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Understanding human-animal relations from the perspective of work

Nicolas Lainé and Jocelyne Porcher

INTRODUCTION

Today, our relations with animals, and in particular with livestock, are widely criticised because of their impact on the environment, on human health, and on the animals themselves. The central driving force behind our relationship with animals, work, has been largely forgotten. However, work, this line of connection that brings together humans and animals, makes it possible to understand why we have lived with animals for thousands of years: *with* them, not *without* them.

This chapter offers an integrated approach to examining human-animal communities from the perspective of work. It aims at showing that in the context of work, humans and animals not only partake in a shared world, but they create this world together and transform it through their collaboration. By extending concepts taken from the psychodynamics of work (Dejours et al, 2018) to non-human animals, this chapter will present the idea of subjectivity, where animals are beings that use skills and intelligence to collaborate with their human co-workers. Drawing on the ideas of ‘conduct’ and cooperation (see concept boxes), we will further argue that assumptions that animal work can only amount to alienation and exploitation, are incomplete and limiting. We will contend that the shared context of work is a space for relations between species, and that human-animal relations are not always a matter of humans dominating animals. We will consider how techniques borrowed from participant-observation or video recording are useful for an in-depth consideration of these relationships, and for throwing light onto the animals’ subjectivities. Examples will be drawn from the authors’ research on elephants in India (1) and farm animals in France (2) respectively. We will conclude by highlighting the opportunity of animal and interspecies work, for the better engagement of social science research into animal welfare and conservation.

WORKING WITH ELEPHANTS IN INDIA

The Khamti and their elephants in Northeast India

On arrival in India to pursue my PhD¹, my curiosity was aroused by the question of concrete relationships between humans and elephants, and I wanted to gain an anthropological understanding of the conditions and implications of the life that the local Khamti² share with elephants. Fundamentally, my aim was to shed light on what it means to share daily life with elephants: how does this work in practice? What ties have been established between humans and pachyderms? A particularity of interspecies communities such as these is that both species have the same life expectancy, and consequently, living with an elephant is not the same thing as living in the company of a cat or a dog, as this shared life is necessarily long. The owners of the pachyderms and their mahouts very often spend several decades together.

¹ The data presented here was collected between 2008 and 2010 during my Ph.D. fieldwork in Arunachal Pradesh (Lainé 2014).

² The Khamti are an ethnically Tai community, (tai-Kadai Branch) who migrated towards Northeast India at the end of the 19th century.

This leaves time for each of the protagonists to get to know the other, through the sharing of common experiences.

After some exploration of South and Upper Assam, I started conducting my fieldwork in the Lohit district in Arunachal Pradesh. I quickly realised that every man I met there over the age of 20 was knowledgeable about elephants. What promising fieldwork for a young anthropologist such as I was! Indeed, in each of the households visited, at least one person had direct experience with these animals which they were able to tell me about. This also applied to my assistant Dipen, who, although only 19, knew a lot about elephants: he had grown up with them since boyhood, and he was able to mount an elephant and ride them. He often told me about his childhood memories of playing with the elephants captured by his father and elder brother, or of joining them in the forest for logging operations.

The Khamti have shared their daily lives with elephants and worked with them³ since they settled in northeast India. There are no official figures, but a brief census of informants made at the beginning of my research estimated the number of pachyderms in Lohit district to be nearly 500; this figure is particularly high in relation to the sub-continent as a whole. Yet despite the large number of pachyderms belonging to the Khamti, everyone, without exception, repeated to me that since 1996, most of their elephants have been sold. This was the year that an Indian Supreme Court decision banned logging and the sale of timber in the country. As this activity is the main occupation of elephants, as well as the main source of income for the Khamti, the latter were forced to sell their pachyderms. Today, while work in the timber industry has resumed, the feeling I have had since the beginning of my investigation, and which has subsequently been repeatedly confirmed, is that elephants are the one thing the Khamti lack the most today, and the cause of their absence, according to my informants, is the lack of work for them to do.

