

Material Culture, Cultural Material

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'I am not yet so lost in lexicography as to forget that words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven. Language is only the instrument of science, and words are but the signs of ideas.'

Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*.

When asked to write for a special issue of *Diogenes* to be entitled 'Anthropology: The Reluctant science?' I was reminded of a remark made to me over dinner by my friend of more than fifty years, the late Eric Wolf. It was the last time I saw him: the meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Philadelphia, in November 1998.

'Do you realize,' he said, 'that the three or four thousand people who have come here, and who describe these meetings as anthropological and themselves as anthropologists, for the larger part no longer have anything to say to each other?'

I think he was right. It means among other things that anthropology, if it *is* a science, is a science of an odd sort. In an early book on anthropology and the humanities, Wolf (1965) described anthropology as 'the most scientific of the humanities, and the most humanist of the sciences.'¹ Surely we can only benefit from asking ourselves yet again the meaning of anthropology for those of us who practice it.

I wish to discuss in what follows a tiny corner of our discipline that still can, I believe, provide all of us with a basis for dialogue. I believe that there are many such corners, some forgotten or neglected, the collective study of which could afford illumination otherwise unavailable, while demonstrating anthropology's intellectual unity and strength. But of course it is an open question whether we anthropologists really *want* disciplinary dialogue or, for that matter, whether we care if we belong to a discipline or profession at all.

Because anthropology emerged as a science while committed primarily to the study of small, non-Western, non-literate and non-European societies, it took on a particular character much of which, over time, it has now lost (see Mintz, 1999). It can be argued forcefully, I think, that many features of the discipline as it used to be were by no means indispensable, and that we are no worse off without them. I think that it can also be shown convincingly that the expansion of anthropology so that it could be applied to societies of very different sorts – including large, modern, western, urban societies – has given it new problems to solve, afforded new insights, and revealed new categories of problem, to which the skills of anthropology can profitably be applied. Hence, whatever the changes that anthropology might benefit from, an attempt to return to what it once was is not one of them.²

The field is organized somewhat differently in Europe and in the United States, and that difference may be relevant here. In Europe, 'anthropology' usually meant 'physical anthropology', and archaeology and linguistics were considered separate, if related, disciplines. 'Ethnology' or 'ethnography' were the terms commonly used to describe what the Americans called 'cultural anthropology' and the British 'social anthropology'. In the United States, most students used to be trained in all four fields (even if we confess that such training was usually perfunctory in at least two of them).³ In Europe, including Great Britain, they were normally trained in one; and in the US, four-field training has been declining for some time. Many large American departments that contain scholars in all four fields no longer expect their students to take courses in all or even some of them, let alone to be qualified in more than one.

Both in Europe and in the US, increasing specialization has had the effect of forcing the subdisciplines apart. But some problems can still be brought closer to a solution when a variety of skills are applied. Under the heading of 'domestication' there are interesting questions whose complete answer requires a combination of specialized skills. While nearly everyone seems to recognize the enormous importance that the domestication of plants and animals has played in the history of humankind, not many anthropologists know a great deal about it, and few seem to appreciate its continuing relevance to human social life. Domestication is usually described as the control of the reproduction of one organism by another – and indeed, that is a hallmark of domestication. But it normally also involves substantial alterations in the territorial and feeding relationships of the domesticates (Clutton-Brock, 1987, 21). Radical changes in these three areas result in very significant changes in the physical character of domesticates. This is perhaps even more dramatic in the case of animals than plants. Thus, for example, changes in skin coloration and the character and color of hair, the form of the face, dentition, and the weight and variability of domesticated animals are not simply the result of controlled breeding. They are effected to a large extent by basic alterations in the territory and the nature of the food quest, during the *process* of domestication, which may take centuries. (It should go without saying that controlled breeding profoundly alters the genetic pool, and facilitates the production of plants and animals possessing those traits which the human domesticators are striving to capitalize upon.)

In the late nineteenth century a number of European scholars, some of them contemporaries of Franz Boas, were interested in domestication for what light it might throw upon the human species; and several, including Boas himself, found it useful to think of *Homo sapiens* as 'self-domesticated'.⁴ What the term means here is that changes in the territory, food and sexual life of hominids may have led in turn to changes in body form, size and proportions, homologous to those we see in domesticated animals. Self-domestication was thought of as what happened when hominids became culture-using, culture-building life forms: what they came to be able to do to and for themselves was parallel to what they would later do to and for animals, in domesticating them.

