human, is part of the animal challenge to sociology. And if sociology fails to respond to this challenge, it is our contention that it will be ill-equipped to address the pressing problems of the anthropocene.

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<sup>i</sup> We mean here pre-second wave feminism rather than pre-feminist which would take us back rather further in time than the 1960s.

<sup>ii</sup> Ingold is critical of the notion of collection and prefers the idea of procurement. This is because 'the activities we conventionally call hunting and gathering are forms of skilled, attentive "coping" in the world, intentionally carried out by persons in an environment replete with other agentive powers of one kind and another' (Ingold, 2012:48).

<sup>iii</sup> Unlike the philosophers' 'we' (Despret 2008), this 'we' includes humans and other animals.

<sup>iv</sup> The pheasant shooting season in the UK is the beginning of October to the beginning of February.