A study of the Khamti-elephant relationship's recent history clearly demonstrated to me the important role elephants have played in their society from the second half of the last century onwards. Since Indian independence in 1947, elephants have been essential for logging operations. At that time, the Khamti were mainly farmers, but with the increase in demand for elephants for logging, many of them began to specialize in the capture of pachyderms. Pachyderms, as we will see, occupy an essential place in timber operations, so they fast became the engine driving the Khamti economy, up until the mid-1990s⁴.

However, the abrupt cessation of operations put both men and elephants out of work. Having no lucrative activity for their animals and in consideration of the economic value of each

³ The proximity between them was possible because of the presence of large numbers of pachyderms, which are an integral part of the ecosystem of the region. North-east India is an excellent natural habitat for elephants. Located on the foothills of the Himalayas and intersected by the Brahmaputra River which winds through the valley for nearly 600 km from north to south, as well as its many adjacent rivers, the region contains a series of hills which serve as refuges for packs of elephants that retreat there during the annual monsoon season (Lainé 2010). The ties between humans and non-humans have been documented since ancient times and, according to the latest census, the region is one of the most important population centres for the species worldwide. Today, despite the consequences of development, particularly in the southern valley, the North-east is home to the largest wild elephant population in Asia (*Elephas maximus*). Nearly 10,000 individual animals were counted in the early 2000s (S.S. Bist *et al.* 2002).

⁴ This decision led to economic impoverishment and social disintegration within Khamti society. During the course of the study, I observed significant opium consumption among them. It was present every day during our talks, as well as in the forest camps (see Lainé 2012).

elephant, many owners sold them. The money raised by these sales allowed the wealthiest to invest in other activities (growing tea, bamboo, brick manufacture) and for those for whom the elephant was capital, they provided a means of support for several years. Some did not wish to sell their elephants, and they continued to make them work illegally by ignoring the ban on logging, for despite the risks involved, they hoped for a rapid resumption of activities. The Indian Court had stipulated that this order and the prohibition it included should only be provisional. Each federal state, via its Forest Department, was to set up an appropriate forest exploitation plan. Activities were resumed in the early 2000s, although in fact they had never really stopped.

This situation only increased the socio-economic divisions between the Khamti living in villages and those living in urban centres. To cope with this economic situation, those who owned elephants sold them. Although it is difficult to confirm this, many Khamti told me that before the ban, each household had at least one or even two elephants.

In addition, this animal has always been used for domestic purposes (a means of transport for hunting, fishing, agricultural work, firewood collection, etc.). Today however, the use of pachyderms is largely limited to picking up and dragging log. When the 'Tai-Khampti Development Society' had a building constructed for its activities outside the city of Namsai, two Khamti lent their elephants before work began, to prepare the ground for construction. This link between the animal-human relationship and interspecies work was therefore immediately central to my anthropological inquiries.

Understanding human-elephant relations through the theory of work

Unlike other animals, the idea that Asian elephants work is largely accepted. It is even one of the main arguments used by animal advocates: as they consider any form of work to be exploitation, they conduct campaigns aimed at moving or removing certain pachyderms from their owners or the institutions that employ them. It should be noted that such a consideration of effective elephant work dates back, at least, to colonial times.

Nevertheless, approaching animal and interspecies work anthropologically was challenging at first. The disciplines that deal with the world of work within the humanities and social sciences often think of animals as simple production tools, assimilated as machines. This approach to animals in research is influenced by Marx's writings, which clearly distinguish the work of men from that of animals. For Marx, work requires a mental operation, a consciousness that animals do not have, as they only operate instinctively. The work of animals has been excluded from anthropological research, as work is considered to be human alone, and therefore part of the field of culture.

Since Marx, several researchers have tried to argue against the anthropocentric notion of work. Among them, sociologist Jocelyne Porcher hypothesized that animals are performing effective working activities (see **PART II of this chapter**). Her research shows that in the relationship between farmers and farm animals, the death of the animal was ultimately only one aspect of their relationship. The relational rationality of the farmers' work with animals remains primary; it is supported economically (making produce from the killing of animals), and not the other way round. Thus, in work situations, the relationship takes precedence over the economic product (Porcher 2002).

