

Learning from Animals

Jérôme Michalon & Antoine Doré

Neither the social sciences nor the natural sciences are currently invested in studying the cultural relations between humans and animals. If we are to understand them, we must reconsider all our categories, and free ourselves once and for all from the nature-culture divide.

Reviewed: Dominique Guillo, *Les Fondements oubliés de la culture. Une approche écologique* (Culture's Forgotten Foundations: An Ecological Approach). Seuil, 2019, 360 p., 23 €.

To use the relationship between humans and animals to rethink culture: this is the goal of Dominique Guillo's book. A sociologist and research director at the CNRS, Guillo offers a structured and thorough synthesis of more than a decade of research. A specialist in the history and epistemology of social sciences as they relate to life sciences, Guillo maintains that the way in which these two disciplinary domains have approached culture suffers from an *identity bias*, which prevents them from conceiving of the existence of cultures constructed by and between different animal species.

The identity bias diagnosis

Guillo devotes the book's first three chapters to establishing this epistemological diagnosis. He gets the ball rolling with the natural sciences (behavioral ecology, ethology, and neo-Darwinian biology), in a first chapter that proposes a highly pedagogical synthesis of research from the past forty years on

animal sociability and culture. First, we encounter the neo-Darwinians' unusual definition of the social (i.e., behavior that seeks to perpetuate the genes of individuals other than their producers); then, an ethological definition of culture understood as a set of traits transmitted by social learning, rather than by the genetic mechanisms of natural selection.

While the existence of "cultures" among several animal species is no longer a matter of debate, Guillo notes a difficulty, and even a reticence, in studying relationships between individuals of different species. "Interspecific cultures" are not, in the natural sciences, on the agenda. What about the social sciences and the humanities? In the second chapter Guillo provides a critical analysis about them, and concludes that they also fail to establish the necessary conditions for the study of "interspecific cultures." This very heterogeneous work¹ (including animal studies, the anthropology of Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola, and Tim Ingold, symbolic interactionism with Arnold Arluke, Clinton Sanders, and Colin Jerolmack, David Goode's ethnomethodology, and the science studies of Donna Haraway and Eileen Crist) have certainly paved the way for the empirical study of human-animal interactions, but at the price of an epistemological imposture. Though they claim to no longer place humans at the center of thought, thus "de-anthropologizing" knowledge, their research invariably returns to a conception of culture as uniquely human. Particularly problematic is some of these scholars' attachment to a form of constructivism that is hardly compatible with the task of overcoming anthropocentrism, as is their indifference (and even suspicion) towards the natural sciences.

Guillo thus calls for a better connection between the social and the natural sciences, as they seem to suffer from the same problem: their inability of studying culture except in terms of animal groups belonging to the same species (whether human or non-human). They suffer from a tropism or *identity bias*, apparent both in their research's focus (intraspecific and intragroup relationships) and results (culture takes place solely between similar entities and accentuates their similarities to one another). Thus, according to Guillo, these "classic" approaches to culture *proceed from* (i.e., postulate) and *produce* (i.e., accentuate) shared identity. In a world in which understanding the interdependence of creatures as different as earthworms, whales,

¹ These are organized according to debatable criteria: not all this work has the same object or follows the same approach.

and molecules is becoming more and more crucial,² *identity bias* constitutes a major epistemological obstacle.

This is all the more true, Guillo explains, in that it is apparent even in analyses of interactions between humans and animals, as current research places greater emphasis on what they have in common than what separates them. How then should we think about the difference between creatures, both as a postulate and as the outcome of their interactions? The entire purpose of the book, which is broadly laid out in the third chapter, is to promote an approach to culture based on the study of mutual adjustments between creatures that *proceed from* and *produce* not identity, but *difference*.

