"As long as it's not the Nubians": An exploration of the impact of human – animal relations on violence

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Introduction

During the time spent on Mudchute Community Farm, this project has constantly metamorphosed. This was most notable during my seven days working on the city farm. It quickly became clear that those I worked with were disinterested with what I had presupposed would be the focus of my project. Similarly, it became evident that what I gained was of far greater interest and importance than anything I might otherwise have written about. Furthermore, it must be made mention that this ethnography deals primarily with those who worked full time or part-time on the island rather than day-a-week volunteers with whom I spent significantly less time. This essay seeks to reconcile disparate anthropological theories of violence and human-animal relations. By using a focus on violence as an ethnographic tool, this essay attempts to understand how intersubjective human –animal relationships may be used as a means of healing structural violence damage and escaping its reproduction. Firstly, I will present anthropological theory of human – animal relations. Key to this argument and inherent in the ethnography is a critique of Tim Ingold's utilitarian relationship between people and domesticated animals (2000:61). Following this I will examine Phillipe Bourgois and Nancy Sherper-Hughes notion of violence as a self-perpetuating system and of structural violence (2004:1). Thereafter, I will detail how my own ethnography exemplifies critiques of Ingold's theory as well as illustrating structural violence failing to reproduce itself, drawing both

elements together in an attempt to understand how the staff of Mudchute take a parental role in their relations with animals. In learning how to raise and care for the animals, they enter a cycle of care which subverts the structural violence inflicted upon them and subsequently dealt out to others and allows them to reform as caring members of Mudchute farm and society as a whole.

Domesticated Animal – Human Relations

It is a reasonable assumption to assume that human – animal relations might be important on any farm, though this is particularly relevant on Mudchute. In order to fully understand the theory on human – animal relations, it is important to understand the fundamental question of what an animal is. In the introduction to 'What is an animal?' (1994 [1988]) Ingold points out, though it may not seem so at first, that this is in fact a self-referential question. It is everything which animals lack which, in turn, makes us unique (1994 [1988]:3). That is to say that only through confirming what an animal is that we can full distinguish our own unique characteristics. Later on in the book Ingold concludes that in trying to understand how we differ from animals, we negate the differences between species. We can only see ourselves as unique from animals to the extent that different species of animals are unique from one another (1994:97). However, Ingold's chapter 'From Trust to Domination' in his later work 'Perceptions of the Environment' (2000) fails to utilise his own distinction. In his writings on hunted and domesticated animals, Ingold describes the hunter gatherer – animal relationship as one of trust in which wild animals give themselves to be killed (2000:72). He contrasts this with the relationship of dominance when animals are domesticated. Humans assume charge of animals feeding, movements and actions which are enforced through the infliction of pain (2000:72-3). The notion of dominance is to Ingold a byword for domestication and implies passiveness from animals. (2000:68) I also wish to draw greater attention to the utilitarian nature (i.e. animals use for meat, milk etc) of the relationship governing what he describes as a human enslavement of animals (2000:76). Ingold views domesticated animals in a mono-dimensional relationship which humans dominate.

Ingold's understanding of human – animal relations has been subject to critiques, which I hope to exemplify and then critique through my ethnography later on. Firstly, John Knight notes in his introduction to 'Animals in Person' (2005) that Ingold treats animals as objects rather than subjects. Knight argues that given relationships between humans and animals often recall relationships between humans themselves and that it is important to see animals as subjects in a two way relationship (2005:1). Secondly, whilst in his earlier work, Ingold stressed the importance of differentiating species of animals form each other in order to better understand what an animal is,

he fails to distinguish between different animals such as wild and domesticated animal – human relations. Dimitios Theodossopoulos critiques this interpretation in his ethnography of farming on a Greek island. On the island, farmers confer different characteristics to different species of animal and the usefulness of the animals can override utilitarianism and prevent their slaughter (2005:24). He readjusts Ingold's theory of utilitarianism proposing instead the notion of 'utilitarianism plus' – where the plus signifies the time of nurture and care in which the animal enters the moral sphere of individuals (Knight, 2005:6). Lastly, Knight furthers the breakdown of animals in human-animal relations from simple species differentiation to individualisation by arguing that human beings become persons through personalisation, and that animals similarly are conferred attributes of personhood when long term interactions generate awareness of individual difference between animals (2005:5). To elucidate, the longer one spends time with an animal and gets to know it, the more the relationship starts to resemble that of one between two humans and personifies the animal. Within the context of Mudchute, Ingold's oversimplification of human – animal relations is particularly clear as workers and an individualized personalised animal form a more complicated bond.

