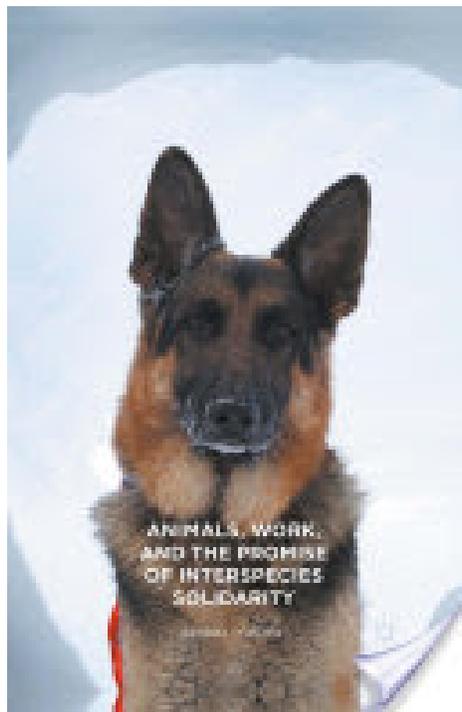


Reviews

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Interspecies Solidarity

Kendra Coulter, *Animals, Work and the Promise of Interspecies Solidarity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 201 pp. \$110.00 (hc), 79.00 (e-book).



I once lived with a border collie, and was often asked, “does your dog work?” Perhaps she didn’t, in the sense that I did nothing to train her to herd sheep. On the other hand, Tammy had a very clear sense of her world, and would often give “eye” to our horses, waiting for a signal from me to go round them up. Her work was never done, as there was always someone — horse, dog, or human — who needed to be cajoled into some space or other.

Tammy’s story is a reminder that animals sometimes work for us, in the sense of fulfilling some specific role; but they may also have their own sense of work, as a job to be done. Kendra Coulter’s book *Animals, Work, and the Promise of Interspecies Solidarity* begins from the acknowledgement that, in both human-animal studies (HAS) and in

labor studies, work done by and for animals has been inadequately explored. To understand animals' work, Coulter argues, means understanding and situating their lives. Globally, capitalism is the driving force which shapes economic and social contexts. It molds all our lives, and — especially for nonhuman animals — the manner of their deaths. It also frames how we understand work largely in monetary terms. Some human-animal interactions, to be sure, center on the generation of income; but others involve unpaid labor, or subsistence work. We need, she urges, to understand how nonhuman animals contribute to the global economy, and how they experience working with/for humans.

Although Coulter stresses the importance of detailed scholarly studies to investigate human-animal work, she also calls for passionate engagement, and speaks of her “political and ethical commitment to ending suffering and improving lives” (13). As she notes, labor studies and critical animal studies have in common a concern for social justice which underpins the academic inquiry. She thus aims not only to analyze how human and nonhuman lives intersect through work, but also to propose changes. And, importantly, she tries to take seriously the animals' points of view.

The first section of the book begins with the observation that millions of people work with or alongside animals across the world, in many different contexts. Yet, despite the enormous significance of nonhumans in, say, subsistence agriculture, studies in the sociology of work seldom address the animals themselves. Coulter examines how some paid work with animals is relatively high status (some jobs with racehorses, for instance), while other work, such as in slaughterhouses, is low status, dirty work with little pay and lousy conditions. Yet other areas of animal work are unpaid, through volunteerism. She draws attention to the gendered and racialized nature of jobs with animals, using the idea of “body work”: this might include maintaining and producing competition horses, cleaning and removing waste in agricultural or veterinary settings, or providing all-round care. Body work between species is always a complex, interactive process, requiring interspecies negotiation; in turn, it involves communication and emotional labor.

Relationships between human workers and animals are complex. Workers in labs or in intensive agriculture, for example, may be relatively detached, seeing the animals as merely units of production or tools of the trade; but others can develop bonds with the animals they use, even if these relationships are transitory. Coulter emphasizes that “the material realities of work do not *determine* how people think and feel, but they help shape perceptions of self and others, within and across species” (50-1). Places of work

and their local cultures moderate human and animal experiences: one farm/lab is different from another. Nevertheless, while it is important to understand the nuances of human-animal connections in work, to recognize that care and compassion can exist alongside institutionalized abuse, the “material reality remains the same. The ends do not change, and the cause of the suffering continues” (53).