The interactionist antidote

Once the diagnosis has been made, Guillo, in chapter four, proposes a remedy: to forget about big philosophical categories for a while (such as nature vs. culture, humans vs. animals) in order to study concrete and situated interactions. He provides two empirical examples drawn from his research: a sequence in which a human opens a bay window for a dog, and several interactions between humans and monkeys at a tourist site in Morocco. In these settings, difference is everywhere: between creatures, in their expectations, actions, reactions, and so on. And yet, “norms” emerge from these interactions that did not exist beforehand. Nor are they “common norms,” for they do not apply in the same way to *co-present* humans and animals, any more than they apply to *all* humans or *all* the animals in the relevant species. Difference generates difference.

The proliferation of regulated conducts between humans and animals, Guillo adds, is not the result of “identical reproduction” among peers. For as ethological studies have shown, animals develop behavior through contact with humans. As a sociologist, Guillo points out that the inverse is also true. Social learning thus exists between different species, which can be observed through interaction. Yet if one is to speak of “interspecific culture,” it remains to be seen how this adjusted behavior can be disseminated in time and space. Revisiting in his fifth chapter the emergence and diffusion of guide dogs since the early twentieth century, Guillo introduces the concept of “*indirect social learning*.” In this instance, learning does not mean “copying,”

² Beginning in the introduction, Guillo places his thought under the auspices of the Anthropocene.

since the future guide dog and its trainer are obviously incapable of reproducing one another's gestures. It implies a process of "making do" [*faire faire*] that proceeds from and produces the difference between dog and trainer, and which never results in the assimilation of difference, even as the practice of guide dogs spreads throughout the world. The mechanism of "making do" and "indirect social learning" (ISL) allows one to explain the way in which relationships between humans and non-humans spread in a net-like manner across time and space, from a micro-social to a macro-social level. This shift allows the author to defend an "ecological" approach to culture, of a kind that will encourage dialogue between the social sciences and evolutionary biology.

Chapter six explores the possible compatibilities between current knowledge of the mechanisms of natural selection and biological evolution and approaches focused on interactions. To the evolutionary forces that are usually invoked to explain the diffusion of behavioral traits—animal genes, human genes, as well as human culture through domestication—Guillo proposes adding animal culture. He sees the latter as consisting of factors for transforming genes and behavior acquired through contact with other species, notably humans. This leads him to emphasize the active contribution of animals to the diffusion of new traits: the increase in ownership of pet animals in postindustrial society could thus be explained by considering the behavioral adjustments exhibited by animals to encourage adoption. Through ISL, animal culture becomes a full-fledged variable in coevolution. The study of interactions thus becomes a necessary transition point and a common denominator for a multilevel analytical program of human and non-human animal cultures approached from phylogenetic, ontogenetic, and interactive perspectives. On this basis, Guillo calls for the development of the "natural history of social interactions" (p. 170).

Guillo does not want to restrict this strong claim to the study of human-animal relations. The final chapter thus outlines how this program would be applied to interactions *between* humans and provides the author with an occasion to revisit several processes well known to sociologists (socialization, the social division of labor, and gender). He reiterates his diagnosis of an identity bias that leads sociologists to focus only on the production of "norms" and identity among the members of social groups and to equate difference with a lack of social bonds, leading it to be neglected and even feared.³ And yet, Guillo explains, welcoming difference into the field of

³ Thus Guillo rereads Durkheim's concern with preserving solidarity despite the growing differentiation of social organisms as the expression of anti-differentialist moral panic: for Durkheim,

analysis is indispensable to explaining certain phenomena, such as power relations, which, despite their centrality, the social sciences consider only in an incomplete manner, neglecting ISL mechanisms.

Guillo's book is undeniably ambitious, drawing on great erudition and testifying to its author's pedagogical talents: it makes complex work accessible while putting forth a carefully constructed argument. Guillo addresses head on debates that others barely touch, such as the discussion on the notion of anthropomorphism, to which he makes a major contribution. Furthermore, by showing in a clear and convincing way that there exist intersecting forms of socialization between species, notably between humans and animals, Guillo's project allows one to redistribute the sources and manifestations of sociality very broadly, initiating a stimulating debate on the foundation of these disciplines. Moreover, his defense of the concept of "interspecific cultures" constitutes the book's decisive contribution, making a persuasive case for the interest in studying human-animal interactions. Those who have already been convinced will also find new material, such as the recourse to ISL for thinking large-scale changes to human-animal relations.