In her research, Porcher extended the psychodynamics of work theories, particularly those developed by Christophe Dejours, to include animal work. This discipline is concerned with the use of intelligence, the ways in which work is experienced, and its collective character.

Research in this field has shown that in order to carry out the task required effectively, the work activity cannot be achieved by simply applying the procedures and regulations of the organisational framework within which it is carried out. In other words, there is no enforcement work. The psychodynamics of work distinguishes prescribed work from actual work. Prescribed work concerns all the rules and procedures that organize the work, and actual work concerns all the means invested by the worker to achieve the actual result. The work activity falls exactly into the gap between the prescribed and the actual. It involves "gestures, skills, a commitment of the body, the mobilization of intelligence, the ability to think, interpret and react to situations, it is the power to feel, think and invent" (Dejours, 2009, p. 20). According to Dejours, all these operations bring work to life; and, from work, we move on to the activity of 'working'. To do a 'good job', as well as to overcome the constraints and suffering imposed by work, the worker must be capable of inventiveness, creativity and intelligence.

Moreover, the action of working is often, if not exclusively, performed within a collective framework. When an operation is performed, everyone is involved in a production activity. Productivity is not based on the usefulness of the individual, but on the fact that each individual works, and is involved in mutual productive activity: to work, you have to cooperate. Sociologists have shown (Cordonnier 1997, Sabourin 2012) that cooperation requires reciprocity between workers: without the participation of one, the other will not cooperate. Christophe Dejours defines cooperation as "the way in which, collectively, workers reshape, reorganize, readjust and adjust coordination to make it efficient" (Dejours, 2013, p. 100). This definition clearly distinguishes cooperation from coordination. As it is only one dimension of cooperation, coordination "is limited to ensuring the articulation of singular activities" (Dejours, 2013, p. 101). In some respects, while coordination is, at the collective level, a requirement, effective collective work includes cooperation. This presupposes a willingness on the part of everyone to share and to deliberate on the task to be accomplished together, and this requires trust and visibility (Dejours, 2008). Further, when all the subjects have brought their intelligence together to form a common dynamic, they form a work collective, that is, "a team that has built its rules through such deontic activity and 'space for deliberation', the place where they are discussed" (Dejours, 2013, p.101). From a working individual, we move here to the collective; cooperation transforms work into 'working with'.

Thinking of animals as fellow workers means that they can no longer be considered to be passive beings at the disposal of humans, but rather, as living subjects that are conscious, at least in part, of their actions. The psychodynamic approach places a greater focus on the invested means of achieving work than on its the final productivity; in other words, it seeks to highlight the way subjectivity and intelligence are engaged by animals to collaborate with human partners. In sum, in the psychodynamics of work, a consideration of the question of working with animals means taking the individual and the relationship into account. It is not just a question of on the one hand studying the working conditions of people, and on the other, the working conditions of animals, it is a question of both. Thus in my research, the elephant became, at work, a true companion to the mahout.

I first looked for signs of elephant investment in work. Work here concerns not so much its purpose, as the means invested to achieve it. It is therefore less a question of trying to show that the participation of pachyderms in activities is real work, than of looking at the way they do it. How do they use their bodies and minds and engage subjectively with men, to perform joint actions? What do these animals have to do with work? I also considered the nature of the ties forged with the men with whom they are engaged. What is the basis of their relationship

with their mahout or owner? At work, do people and elephants cooperate and coordinate their actions? In other words, can we affirm that they form an interspecies work collective?

Methodology

During fieldwork, the methodological tools employed were primarily ethnographic. First, semi-structured interviews and life-stories were collected from elephant owners and mahouts. These well-established tools helped to provide general information on the different uses elephants are put to, and more particularly, in knowing more about the impact of the 1996 timber ban.

Participant-observation was then employed while accompanying elephants and mahouts in the forest. This method was supplemented with video recording, which rapidly became a useful tool for analysis. Initially, these recordings were used as a means of observation, to supplement the notes and to remind us of the omissions when they were written up into ethnographic sketches. From a practical point of view, the use of videos recorded the time and date of the observations, and certain aspects of the context and the situation. The videos also made it possible to have backup for the interviews with the elephant capturers, which took the form of my asking them to explain what was happening between them and the animal during various activities.