The next section turns to work done by animals. Animals across the world work in a variety of situations; yet only some of these we acknowledge as “work.” Sheepdogs like Tammy are “working breeds,” yet she did not “work” in the sense of herding sheep. Part of the problem in recognizing animal work is the prevailing ethos of working for pay — which animals evidently do not. Coulter draws a distinction among subsistence, and voluntary labor, and that mandated by humans. Subsistence is work done in maintenance of self and others: all animals do this even if we don’t think of it as work. “Voluntary” labor, done for humans, includes care work done by animals in our homes — the pet dog who barks to warn of intruders, say. But perhaps the most significant category is work required by humans.

To analyze the impact of animals’ work, Coulter draws particularly on feminist political economists, whose analyses of unpaid labor can apply across species. She draws particular attention to social reproduction — covering much of the labor, usually done by women, which goes on unremarked in households. Animals, too, can be part of these processes of social reproduction, whether in terms of contributing to care or in the transport of items necessary to human life. She notes the example of donkeys in subsistence economies, whose women handlers can carry the baby while the donkey carries loads of food, water or firewood. Without the donkey, the mother might have to leave the child behind — so, in that sense, the donkey contributes to childcare.

Like women’s domestic labor, that done by animals contributes substantially to creating value, to “people, economies, societies and corporate interests everywhere” (77). Within these nexuses, animals are undoubtedly exploited or abused; yet, as Coulter points out, there may be individual animals within these systems who do have some agency or even get some enjoyment out of what they do — as many people handling sheepdogs would argue. Coulter emphasizes a continuum of suffering/enjoyment, terms which allow for animals’ abilities to feel. Some elite racehorses, for instance, appear to get something out of the job even if running a race is physically demanding. By contrast, many animals — such as those living their lives in intensive agriculture — have few opportunities to enjoy much at all.

The third section focuses on work done for animals — animal advocacy is an overtly political kind of labor, necessarily done by humans since nonhuman animals are excluded from political processes. Some of this work involves little or no direct contact with other species (fundraising, for example); other jobs may involve direct hands-on animal care. Some may be emotionally harrowing (leading, for example, to compassion fatigue among workers in animal shelters or laboratories). Sometimes, the animal care is indirect, such as projects which aim to help ‘working’ animals, in part by collaborating with local communities whose lives depend upon them. And some work for animals explicitly entails working through legal and political processes. Although animals are not directly included in the political sphere, there are many instances globally of efforts to ensure better lives for animals through legislation, from prohibitions on keeping horses in tied stalls (Scandinavia) to city protections for stray dogs (Greece).

Despite these efforts, there remains much to do; thus, Coulter’s concluding chapter sets out what she terms an “Anifesto” — bringing together ideas to recognize and value animals’ work, and to reduce suffering. There are, she stresses, many connections between human and animal work, both in terms of labor done, and in terms of the potential for shared suffering. There are also substantial differences: humans and nonhumans are not positioned equally, and animals have little power. Even so, it is important to recognize that “animals are not powerless or voiceless, and they shape elements of daily practice in all sorts of ways” (141). We must, she argues, try to understand the nuances of individual animals and their working lives, as well as the generalized relations of (say) the exploitation of animals in factory farming. It is for this reason that she does not insist upon a specific category of animal “worker,” for to do so would obliterate the many identities animals have in relation to humans (as friend, guardian, etc). Rather, we need to develop understanding of the complexities of animals’ work alongside other ways of knowing them.

It is a strength of this book that Coulter repeatedly warns us of the nuances. Individual lives matter, and not all animals (or people) will have the same experiences; it is the task of HAS scholars to untangle these webs, and to examine specific contexts. How animals are treated within global economic systems goes hand-in-hand with how people are treated, especially women or people in poverty. Meanwhile, scholars in labor studies must pay more attention to ways in which human oppressions profoundly intersect with those of animals: “A just and caring society cannot be created on a mass, unmarked animal graveyard,” Coulter reminds us (162).

It is that nuanced understanding which argues against a unitary animal liberationist perspective, she argues. To be sure, there are strong ethical reasons to stand against using animals as commodities. But this position also glosses over the multiple ways in which animals (and humans) are positioned within economies, and ignores how millions of people's lives are deeply enmeshed with those of other species. As she points out, for many people globally, "[t]heir livelihoods are interwoven with animals, and animal liberation would disproportionately affect these already disadvantaged people in significant ways" (149). Acknowledging that animals are exploited within the status quo does not, for Coulter, mean that all human-animal relationships must end. Rather, she suggests, we should explore the possibilities of "interspecies solidarity," not only as a commitment but also a political project. Solidarity cuts across empathy and caring as well as rationality; it is an awareness of what we have in common, despite our differences. And it is a promise, not only to do better at understanding animals' lives and experiences but also to try to change things.