Culture's other foundations

Even so, the identification of epistemological blind spots and dead ends, on which Guillo relies in justifying the originality and reparative significance of his project, is debatable in a number of respects.

First, the picture the book presents of the social sciences is often harsh. For example, to say that research on social classes is only concerned with the internal identity of groups overlooks the fact that the sole purpose of this research is to examine social *inequalities*—that is, *differences* between social groups. For years, anthropology has approached culture as the outcome of social activity that *jointly* produces group identity and its other, the non-group.⁴

Should one separate identity and difference in the way Guillo proposes, when this means relinquishing considerable social science research that views the production of identity as *consubstantial* with the production of differences? This is the

differentiation is a problem which, if it cannot be abolished, must at minimum be regulated, lest society cease to exist.

⁴ This is evident in the work of F. Barth (1969).

case, for example, of interactionist studies of gender, which have flourished since the publication of Erving Goffman's 1977 essay "The Arrangement between the Sexes,"⁵ to which Guillo does not refer. Applying his "ecological" model to gender socialization, he presents, as if it were a new discovery, the fact that differentiated gender roles are constructed not only through contacts between people of the same gender (i.e., through imitation), but also through repeated interactions with people of another gender (that is, by "making do" or social learning), so that one becomes a woman through contact with men and inversely.

What is one to make, moreover, of the absence of any reference to a 2001 book by Dominique Lestel, and whose title alone—"the animal origins of culture" (*Les origines animales de la culture*)—would seem at the very least to merit a few lines? The similarity between the projects pursued in both works is obvious: "In the following pages, I advance the thesis that far from being the opposite of nature, culture is a phenomena inherent in the living, of which it constitutes a particular niche and whose premises are found in the very beginnings of animal life," Lestel writes, adding that animal cultures make it our duty to consider cultural phenomena from an evolutionary standpoint" (p. 8). Consistent with this proposal, Lestel (along with his colleagues Florence Brunois and Florence Gaunet, 2006) has called for the development of a "new science," an "ecological" synthesis straddling ethology and ethnology.⁶ A discussion of this proposal—and many others on the same subject⁷—would have been desirable.

⁵ On thinks of such work as West and Zimmerman (1987), West and Festermaker (1995), to which the journal *Terrains et Travaux* devoted a special issue: (2006). <https://www-cairn-info.inshs.bib.cnrs.fr/revue-terrains-et-travaux-2006-1.htm>

⁶ Referring to Lestel would have allowed Guillo to position himself more explicitly in relation to an entire swathe of original research on culture, which appeared in the wake of the anthropology of techniques and which, in the 1990s, discussed "animal cultures." We think in particular of the anthropology of technique that developed in France at the initiative of André Leroi-Gourhan, which continued with André-Georges Haudricourt's work on domestication and with the *Techniques et Cultures*. In the same vein, the work of Frédéric Joulian (2000) on *animal* techniques also testifies to an early reception in France of ethological studies of animal cultures.

⁷ The goal of reconciling social sciences and life science by making human-animal relations a privileged object regularly reappears: see the etho-ethnology of Lestel, Brunois and Gaunet, the anthropology of Tim Ingold, Eric Baratay's history from an animal point of view, and works by Véronique Servais, Florent Kohler, Nicolas Lescureux, Vincent Leblan, and others. Guillo mentions some of this work, but without any discussion of the added value of his own project compared to others.