Violence and Structural Violence

In contrast to to human – animal relations, an anthropology of violence is less obviously related to farm work in general, nevertheless, both structural and physical violence play a large part, in the lives of the farm staff. In Scherper-Hughes and Bourgois' introduction to 'Violence in War and Peace', the authors recognise violence as a concept which is particularly difficult to pin down since it is individually relative. What may be seen as legitimated expression by some might be seen as illegitimate activity by others (2004:2). Furthermore, the authors note that violence must legitimately extended as a concept from a mere exercise of physicality to incorporate attacks on personhood, dignity and self-worth. It is only through seeing violence through its socio-cultural dimensions that we understand its power and meaning (2004:1). Indeed, all that the authors claim to know about violence is its reproductive capacity: violence gives birth to violence (2004:1). Structural violence (a particular type of violence) relates to the violence of poverty, hunger, social exclusion and humiliation, which in the eyes of Scherper-Hughes and Bourgois reproduces itself into intimate and domestic violence in later life (2004:1). For example, instances of poverty (particularly relevant on Mudchute) may seem the result of an accident or chance, however, must be seen within the context of human decision enforcing suffering upon others (Farmer, 2004: 286). On Mudchute,

the ability of individuals to subversion of the reproductive capacities of structural violence through their relations with animals will be analysed.

Isle of Dogs

Mudchute Community Farm is the largest city farm in Europe, boasting 33 acres. It is uniquely situated on the Isle of Dogs, an island in the middle of the Thames formed out of one of the sharpest meanders in the river which bounds it on three sides. The north side of the river is partially bounded by a stretch of water part of the South Quays. Making the island all but unattached from London. The island was formerly known for the shipping docks which as well as being a trade hub for the capital, provided livelihoods of the local working class on the island (or islanders, as they staunchly refer to themselves). When the docks moved, force by the sharpness of the bend around the island which new large ships failed to negotiate, this brought greater hardship to the people of the island and many followed the docks to the new site in Tilbury, Essex. As a result of this commercial decision an already impoverished area suddenly became significantly poorer. Subsequent to the dock's move, the area was regenerated as London's premier business district, known as Canary Warf. The dockland area is now formed from sky-scraping offices and luxury apartments for those work there, juxtaposed against the far poorer local housing and council estates in the surrounding areas. Canary Warf remains desolate of shops or services, lacking a basic high-street. Indeed all the services the island really has are an ASDA supermarket (whose car park you walk through to reach the farm) and the Docklands Light Railway.[1] Throughout the regeneration little consideration was given to the islanders who remained. However, as a result of community pressure, predominately lead by a wealthy islander (one of the few), the local community was gifted a piece of land on the West side of the island which formed the basis of what would later be founded as Mudchute Community farm. The farm would be open to visitors and the community to visit, with the aim of educating young and old about the countryside and food sources.