In the event, these videos proved to be particularly useful for analysis. When I watched some videos on my return from the field, they proved to be the most effective way of observing the details, and the reactions of the elephants, which were difficult to take in at the time. These videos provided a means of emphasising the physical engagement between mahouts and elephants, and made it possible to note the frequency and nature of interactions. They revealed the sensory channels (visual, olfactory, tactile, aural) that were most employed when humans and animals communicate and coordinate their action. Using video as a medium for my ethnography allowed me to reveal a wealth of sensory information, such as the sounds or gestures of communication and the looks exchanged during the action. At another level of analysis, these videos made it possible to appreciate the investment of elephants in the accomplishment of their tasks (satisfaction, frustration), and the role of the emotional bonds woven with their mahout. This tool could therefore be used both for the presentation of observed facts and for their interpretation. This is the approach undertaken by anthropologist and documentary filmmaker Natasha Fijn (2011) in her doctoral research into the links between herders and animals in Mongolia. In a recent article, she advocates the use of video in research involving humans and nonhumans (Fijn 2013).

Results: Working-with

In the forest, elephant/mahout work teams work directly when a tree is felled and transformed into logs. Together, they have the task of transporting the trees from the place where they are cut to a previously defined gathering place. People and elephants then load them onto trucks that will transport them to the factory. For each of these activities, my analyses and observations show that each elephant knows what they are doing and what is expected of them. Moreover, among owners and/or mahouts interviewed during the survey there is no doubt that at the very moment when men place ropes and accessories on elephants in the village, the elephants know where they are going, and what will be asked of them.

In order to successfully execute tasks, Khamti and elephants negotiate together to achieve a common goal. At work, all participants have the power to influence the outcome of the action being taken. While there is no doubt that the Khamti attribute intentions to elephants, the

results show that elephants also clearly recognise the people with whom they work (owner, mahout). Invariably, the shared knowledge of the pachyderms and the humans with whom they team up is fundamental to the achievement of tasks (Lainé 2018). These various elements make it possible to argue that mahouts/owners and elephants do not simply coordinate their actions in a ‘mechanical’ way: the importance of autonomy and initiatives which are central to their relationship give rise to real interspecies cooperation, in other words, to the formation of interspecies working groups (Dejours 2013).

Video recordings have led to the development of a multi-species ethnography that has revealed the individual participation of elephants in work by showing how, in each of the activities in which they are involved, these animals invest themselves and make a personal contribution. The results also show that working, or more specifically ‘working with’, takes the form of a common beingness in shared living conditions (Lainé 2016 and 2018).

FARM ANIMALS IN FRANCE

Farm animals have mainly been studied in the context of "animal welfare", and with the aim of reconciling animal welfare with productivity. For more than thirty years, these studies have primarily involved experiments which involve placing groups of animals in different situations and comparing their behaviour and/or physiological parameters, based on hypotheses about the effects of one parameter on another. For example, to refer to an experiment in which I [Jocelyne] participated, the point under study was what the effect different types of behaviour by researchers had on a batch of 18 pigs. The animals were divided into three groups: The first were to be treated with kindness, the second with indifference, and the third was the control group. The results suggested that the pigs treated with kindness were more likely to interact than the others (Terlouw and Porcher 2005). Since these experiments are financed by ‘animal welfare’ programs, it could be deduced from this conclusion that pig producers have an interest in showing kindness to their animals.

However, these experiments have several major conceptual and methodical flaws. First, they do not take into account animal subjectivity and intersubjective relationships between humans and animals (Porcher 2002). When you interact with a pig, the pig asks themselves, and asks you - what do you want, and why? A pig is not a gas molecule or a bacterium. As soon as you are in the presence of an animal, communication is established. As Watzlawick said of humans, communication is inevitable, and this is no less true in our relations with animals. In these experiments, there is a high probability that the pig will act according to what they think you want them to do, and not in direct response to your standardized behaviour. The other very important bias is that these experiments are carried out without the involvement of farmers – even though these are farm animals. Livestock farming is often referred to in the conclusions of articles reporting on the experiments, or even in the introductions, yet livestock farmers are not consulted and do not participate in the construction of the research. In other words, it is work itself that is the most absent from this farm animal research. Animals are considered outside the context of our relationships. However, it is work that gives meaning to our relationships and, without taking work into account in farm animal research, our interactions are reduced to meaningless behaviours.