One of the dramatic consequences of domestication is revealed when organisms are no longer able to reproduce without human intervention, as is particularly clear in the case of a plant such as maize (*Zea mays*) (Haudricourt and Hédin, 1987). The same is true for some animals as well. Many domesticated forms would not be able to survive if reintroduced, unprotected, into nature. These observations make us realize that a domestic animal is so transformed in character by domestication that it is, in really quite literal

ways, a *cultural object* as well as a natural object (Hale, 1962, 50). Indeed, there are solid grounds for viewing a domesticated animal as an example of *material culture*. Miller (1987) quite properly points to human labor as the basis for distinguishing the artifact from the natural object; but he does not include any living things among his artifactual examples. Indeed, today's students of material culture do not seem inclined to regard horses and pigs as material culture, for the most part, and the concept may offend some contemporary sensibilities.⁵ But anthropology has had good reasons for treating domesticated animals as if they were material culture, because their existence attests to human creativity, and is particularly striking among peoples whose material worlds may be meager.

Anthropology's interest in domesticated animals and its interest in other forms of material culture traveled together, for obvious reasons. Studies of the equestrian peoples of native North America, for example, dealt with travois and coup sticks and saddles, as well as with horses (e.g. Lowie, 1935); studies of Inuit dog teams dealt not only with how teams were trained, but also with how their harnesses and sleds were made and maintained (e.g. Birket-Smith, 1938). The traditional study of anthropology dealt with domestic animals particularly (but not only) in regard to production; and there always was some material culture involved in the use of domestic animals for productive purposes.⁶

The term 'material culture' itself merits a comment, because the distinction between *material culture* and other sorts of culture is often unremarked. No less an authority than Kroeber spoke of an old German 'white-collar distinction' between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften* (sciences dealing with nature and sciences dealing with the human spirit), which he considered merely nominal (Kroeber, 1948, 295–6). Though of course there is no hierarchy in science, and though sciences deserve to be characterized above all by their method, I disagree with Kroeber's view that objects and ideas are indistinguishable, in terms of their cultural significance. I am inclined instead to take the philosophical position suggested by Dr Johnson's distinction, quoted at the beginning of this piece, between 'the sons of heaven' and 'the daughters of the earth'. Because all societies possess cultures, by each of which the world as it is has been transformed into a *culture-specific* reality, the relationship between words and things is similarly culture-specific. But this does not eliminate the functional differences between the world of things and the world of words that describes them. In each and every society, the productive forces are embodied in a historically-produced material culture, which is imposed upon nature, and which is harnessed to maintain the society economically and socially. This is not to argue that the world of words and ideas is irrelevant or secondary to the world of things. But concrete material, cultural objects – including domestic animals – are *not the same* as the language in which their reality is enmeshed by its speakers. To suggest that they are the same does not, I think, refute positivism so much as misperceive a really obvious fact about the world. Things serve to produce and living things serve to produce and to reproduce; words cannot produce and reproduce.

Domestication is a phenomenon open to study from both humanistic and scientific vantage points. It is an ideal example of cultural processes, enormously variable worldwide, and diuturnal. The first cases of animal domestication go back at least nine thousand years (Clutton-Brock, 1987), and while there have been hardly any new domesticates – the fur-bearing fox and the fruit fly are two commonly-mentioned recent examples,

and fish and seafood are being increasingly domesticated now – the domestication process is of enormous antiquity. We do not really know how long it takes to get from a true feral form to a domesticate; we do not know why people undertook to domesticate animals (or plants) in the first place (speculation favors religious and then economic motives; see, for example, Thévenin, 1960); and we have little but inference to help us interpret *how* people domesticated successfully. Still, of one thing all students of domestication are sure: the effects of domestication were felt both by domesticates and domesticators, and successful domestication transformed the understandings of humans of who and what they were, as well as of the animals whose masters they had become. The *creation* of a category of living things *between* us and the feral world surely affected how people felt about themselves and what they were capable of; it must have transformed their view of nature; and it doubtless altered their conceptions of what the feral world was like, in relation to themselves. It takes no more than the most cursory glance at the Old Testament – for instance – to make one realize how important domestication is in our own history.

