

review

BLACK
ROSE
BOOKS

Barbara Noske

BEYOND BOUNDARIES

Humans and Animals



Barbara Noske: *Beyond Boundaries: Humans and Animals*

Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1997

Reviewed by John Sandlos

There are certain ideas that have become so pervasive in recent times, that any mainstream discussion of their relative merits (or lack thereof) is deemed faintly ridiculous by the adherents of the newest of the new world orders. The sanctity of free markets, the benefits of global trade, and the absolute importance of generating absolute amounts of wealth on a nation by nation basis remain the largely unquestioned gospels of our time. Still, one does find a healthy dose of dissent in the alternative press, among left-wing academics, and

among the few remaining social democratic voices in our political parties and public policy making regime. Indeed, one can, if one wishes, still participate in counter-hegemonic discourse without having to tear down too many conceptual barriers, and without having to upset too many of the institutions – universities primarily – that will still tolerate such deliberations.

However, it is still possible to cross certain iconoclastic borders within the confines of radical discourse and, in the book *Beyond Boundaries: Humans and Animals*, Barbara Noske probably does go “too far” for even the so-called radical left. Her most fundamental “mistake” is, I suppose, to focus on something so firmly entrenched and so much a part of our being as the species boundary and all of its inherent conceptual baggage, particularly the assumed uniqueness and superiority of human beings in relation to all other living things. Indeed, Noske’s mission is not simply to critique humanistic ideologies and practices in relation to animals, but to radically re-think the most fundamental aspects of our entrenched human-centred cosmology. Her relatively brief volume is not only a sweeping examination of the historical human-animal interface, but also a more ambitious effort to “get our conceptual house in order” (as present fiscal policy makers might put it) within the context of the broader relationship between humans and other animals. Noske therefore challenges everything from the anthropocentric assumptions of the social sciences, feminism, biology, and mainstream environmentalism to the destructive practices of capitalist agriculture and the animal research establishment. The more fundamental question concerning the place of humans in the “great chain of being” remains paramount throughout such diverse criticisms, and Noske continually asks her readers to consider a universe where humans no longer rest at the apex of Creation: “even if there is such a thing as a species boundary between ourselves and all animals, might this discontinuity exist on a horizontal level rather than on a vertical and hierarchical level.”

The book begins with an analysis of domestication – defined here as a process that removes a particular species from its natural subsistence cycle – that moves from the early neolithic to the rigid hierarchies of what Noske terms the “animal-industrial complex.” The latter discussion is a litany of sufficiently gritty details describing the institutions of factory farming and “scientific” animal research to justify the author’s claim that something has gone terribly awry in the human relationship to other species. Noske analyses the intensification of these “broken” relationships under modern industrial agriculture and, in one particularly brilliant section, uses a Marxist framework to suggest continuities (though perhaps not a direct equation) between the condition of human and animal labourers in the productive process of the capitalist farm. Like workers under a capitalist regime, animals in the modern farm and laboratory are alienated from the products of their own bodies, from productive activity (i.e. de-skilled like the assembly line worker, animals are bred to be milk producers,

meat producers, or tissue producers rather than autonomous beings with a free will). They are also alienated from fellow animals, from surrounding nature, and from their own species life. Thus, the historic mission of positivist science to de-value nature is largely complete with respect to animal life, and the author’s fervent desire for humans to regard animal presences as “other worlds, whose otherworldliness must not be disenchanting or cut to our size but... respected for what it is” lies dead on the killing floor of our so-called enlightened age.

However, Noske remains undeterred, and much of the remainder of her book is devoted to the establishment of a theoretical basis for human-animal continuities. She begins by dismissing scientists who reduce animal life to mere object status (“how can those who are content to study animals totally from without whilst showing no interest whatsoever in their minds, possibly know anything about what animals feel, think or want”), but also dismisses social scientific critics who, out of fearfulness toward socio-biological thought, assert the superiority and uniqueness of humanity solely because of the ability to create language, culture, and technology. Both the social and the biological sciences are, according to Noske, allied in their shared belief in animal “objecthood”, and differ only in their willingness to apply this object status as an explication for human behaviour.

Noske takes a third and largely untrodden path in this debate by first pointing out the absurdity of lumping all other species into a single category that is separate from the one truly unique species of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, and by secondly asserting that animal cultures, languages, and technologies do exist; they are only different in kind from the human variations. Thus, the deterministic “trap” of the sociobiologists that terrifies so many social scientists can be rejected based on its absence anywhere in not only the “social” world of humans, but also in the so-called natural world of animals. Noske elaborates on this point in a beautifully written section that synthesizes a great deal of covert scientific and non-scientific writings that describe social relationships amongst animals and between animals of different species (there are many examples involving humans). This, for me, was the most interesting and provocative section of the book, one that created almost an aura of suspense as firmly entrenched conceptions about the human relationship to the cosmos come crumbling down around the reader.

More importantly, Noske’s examination of such phenomena as the “radical” science of Goodall-Fossey-Galdikas, the wildlife narratives of writers such as Farley Mowat, the primate sign language experiments of the Gardners, and the documented existence of “wolf” and “gazelle” children (i.e. children raised by other species), places them within a comprehensible social and intellectual framework. What emerges is this author’s ground breaking call for an “anthropology of animals”, a proto-discipline through which humans can remind themselves that “other meanings exist, even if we may be severely limited in our understanding of them.”

If there is some fault with *Beyond Boundaries*, it lies in a tendency to move too quickly from one set of ideas to the next. The reader is often catapulted from Marxist theory to more anecdotal information in one fell swoop. The discussion of human primate ancestry is somewhat lengthy, while the postscript on androcentrism and anthropocentrism is badly out of place following the discussion of human-animal continuities. Conversely, some issues are glossed over too readily by the author, particularly the discussion of relationships between humans and animals in non-agricultural (i.e. gathering and hunting) societies.

Nonetheless, if the book includes some of the hesitancy endemic to breaking new ground, it also contains the ecstatic energy of something very fresh and new. There is a consummate passion to Noske’s writing that is often lacking in the sterile and institutionalized world of academic publishing. Such passion manifests itself in an absolute intellectual and, appropriately enough, emotional commitment to her subject matter. *Beyond Boundaries* is therefore a must read for anyone who is, well, human. It may help you to become more so, and less so, all at the same time.