

Extracts from The Social Construction of the Other:  
on the Sociological Question of the Animal  
by Birgit Mütherich

“The Animal” as an Antithetical Construct

The problem of the animal, or rather of what is perceived as the animal, begins with its concept; for strictly speaking, “the animal” is a fictive category. Rather, what actually exists is a great diversity of thousands of different species, from the roundworm to the gorilla, which can be said to possess certain features that distinguish them from forms of plant life, among them sense organs, fixed action patterns, memory and the ability to learn. Although these features equally apply to human beings, which biological taxonomy would unquestionably categorise as mammals, our culture has been dominated not by an awareness of common features and kinship, but rather by an ontological divide. While many cultures, such as that of Ancient Egypt, never developed this kind of terminology because they found no need to draw an absolute distinction between different life forms (1), the blanket term “animal”, undifferentiated, ambiguous and contradictory as it was, progressively mutated into the antonym for “human” under the powerful influence of western civilization’s religious interpretations and philosophical movements (2). During the Early Modern Period “the animal” went from being a structural element in a triadic world pyramid composed of “god, human and animal” to being the wholly Other, the very antithesis of humanity’s self-image. In so doing, it acquired a crucial social and political function: as an implicitly permanent point of reference within the western symbolic system, it provided the primary foundation for hierarchical constructions of reality, regimes of inferiority

and superiority and models of legitimation that perpetuate all forms of exclusion, oppression and violence among human beings themselves.

(...) The German language is, as Schopenhauer remarked early on, especially rich in constructions that characterise the animal as something intrinsically Other, as the representative of a separate realm of its own that is styled “nature” (3). Animal individuals (4) are deprived of their individuality as subjects, they are objectified and devalued and their forms of acting and behaving deliberately estranged – even when these are formally and functionally identical with human forms of behaviour. Thus for example, German linguistic conventions would have it that animals *fressen* (devour or eat like animals) rather than *essen* (eat like humans), that they *werfen* (drop, litter, whelp or throw) rather than *gebären* (give birth), that they are *trächtig* (in foal or in kitten) rather than *schwanger* (pregnant), and that they *verenden* (die like animals) rather than *sterben* (die like human beings). They are referred to as *Exemplare* (specimens) rather than as individuals, and their dead bodies, when not being dismembered and served up on platters, are termed *Kadaver* (carcasses) or *Aas* (carrion) rather than *Leichen* (corpses). (...) Historically this hierarchical and patriarchal paradigm – first theocentric, then anthropocentric – proved to be an extremely versatile method of establishing control by means of flexible mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. (...) Having postulated that humans, or more specifically men, had been made in God’s image, and that He had granted them dominion over other forms of life, (5) this basic order found that it needed a counterpoint to the human being and the idealised features that distinguished him and which were themselves derived from the doctrine of the *Imago Dei*. In the everyday culture of the ancient world, “the animal” had primarily been regarded as a sacrificial offering or source of meat;

but once religious law had defined it as a creature that could and should be dominated, it became the ideal repository for all that was evil, ungodly and anti-human. This not only made “the animal” both the cause of the Fall in the creation myth and the Antichrist in the Apocalypse of the End Times, (6) it also made it the political symbol for a rising Christianity in its struggle against the old animal deities and powerful competing religions of the period (7).

(...) [The] human being’s immortal soul, his capacity for salvation, his ability to exercise divine reason, and his free will to choose between good and evil are all negative correlates of the animal’s repellent qualities: its absence of a soul, its lack of reason, its lack of free will and its mortality. The disciplining function of this construction is made clear by the fact that the (conception of the) human being contains both principles, reflected with the same asymmetry and intrinsic value. While the western project of civilisation defines this ideal “inhabitant of two worlds” as one who controls his “inner nature” and physicality by means of his intellect and reason, the construct of the animal is – apart from a few internal functional differences such as that between “work animals” and “pests” – on the whole one-dimensional. In essence this implies a conception of the animal as a piece of “living matter”, as a being reduced to its own physicality and devoid of any subjecthood – and this despite the fact that the animal’s own capacity for feeling was understood relatively early on. The conception is promoted by growing economic interests in exploiting other species, and accompanied by a progressive desensitisation to their mistreatment and killing. In Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, down to the first half of the twentieth century, the dominant ideas – those serving the interests of the ruling class – were characterised by a search for features that distinguished humans from