[1] A service brought in to aid the business commute to Canary Warf.
[2] Though I am wary of being prescriptive rather than descriptive, roughly speaking John, Campbell and Henry were the main islanders that I dealt with. Everyone else hailed from elsewhere, predominately east London: a generally poor area in itself.
[3] Whilst the acts committed by the assailant locals on the animals are not always of a sexual nature, and can

Mudchute Farm

The farm itself consisted of offices, stables and a café plus pens for small animals (ferrets, rabbits, turkeys etc.) which were inaccessible at night, however the larger fields (for pigs, sheep, llamas, alpacas etc.) were situated on public land and were accessible 24/7. Some people who worked on the farm self-identified as islanders while others did not. Being an islander, whilst something many were proud of, was subject to a large stigma amongst others. Many were proud to say they were islanders when asked, but prone to saying they came from elsewhere when teased by others.[2] Whilst mucking out the donkeys and sheep, Mary shared her thoughts on the islanders, whom she considered 'weird'. She explained a rumour that there are only three surnames on the island, implying that they were inbred. She then paused for a moment before explaining how the island itself was originally formed out of a landfill site. Mary made a connection between the people on the island as the rubbish of society, and the land to which they were bound as reflecting their social status. To her, being an islander meant one was an outcast, alienated to society. This understanding of 'being an islander' poignantly demonstrates the forms of suffering which Scherper-Hughes and Phillipe Bourgois identify as being caused by structural violence. The poverty and hunger related to the poor labour market on the island coupled with the social exclusion and humiliation attached to being an islander are the main ways in which structural violence is enforced upon the islanders (2004:1). Campbell, another islander, personified this best. He left school at eighteen years old aiming to work rather than to go to university but had found any jobs. Despite achieving good grades in school and expressing a desire to work, he quickly found out that the local job centre discriminated against people who were claiming benefits. He was convinced they had deliberately refused to tell him about jobs or apprenticeship opportunities of which he later heard about through his uncle, who ran another job centre elsewhere. As a result he continued to be unemployed.

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Though these examples of islanders are perhaps the most potent, many of the people on the farm experienced difficult circumstances economically, socially or health problems as they were growing up too. This had consequences in their later life: John had anger management issues, Henry was a reformed drug addict and physical assailant, Jeremy was an alcoholic and Mary often referred to herself as having an easier time getting along with the farm animals than people, etc. In general many seemed to believe that the farm could be a place of healing for themselves and others. To name one of many examples, it was said that John's anger management issues improved since he started working on the farm, and indeed neither his condition nor anyone else's were apparent to me in our daily interactions. The farm was clearly an aid in stabilising people who had been subject to violence (including structural violence), but how was this achieved? Many people on the farm were keen to tell me about their favourite animals. The darling of the farm was Dennis the pygmy goat, who spent much of the time we had together eating my clothing and playfully head-butting my legs. John made it clear he liked Boxer, an insatiable llama which many dreaded mucking out. I personally, by the end of the week, had developed a fondness for a nameless golden pheasant, which made a habit of pecking me. Undoubtedly, the favourite animals demanded greater care and attention, were visited more frequently, and frequently talked to as if capable of response. I sat with Henry on the gate to the pigs and he explained to me a rumour that someone had been having sex with the pigs at night. He conveyed his disgust but then relayed that he was far happier it was the pigs and not the Nubian goats.

The staff's relationships with animals clarify the critiques of Ingold's understanding of human-animal relations. Consequently, it becomes clear that the relationships between the staff and the animals of the farm vary widely, according to individual animal and species. Henry, whilst not content with the abuse of the pigs, was far more content than he would have been had the goats been subjugated in the same way. I am certain everyone would have been appalled had anything happened to Dennis. To posit the whole animal kingdom into a domesticated human – animal relationship when the relationships vary, as Ingold does, seems misplaced. Even the utilitarian nature of human – animal relations must be called into question. The farm was frequently referred to me as a place of learning, for children and adults to understand where their food came from. The animals were not for slaughter or for any capitalist means of production (the utility of animals inferred by Ingold). If there was a utilitarian element to the use of the animals, it could only ever be conceived as the social capital that the animals represented in terms of their ability to educate and socialise with people. The personal relationship between animal and person would be inseparable from their utilitarian function. In short, the function and the relationship between animal and person on Mudchute farm are the same thing, the nurture and outcome of segregation appear to be

misrepresented in this instance. The domestication does not illustrate an instance of utilitarian dominance or of utilitarian plus relationship as the animals are social actors rather than purely exploited resources. Consequently, Ingold's and Theodossopoulos' understanding of domesticated human – animal relations collapse.