As a consequence of recognising the failure to understand farm animals in terms of ‘animal welfare’ in this research, I became interested in their relationship at work, and began by asking the question: do animals collaborate at work? (Porcher and Schmitt 2012) Then,

having answered this question in the positive, I followed up with the question: do animals work? (Porcher 2017b). Understanding the relationship between animals at work means taking an interest in their capacity for subjectivity, intelligence, initiative and resistance. How can animals be studied without using experimentation, and no longer from the point of view of biology and the natural sciences, but rather from the perspective of the social sciences? With which methods? With which tools?

I based my research into workplace suffering in industrial systems for the better understanding of human relationships at work (Porcher 2006) on the psychodynamics of work (presented in Part I of this chapter). By observing animals at work, it seemed to me that this theoretical framework could also help us to understand an animal's behaviour and the issues at work for them and for us.

This is the reason that in 2007, in collaboration with Tiphaine Schmitt, I created the first field study of relationships between working cows and farmers (Porcher and Schmitt 2012). Tiphaine conducted participant observation for three months on a dairy farm. She conducted interviews with the farm members, and we built a protocol for live and video observation of the animals. In other words, we used methods similar to those we would have used if we had observed children in a family or at school. Animals, like young children, do not talk, but their actions speak for them. The results showed that cows collaborate at work, or rather, that they try to be as uncollaborative as possible. The farm on which we did our research was not particularly pleasant for the cows. It was a zero-pasture farm, with high productive pressure and a rather violent producer. In these difficult conditions, cows were nevertheless obliged to work, just like a factory worker, even though the work has no economic interest. We have shown how cows value work and why this type of intensive system is counterproductive, as it deprives itself of the animals' intelligence and ability to act.

I have recently undertaken research which is also based in the psychodynamics of work, with another colleague, Sophie Barreau, at a training centre for breaking in young race horses (Porcher and Nicod-Barreau 2019). Our hypothesis is that this breaking-in period corresponds to a professional training that prepares the animal for its future profession. We think of the horse as an actor in their training and we study their relationships at work. As the training follows a very standardised twenty stages, we have been able to analyse the evolution of the horses' behaviour step by step, as well as the behaviour at each step. Video has been a central tool for these observations, and Sophie has filmed a hundred horses during these twenty stages. Further, we have studied certain stages using the Observer XT software⁵ with the objective of highlighting occurrences of behaviour and differences between variables (horse, trainer, age of the horse, sex of the horse). The first results of this ongoing research show the importance of affectivity in the relationship between trainers and horses, and the importance of voice in the training work. These results confirm those obtained elsewhere (Lainé, 2016; Porcher and Estebanez 2019). In working relationships with animals, the voice is the bearer of intentions and affects, and is an important medium of communication at work. Within the context of training young horses, the voice is there to emotionally envelop, reassure, encourage and convince. The trainer's goal is for the voice to convey the confidence that the animal can have in the human being.

⁵ The Observer XT software allows the collection, analysis and presentation of observational data.

THE QUESTION OF ANIMAL WORK

In both of the case studies presented above, the question of animal work offers a crucial alternative to counter the criticisms of an anthropocentric view of animal domestication, and it presents a new perspective on interspecies relationships (Porcher and Nicod 2018). Investigating human-animal relations could not only illuminate sustainable farming systems, but could also offer new insight into species conservation (Lainé 2019) and maintaining a high level of biocultural diversity (Lainé 2018).

The question of animal work is often dismissed, for do animals indeed work? To dismantle this attitude, it was first necessary to get past the idea of work as alienation, and domination of man over animals. By choosing to observe conduct rather than behaviours, it is possible to verify whether the animals under observation have understood the task required of them, and to identify elements that indicate their ways of engaging and disengaging (see conceptual box 1 below).