members of other species or even presented them as the antithesis of each other. What is significant about these highly influential theories – such as those of Aristoteles, Thomas Aquinas or René Descartes – is not only that they establish axiological hierarchies among life forms and dualist constructions separating human beings from other species, they also consistently justify regimes of permanent inequality among human beings themselves. In both fields, these theories come to be contrasted with more liberal positions and critiques of culture and power that emerge in the Early Modern Period with thinkers such as Michel de Montaigne (an early pioneer of ethnology and animal psychology), David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Jeremy Bentham, down to Leonard Nelson. Nevertheless, the antithesis to “the animal” retained a central importance, not least because of the compatibility between hierarchical political concepts, the actual power interests of feudal (and later class) society, and the traditionally dualistic structure of western culture. Its dual function as a basic component of the culture’s model of order on the one hand, and point of reference and source of legitimation for political strategies on the other, led to the formation of lasting collective prejudices. Passed down by patterns of perception, classification and behaviour, these were manifest in every area of society, and, from the beginning of industrialisation especially, went through various different processes of institutionalisation. In social and political terms, the crucial reason for the construction of “the animal” as the “wholly Other” may have originated in its function as an instrument of education and control in the formation of European civilization. The opposition of idea to appearance, of mind to nature, of soul to body and of order to chaos, which had been known since Antiquity (Platonic Idealism, Aristotle’s concept of nature and politics, Stoicism), were crucial in determining that reason, morality and self-control constituted the fundamental

guiding values for an orderly and hierarchical state. The “animal”, which was supposedly non-rational, subject to its own nature and without free will, was both proof and justification for the idea of a goal-oriented order of being, in which non-rational beings had been created to be used and dominated by rational ones. However, this idea was applied far more broadly: for example, all groups of humans that could be described as lacking reason, as being governed by their instincts, as being unable to control their emotions and therefore as being unalterably “close to nature” were largely regarded as being without rights and as subjects or even objects to be dominated. (...)

The accusation of being backward or having no history, part of the standard repertoire of exclusionary figures of argumentation, originates in a form of thinking that specifically reconstructs history in terms of societies’ organisational, technical and material forms of intercourse, and associates the concept of history with the productive human (male) subject who aims at appropriating his environment. Combined with the old but still widely accepted model of “natural” evolution, conceived both as having come to an end and as being ordered in a hierarchical series of stages, this pattern of thinking contains a biological prejudice not only against animals but also – and especially – against women. Arguments about a so-called female “nature” are used to interlink their position with biological and social forms of social reproduction, which in turn are used to establish their supposed lack of history, inability to develop and “naturally” inferior status. In contrast to work in the sphere of production, which is interpreted as being manly and active and a force for historical progress, women’s part in social work is seen as passive, unchanging and an almost timeless and natural “performance of duties” – as well as one that needs to be preserved as such.

“Women”, declared the doctor Max Runge at the end of the nineteenth century, “are bound by eternal laws. The best examples of them feel no need to become half-men, but desire rather to be wives and mothers...”. For the physicist Max Planck, there was no doubt that “nature itself has ordained for women their vocation as mothers and housewives, and natural laws can never be ignored without causing serious damage, which would become particularly apparent in the succeeding generation” (8).

(...) The construction of that which is “animal”, and its denigration and relegation to a different order of being, cannot be regarded as a purely semantic phenomenon in the history of ideas – any more than racist and sexist forms of speech can be treated as the mere object of theoretical game-playing. Rather they reinforce the real subjugation of animal individuals, a process that has massively intensified as industrial society’s forms of production have continued to expand. The fact that non-human beings possess no rights to life or its enjoyment, that they in general are entitled to no form of existence beyond that defined for them by human needs, that their (forced) reproduction, their miserable living conditions in mechanised battery farms and laboratories and the billions of deaths they suffer every day should be controlled by humans to serve our personal needs and growing social consumption is largely regarded as “natural” even today, and justified on the grounds that the “animal” “consents” to it, or on the grounds that it is inferior because it is less rational. (Even though this attitude seems on the face of it to be outmoded – as opinion polls or people’s own close relationships with their pets would indicate, or as educational interaction with children and animals and the large numbers of viewers for animal documentaries would suggest – the fact cannot be ignored that all manner of individual psychic needs or specific forms of