During my time on the farm, one of the main complaints from everyone was regarding visitors and assaults similar to those on the pigs. I was entertained with numerous stories of people engaging in coitus in the pens of various animals or beating and stoning the animals. The most notable story was when local kids stole a piglet and used it to play football with. Most of these activities, I was told, happened at night. The members of the public during the day were made up of middle class families taking their children round the farm, locals passing through and school groups. The abuse of animals on the farm was an almost ever-present topic of conversation and those guilty of acts of abuse were frequently generalised as belonging to larger groups of people and often humanity itself. Numerous people said that since working on the farm they had lost their faith in humanity. Henry once told me that if he won the lottery he would buy the farm and prevent anyone other than farm staff coming on. Whilst it would be easy to argue that the abuse of animals so angered and offended the staff for ethical and indeed work related reasons, i.e. it was upsetting for them to think of any animals in distress and it meant redoing work with new animals, I believe that this does not represent the extent to which individuals felt implicated by the acts of violence enforced upon the animals.

Analysis

Animals have long been known to have therapeutic potential in alleviating the suffering of highly aggressive or emotionally disturbed individuals (Beck and Katcher, 1996:133-173), so the knowledge that they might aid many of the workers on Mudchute farm's social and psychological difficulties is perhaps not surprising. However, this does not fully explain the phenomenon. Phillipe Bourgois' ethnography 'In Search of Respect' (1995) analyses how a childhood of structural and physical violence causes the crack dealers of East Harlem to deal out violence to others in later life, most notably through the gang rape of women (1995:174-175). A direct contrast can be made with Mudchute farm, in particular the islanders: Henry, Campbell and John. In contrast to the local animal assailants,[3] Henry, Campbell and John have succeeded subverting the reproduction of violence in

[3] Whilst the acts committed by the assailant locals on the animals are not always of a sexual nature, and can never be considered domestic and so do not conform to what Scherper-Hughes and Bourgois say structural

their life through forming social relations with the animals. Neither John nor Henry showed any signs of causing physical harm to others nor had they during their time on the farm to date. In contrast, local assailants continue a cycle of violence through repeated aggressions.

Beck and Katcher (1996) note that in rearing cats and dogs, individuals play alternate roles of both mother and child. While I would struggle to argue that the people on Mudchute farm were child-like in social relations with their favourite animals, it was clear throughout that many assumed parental roles as they cared for certain animals. For example, Mary frequently referred to herself as 'mummy' to Simba, the ram, and she often spent a lot of taking care of the animal's appearance. Dennis the goat was impeccably brushed and cleaned in preparation for a visit to Spitalfields city farm. In rearing the animals, the individuals of Mudchute farm bring up the animals in a caring environment rather than a violent one similar to the one they once experienced. In the process, the care that they impart to their relationship with the favourite animals is returned by the animal, which responds by showing their preference of certain farmers. Boxer the Llama could be seen to always show preference to John in the way their playful interactions. It is only through entering a cycle of care, that one can escape a cycle of violence. Henry's disgust at the prospect of someone attacking the Nubians illustrates the protective nature of their relationship. To damage the Nubians is not simply to injure a friend but tantamount to an injury to Henry himself and his healing progress from drug addiction. The anger on the farm shows that these acts represent not mere ethical or physical hardship but rather the loss of a close relation integral to the individual's current social status.

Conclusion

Mudchute farm illustrates a particular situation in which one can perceive a complete collapse of any notion of a utilitarian relationship (either Ingold's or Theodossopoulos') in human – animal relations. It demonstrates that the only possible utilitarian value of the animals is their capacity for socialization with individuals, which then presents them as social actors rather than merely exploited passive ones. Ultimately, it becomes clear that human – animal relationships can help transform notions of identity by allowing individuals to escape the reproductive capacity of structural violence and entering into a cycle of affection and care.

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violence produces in later life. Having not met the assailants, I cannot claim that structural violence was the main character of their upbringing so this does not in any way critique their understanding.

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