In many respects, Guillo's project belongs to the spirit of our time,⁸ which should encourage us to minimize the significance of the paradigm shift he proposes. Furthermore, his approach shares a family resemblance with a body of work that his book frequently attacks: that of Bruno Latour. In the early 1980s, Latour initiated a collaboration with the primatologist Shirley Strum, which sought to examine the way their respective disciplines (sociology and ethology) theoretically defined the "social" (Latour & Strum, 1986) and to identify the level at which each documented it empirically (Strum & Latour, 1987). Thirty years before Guillo, Strum and Latour wrote that it was through the study of *interactions* (an approach shared by both disciplines, which, at the time, was innovative) that social dynamics could be really understood, both among humans and animals. The emphasis on interaction as the only relevant level at which social and life sciences can be connected (Strum & Latour, 1987) and the complexity of the relationship between humans and non-humans explained (Latour, 1994); the call for conceptual and ontological deflation prior to empirical observation (or what Latour and Callon call the "principle of generalized symmetry"; see Akrich, Callon & Latour, 2006; Latour, 1988, 1991); an ecological (Latour, 1999) and reticular approach; and the transition from an anthropocentric conception of action to a redistributed conception ("making do"; Latour, 1996, 2000): there are numerous examples showing that, despite his expressed desire to denounce the inanity of Latour's non-modern sociology, Guillo takes a strikingly similar path.

An asymmetrical epistemology

This diagnosis of a forgetting of culture's foundations, which is itself based on several omissions, is accompanied by over-adherence to the epistemology of the behavioral sciences. The sole definition of culture used and discussed in this book is borrowed from this discipline, as is Guillo's key concept (social learning) and the regular appeal to "parsimony." Furthermore, it is the social sciences rather than the behavioral sciences that the author holds responsible for the impossibility of a synthesis in the study of interspecific cultures. In contrast to what they assert, the social sciences are most inclined to validate the nature-culture dualism and the boundaries between disciplines, whether because of ideology or disciplinary loyalty.

⁸ The desire to break with anthropomorphism and to revalorize animal agency have imposed themselves in recent years as a scientific as well as a moral imperative (see Michalon, "The 'Animal Cause' and the Social Sciences," 2018 – <https://booksandideas.net/The-Animal-Cause-and-the-Social-Sciences.html>).

Conversely, sociobiology, behavioral ecology, and evolutionary psychology, by considering humans as one living being among others, abolish the frontiers between these dualisms and appear, in Guillo's account, as progressive theories, while the social sciences are noticeable only for their conservatism. He notes, for example, that by restricting cultural phenomena to identity, the social sciences risk fueling the rise of "'identitarian' political discourses" (p. 302).

Similarly, the author's plea for radical interactionism, purified of all "mentalism," seems to imply a break with much social sciences' work on culture. Indeed, Guillo says little about the possible connection between his project and more traditional approaches, in which culture is, for example, approached as the construction of a symbolic relationship between the individual and their peers as well as otherness. In addition to the study of "objective" differences and identities, the point is to study identities and differences that are *perceived, felt, conceptualized, considered,* and *discussed* by individuals. Does the focus on adjusted behavior, advocated by Guillo in the name of rejecting anthropocentrism, mean that one should no longer be interested in symbolic relationships? One gets this impression, and the consequence of such a gesture must, once again, be evaluated in cognitive terms: to study interspecific cultures, must one abandon an entire swathe of research in which human speech is seen as an object whose heuristic potential is well established? Does rejecting anthropocentrism mean that we must relinquish a body of knowledge on the ways in which "we" and "they" are symbolically constituted?

When assessing this dense and rich interpretation, one wonders how such a powerful plea for considering difference can go hand-in-hand with the goal of unifying the sciences? For despite his protests to the contrary, Guillo's project is typical of all calls for synthesis or an integrated and unified paradigm: it is epistemologically reductionist. He proposes a single path (interaction) to the *totality* of our understanding of social phenomenon.⁹ In the process, he sketches a horizon in which differences between the disciplines will gradually disappear, jettisoning along the way approaches that differ too greatly from the new paradigm. Even in epistemology, the production of identity generates difference—and, in this instance, exclusion.

⁹ The author emphasizes this totalizing potential throughout the book.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, 20 November 2019.

Translated from the French by Michael Behrent.

Published in booksandideas.net, 19 March 2020.