instrumentalization are operative here, which do not run counter to the economic interests and general cultural model of order, but are often part of it). As a symbol of a commodified, inferior life form, produced to serve particular needs, and as a representative of the underdog, stigmatised as a matter of course, “the animal” is defined in our culture the very prototype of the Other that must be dominated. As such it also serves as a model for related forms of behaviour, which range from training and manipulation to depersonalisation, exploitation, anonymisation and annihilation (followed by technical transformation into a dead commodity). This both inculcates and propagates a basic attitude towards the Other which extends from the symbolic level through social systems of norms and values to collective and individual attitudes and patterns of behaviour, and which is based on dissociation, degradation, objectification and violence, and on suppressing elementary commonalities – some physical (feelings of pain), some psychic (the ability to suffer), and some affective, cognitive and social.<sup>(9)</sup> (...) Like racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination, the social construction of the Other – including the propagation of the image of the enemy – can only be analysed and problematised as a form of violence through a holistic approach, one that includes the “animal question” and a qualitatively new broadening of the range of beings we recognise as other subjects. By analysing the violence implicit in the construction of the Other, it may become possible to attenuate and perhaps to some extent even overcome it, thereby opening up a broad, new field of research. (...)

1 See Erik Hornung, “Die Bedeutung des Tieres im alten Ägypten”, in *Studium Generale* 20/2 (1967), pp. 69–84.

2 On the problem of the concept of the animal from a sociological, anthropological, biological, juridical, linguistic, philosophical and archaeological point of view, see Tim Ingold (ed), *What is an Animal?*, London/Boston/Sydney/Wellington, 1988.

3 Arthur Schopenhauer, *Preisschrift über die Grundlage der Moral*, chapter 19, no. 7, in his *Werke in fünf Bänden*, vol. III, edited by Ludger Lüdgehaus, Zurich 1988, p. 596f.

4 [Translator’s note: Mütterich uses here the term *tierliche Individuen*, as opposed to the more commonly used *tierisch*. She explains:] Despite its unambiguously negative connotations, the colloquial term *tierisch* (meaning “animal”, but with connotations of “brutal” or “bestial”), is still in use in the literature. However, it is increasingly being replaced by *tierlich* (which lacks these connotations), and this objective linguistic form is used here throughout. (For a critique of the word *tierisch*, see Teutsch, Göttingen 1987, p. 190 f., and Hediger, Munich 1980, p. 323).

5 *First Book of Moses*, chapter 9, verses 1–7.

6 For the figure of the Antichrist as “the beast with the number 666” see the *Revelation of Saint John*, chapter 12, verses 7–9, chapter 13, verses 11–18.

7 See Jeremy Rifkin, *Das Imperium der Rinder*, New York 1994, pp. 27–34.

8 Quoted in “Sein ist das Weib, Denken der Mann”, op. cit., p. 63, 71. These comments were part of an 1897 report on “the academic woman” in which “eminent university professors” offered their assessment of “women’s aptitude for academic study and professions” (op. cit. p. 90).

9 In certain fields of life, in particular the military, a capacity to distance oneself from and destroy others when required is considered highly desirable. In many countries, the training programmes for hand-to-hand combat experts, elite soldiers and torturers includes demonstrating the ability to kill animals that are generally positively regarded, such as dogs, as a means of developing aggressive capacities. “Training” often involves particularly brutal forms of mistreatment, such as cutting open and tearing apart live animals, as a means of systematically lowering inhibitions.