Animals have figured in public discourse in recent decades by way of environmentalism, ecological tourism, debates over animal intelligence, animal rights, vegetarianism, and so on.⁷ But the social history of animal domestication does not receive much public attention, and anthropologists have done too little of an educational kind in this regard. One of the recent events in which they did play a role, and wherein domestication was a key to large events, was the quincentenary celebration of Europe's discovery and conquest of the New World. The role of domesticated plants and animals in what Alfred Crosby (1972) refers to as 'the Columbian exchange' was of course enormous. During the celebrations, and probably for the first time, millions of people learnt that such foods as hot peppers (*Capsicum spp.*), peanuts (*Arachis hypogaea*), tomatoes (*Lycopersicon esculentum*), maize (*Zea mays*), and potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum*), and such animals as the turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*), the llama (*Llama glama*), the 'guinea pig' (*Cavia porcellus*) and the Muscovy duck (*Cairina moschata*) were from the New World, gifts of the genius of Native American cultures to world civilization. This was an occasion to celebrate human ingenuity and insight – science by and for the people, before anything called 'science' even existed – without lapsing instantly into discourses about the inhumanity of human beings to other living creatures.

Over the last century, anthropologists have worked with botanists, zoologists and geologists in researching the history of the domestication of scores of plants and animals. But equally important for our discipline, the questions that domestication had raised for anthropology had answers that physical anthropologists, archaeologists, linguists and ethnographers could provide by cooperating with each other. Many of those questions persist, and the specialists who work on them are aware of the need for interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary co-operation. But there is not much general awareness in anthropology as a whole of the significance of such work. Indeed, there is doubt that even inside anthropology it is as well known as it ought to be that specialists in different subdisciplines can and do collaborate actively, understand each other and try to be understood.

Hence this paper becomes a plea in favor of several different objectives. Anthropologists who care about the unity of the discipline need to identify questions that can be answered more effectively through co-operation among scholars working in different parts of it, as well as among scholars of different disciplines. We should also try harder to

make our findings accessible to a general public by the ways in which we teach, lecture and publish – to talk to fellow humans, and not simply to each other. We should continue to stress the enormous contributions to world culture, including material culture, that have been made by technically less advanced societies – not simply in art, but also in science.⁸ I think we should also return to discussions of the term ‘culture’ and its meanings. The central concept of anthropology has been gutted of meaning and thrown aside by many of our colleagues. If any of us believe the word still has a specific conceptual meaning, we should demonstrate as much to those who have chosen to abandon it.

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Notes

1. Though the phrase is framed in quotation marks in the text, Wolf gives no citation. I do not know if he coined it.
2. Alfred Kroeber (1953) argued that anthropology’s dedication to ‘primitive’ peoples arose because no other profession was prepared to study such societies seriously. But he also asserted firmly that anthropology had never forsaken its commitment to the study of all of humankind, in all of its varieties.
3. It was a common saying among my generation that Boas was the first generalist in anthropology, and Kroeber – his first eminent student – the last! In the 1950s many students were highly competent in ethnography and linguistics. Many archaeologists knew a great deal of physical anthropology and vice-versa. Few, if any, were highly competent in three, let alone in all four, subdisciplines.
4. This was also true of Boas’s student, Melville J. Herskovits. See Herskovits, 1929, 1931.
5. Though at least one paper in the new journal *Material Culture* was concerned with pet dogs, I suspect that to call an animal part of the material culture will be read as provocative and unfeeling.
6. Two remarkable monographs on the origins of domestication of the reindeer contain a great deal of information on the accompanying material culture. See Laufer, 1915 and Hatt, 1917. Hatt, in particular, in describing the differing degrees of domestication involved in reindeer use among Paleo-Siberian peoples with the hope of proving that they, rather than horse-users, first domesticated *Rangifer rangifer*, provides considerable detail on artifacts and practices.
7. I have not attempted to provide bibliographical assistance in these regards because the literature is too large and diffuse.
8. In addition to domestic plants and animals, technical contributions such as snow goggles and skis, the fire piston, and a vast number of medically useful plants (of which they are now being systematically robbed) have come to us from the so-called primitive world.

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