Conceptual box 1: Conduct rather than behaviour

As demonstrated by the psychodynamic of work, 'working' is apparent from the worker's subjectivity. To do a "good job", but also to overcome the constraints and sufferings imposed by work, the worker must be capable of inventiveness, creativity and intelligence.

To achieve this, the analysis of the different tasks performed by the animals must be considered through the notion of conduct, understood as « *way of acting which presume intelligence and action* » (Porcher, Schmitt, 2012: 241). The use of the notion of behaviour, although recently debated in a critical and transdisciplinary framework (Burgat, 2010), refers to a certain form of ambiguity. Resulting from the discourse of behaviourists, widely used by animal sciences until today, the notion of behaviour does not presuppose the intelligence of the individual. On the contrary, in its most Pavlovian sense, its use would risk interpreting each of the actions of animals in terms of conditioning, which would give humans the primacy of their actions over animals. Interpreting the animal's actions in terms of conduct makes the animal an active agent, that is to say the subject is not acting influenced by its genes or by conditioning, but the animal is an actor in what he or she does (Porcher, 2017a).

Thus, employing conduct rather than behaviour allows, on the one hand, to discuss whether the observed animals have understood the task required of them (or whether they simply act as beasts of burden, responding to commands dictated by humans); on the other hand, to identify elements that indicate the animals' commitment (animal intelligence, consent, renunciation, affectivity...).

The psychodynamics of work draws into focus several aspects of what it means to be collectively engaged in a common activity. At work, do individuals form collectives and cooperate (i.e. by engaging their own subjectivity), or do they simply coordinate their actions? This is a challenge, because coordination implies a mechanistic idea of the animal, while active cooperation requires the use of intelligence to accomplish a subjective task. The aim is to look for clues by observing the operations performed by humans and animals.

The notion of collective of work, as proposed by Dejours, reflects a "a team that has built its rules through such deontic activity⁶ and 'deliberation space', the place where they are discussed" (Dejours, 2013, p.101). Thus, the notion of cooperation is more crucial and more pertinent than coordination (conceptual box 2)

⁶According to Christophe Dejours, a deontic activity, or "deontic of doing", refers to the links forged between subjects in order to work together (Dejours, 2009).

Conceptual box 2: Coordination and cooperation

Since one is never working alone, coordination is a necessity. A foreman, a project manager coordinates the work, i.e. they distribute the tasks, make sure who works with whom, with what means and with what objectives. Coordination is part of the work procedures. It is binding on working people and accepting this coordination is part of the subordination relationship linked, for example, to paid work. On the contrary, cooperation cannot be decreed. It depends on the will and desire of people. It is deeply linked to the intersubjectivity of relationships. Cooperation is about engaging beyond the prescribed rules with someone to do something. This is what managers are looking for, but not necessarily achieved. In the case of animal labour, we can also distinguish between coordination and cooperation. In the example of the dairy farm above, the cows responded to coordination orders, such as going to the milking robot when requested by the producer. But they were not cooperating. So, if the producer turned his head, they could change direction and not go to the robot. They didn't want to deal with the producer. He was assured of their relative obedience but not of their cooperation.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have offered an account of how participant observation and the use of video-filming offer useful tools for exploring human-animal relations in the context of work. Human work has historically been the realm of the social sciences, while animal work is still a research issue. Animals are currently being appropriated by supporters of industrialism⁷, or of welfarism, or of abolitionism, and it is not a simple matter to propose research that appeals to these agendas, built on the economic and social history of our relations with animals. The work of animals is still a new and existing area of research, which we have initiated, and it allows us to test our capacities as researchers, to use, and even invent tools that enable us to ask animals the right questions: questions that enable us to understand them and not ones that tend to their enslavement. As Dejours writes, work contains the promise of emancipation. It is up to us to make sure that they are finally held.

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⁷ Whether it is the heavy industry of animal production inherited from the 19th century or the cellular agriculture that is currently being set up, (in vitro meat for example (Porcher J. 2019)).

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