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Translation Nathaniel Mc Bride 2019



Frank Greger

### On Birgit Mütherich

Birgit Mütherich was not only a fierce opponent of the speciesist oppression of non-human animals, she was also a critic of discrimination and exploitation among human beings themselves – in particular social inequality and exclusion, racism and homophobia. Bi linked her critique to a general one of capitalist social relations, and though she sometimes did not express this quite so clearly in her texts, she did so all the more forcefully in personal conversation. Indeed, it was something she never tired of discussing – whether with cashiers at the supermarket, colleagues at her research institute or activists in the animal rights

movement. In these discussions she would always try to include different forms of oppression in her critique of society, as a way of relating them to each other and exposing their common roots.

The major influences on her academic research into peace, conflict and violence on the one hand, and gender and alterity on the other, were the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, the philosophical approaches of Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer and Johan Galtung's peace and conflict studies. Throughout her life – starting when she was at school, then later at university and in her sociological work – Birgit engaged with questions of social relations to non-human animals and speciesism, despite the personal difficulties this created for her. In pursuing her research, she became convinced of the necessity of making connections among different disciplines, especially among the social and natural sciences. As a result, she thought of herself not only a social scientist (as her degree from the FernUniversität in Hagen qualified her to be), but also as a philosopher and a natural scientist. One profession that Bi would very much have liked to practice was veterinary medicine, and her talents covered a broad range, including languages, mathematics, science and technology. However, it was in the field of music, and especially of visual art, that Bi displayed her abilities a universal artist in the broadest sense of the term. Several of the pictures she painted relate to her personal experiences and her understanding of politics and science, bearing witness to her own examination of the horrors of society's power and violence. In the end, she felt she could have a greater influence through her academic work on social problems, and she worked at the Technische Universität Dortmund's Centre for Social Research on youth, migration, gender and work, before going on to become a research associate at the University's Institute of

Sociology. Her writings and especially her book *Die Problematik der Mensch-Tier-Beziehung in der Soziologie: Weber, Marx und die Frankfurter Schule* (Sociology and the Question of Human-Animal relations: Weber, Marx and the Frankfurt School) were pioneering works of human-animal studies in the German-speaking world. It was largely thanks to her that working groups on human-animal relations were established at the 2003 conference of German sociologists in Dortmund and at the Thirty-Third Congress of the German Society for Sociology in Kassel in 2006. In her academic work, Bi saw herself as part of the animal rights movement, and used her lectures to pass on the results of her studies to other activists in the movement.

At the same time, Bi was herself politically active. For a long time she worked in the local Green Party's Landesgemeinschaft Mensch und Tier (Human and Animal Regional Association) and in PAKT, Politischer Arbeitskreis für Tierrechte in Europa (Political Working Group for Animal Rights in Europe). In the nineteen eighties and nineties she took part in all the important demonstrations for animal rights, including the first protest against bullfighting in Madrid in 1989. She also attended a series of international conferences, such as at Tossa de Mar in 1991 and in Vienna in 2002.

In everything she did, Bi strove so far as was possible and practicable to form broad alliances; an example of this was the demonstrations against the Jagd und Hund hunting exhibition at the Westfalenhalle exhibition centre in Dortmund. In the last years of her life, Bi joined Die Linke, Germany's main anti-capitalist party. This decision came from her understanding that relations of power and violence towards animals cannot be altered without fundamentally changing

society and above all the economy, and from her view that this change could be effect through party politics. Bi was always the first to draw conclusions for everyday practice from her academic and political work. She was one of the first animal rights activists to progress from vegetarianism, which she had adopted at the age of ten, to veganism. She also very early on opposed the use of leather and other animal products, and was extremely careful to use language that did not discriminate against animals. At the same time, she did not discriminate among animals themselves: anyone who visited her at home will know of all the precautions and rescue operations she undertook to protect insects and other small individual animals, which are generally overlooked in the larger political discourse. Ultimately it was always the concrete individual and his or her suffering that stood at the centre of her political and academic work. That is why Bi became an early member of free animal, and sponsored a series of animals through the organisation. She also looked after traumatised or elderly cats over several decades, engaging not only with violence and its physical and psychic consequences for the victim in theory, but also in practice.

From the obituary on Birgit Mütterich by Renate Brucker and Melanie Bujok, November 2011