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Piers Beirne¹

Criminology and Animal Studies: A Sociological View

Most readers of *Society & Animals* probably will not know that among the multi-disciplinary practitioners of criminology there is longstanding and, at times, quite heated disagreement about its proper objects of study. As a sociologist, I understand criminology to be a discourse that investigates the whys, the hows, and the whens of the generation and control of the many aspects of social harm—including abuse, exclusion, pain, injury, and suffering. In this harm-based discourse, categories such as “crime,” “criminal,” and “deviance” have no ontological reality. Rather, they are social constructions that are selectively applied by a network of state and other social control apparatuses to the actions of some members of society and not to those of others. In other words, criminology tries to uncover the sources and forms of power and social inequality and their ill effects.

Criminology is an interdisciplinary field whose chief perspectives are supplied, at least in the Anglophone world, by sociology. But because it is often comprised of scholars who do not identify themselves as criminologists, as such, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish clearly between scholarly labors that are

self-consciously criminological and those that are devoted to appropriating and reworking for criminological purposes raw materials that were originally generated in other intellectual and social contexts. (The writings of certain moral philosophers and feminists on animal rights, for example, are of the latter sort and should be of great importance to criminologists interested in the study of animal abuse.)

Images of Animals in Criminology

Mindful of these prefatory comments, I suspect that since approximately 1970 the visibility of animals other than humans (animals) has increased markedly in criminology. This increase largely reflects a coincidence in the domain concerns of two intellectual tendencies. Of these tendencies, one is the labors of natural scientists keen to apply principles of ethology and ecology to the study of human societies. The other is the desire of some social scientists to abandon Durkheim's imperialistic declaration in *The rules of sociological method* (1982) that the social and cultural realms of human life are autonomous from the biological. The result of the confluence of these tendencies is that claims about the nature of animal bodies, of animal behavior, and of human-animal interaction have been inserted into a surprising diversity of debates in criminology. These include, *inter alia*, the configuration of urban class relations in early nineteenth-century England; the alleged links between crime and human nature; the behavioral manifestations of children who are likely to mature into violent adults; and the prior histories of adults who engage in inter-human violence.

In criminology, animals nowadays most frequently appear in the area of family violence. Schematically, it has been shown that companion animal abuse often occurs disproportionately in a variety of family violence contexts: heterosexual partner abuse; lesbian partner abuse; child physical abuse; child sexual abuse—both at home and in day care centers—and sibling abuse. One of the undoubted strengths of the empirical finding that animal abuse frequently exists with other forms of family violence is the diversity of its data sources. These latter have been gleaned not only from structured interviews with battered women and abused children but also from reports of animal abuse to veterinarians, animal control officers, animal shelters, women's shelters, and police.

However, on nearly every occasion when animals enter discourse in criminology, including family violence, their status is that of passive, insentient objects who are acted upon by humans. As objects of human agency, animals are present in criminology as property, as weapons, and as signifiers of violence between humans. In these ways, animals tend to enter discourse mainly because they reflect, or are drawn into, some aspect of the complex web of human relationships that is deemed problematic or undesirable. In research on family violence—but also on other forms of inter-human violence, such as serial murder and mass murder—investigators admit the discursive relevance of animal abuse but tend not to perceive the physical, psychological, or emotional abuse of animals as an object of study in its own right. This is so, I assume, because from the perspective of mainstream criminology, the study of animal abuse *sui generis* is seen to have little or no relevance to understanding and solving the pressing interhuman problems of the day (“real” crime).

These gloomy comments do not mean that criminology altogether lacks positive omens. I can report, for instance, that a small handful of scholars is strongly committed to trying to place studies of animal abuse firmly on the agenda of sociology and criminology. Criminologists have delivered papers on animal abuse at various conferences in the past five years, and panels and roundtables on the topic have for the first time been organized at annual meetings of both the American Society of Criminology and the British Society of Criminology. Currently, there is a “section-in-formation” on Animals and Society within the American Sociological Association, with 300 members needed to gain full section status.

The Future(s) of Criminology and Animal Studies

Do these positive signs indicate that a full-blown research program on animal abuse is in the making? It is hard to say. On the one hand, research on animal abuse, sparse though it is, is beginning to appear in venues that command a sizeable audience. There is an entry on animal abuse in the 2001 *Sage Dictionary of Criminology*, for example, and criminological studies of animal abuse have recently been published in journals such as *Criminology*, *Society & Animals*, *Theoretical Criminology*, *Violence Against Women*, *Critical Criminology* and *Crime, Law and Social Change*.

On the other hand, a successful research program in animal abuse requires more than the short-lived efforts of a few individuals. It needs established researchers with substantial investments of time to investigate it. Their findings then need to be published in journals that attract more than a local readership and to be disseminated further through undergraduate and graduate instruction, thereby helping to stimulate graduate students to undertake and complete their masters' and doctoral research on animal abuse. At the moment, these building blocks are more hoped-for than actual.

Whatever the institutional status of this research program, research on the link between animal abuse and inter-human violence likely will proceed apace, in part because it is a reliable vehicle for criminologists to pierce the general veil of social inaction and for which some financing might be available. The principal site of investigation of the link probably will continue to be family violence. Although there is no good reason to suppose that the causes of companion animal abuse differ much from those of the abuse of human family members, investigation of the link must pursue two hydra-headed questions: Are those who abuse animals more likely than those who do not subsequently to act violently toward humans? Are those who act violently toward humans more likely—than those who do not—previously to have abused animals?

Properly to proceed with such questions, criminologists must pay urgent attention to data collection and related methodological issues. In the United States and elsewhere, police-based data on animal abuse are very scarce and thoroughly unreliable. There are few self-report studies of animal abuse. There are no large-scale household victimization surveys that include questions on the incidence, seriousness, and frequency of animal abuse. Much existing empirical data are compromised by the use of control groups of nonrandom composition and the uncritical constitution and haphazard analytical employment of such categories as "abuse" and "cruelty." There is also little solid information that would permit analysis of the relationships between animal abuse and such key variables as gender, age, class, and race. Moreover, the source of the relationship between animal abuse and inter-human violence must surely be sought not only in the personal biographies of those individuals who abuse companion animals but also in those institutionalized

social practices where animal abuse is routine, ubiquitous, and often defined as socially acceptable.

Indeed, among the many issues that press their claims for attention, the single most important is whether studies should be based on a narrowly defined notion of “crimes against animals” or a broader concept of “animal abuse.” At present, there is much tiptoeing around this question, perhaps because to confront it head-on would involve unnecessary politicization and some professional marginalization. But avoiding it means that animal abuse studies are confined overwhelmingly to those harms regarded as socially unacceptable, one-on-one cases of animal cruelty. This is not without difficulty, however, because among the numerous and as-yet-unresolved questions for a theoretically informed criminology is why some harms are defined as criminal (e.g., intentional cruelty), others as abusive but not criminal (e.g., withholding affection from companion animals), and still others as neither criminal nor abusive (e.g., using animals in laboratories or eating them). Criminology has no legitimate warrant arbitrarily to restrict its inquiries into animal abuse to a notion of harm defined as such either by state authorities or by fickle public opinion.

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Note

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