People, Things, and Animals

SOC 319/ANT 319
Spring 2009

Tu/Th 9:00-9:50, plus one precept (time to be determined)
Wallace Hall, room 002

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Please note: The syllabus is subject to change to adapt to the course of our discussions. Updates will be posted on Blackboard. Please make sure you always use the latest version.

The social sciences usually deal with people: individuals, groups, or mankind. But definitions of what is a person and who belongs to humanity vary widely across times and places. In this course, we will look at the different ways in which people draw boundaries around mankind or within it, and discuss what purpose these boundaries serve. Can things and animals act upon humans, or only be acted upon? Do they have a role to play in constructing society? We will also look at movements that question established boundaries, such as racism/antiracism, vegetarianism and animal rights activism, pro-choice/pro-life activism, feminism, ecologism etc.

Thus, the central idea of this course is to take distinctions that are usually seen as belonging to different spheres of life and treat them together as "boundaries" that we create in order to maintain our identities as individuals and members of groups.

An important theme that will run through the course is that every challenge to some established boundary (e.g. racial segregation) involves the reinforcement of some other boundary (e.g. that between humans, who are all equal, and non-humans, who are inferior). We will learn to look for the common principles that people appeal to when they want to contest some divide they perceive as unfair, and to trace such appeals in everyday confrontations, not just theoretical texts. Rather than weigh the arguments for or against vegetarianism, for example, we will adopt a sociological perspective to study people who make such arguments.

Yet another topic will be the ways in which people in different times and places construct the difference between (human) *culture* and (non-human) *nature*. Thus we will compare Australian and Russian vegetarians, French and American pro-choice activists, and "nature"-dwellers in Siberia and the Amazon Rainforest.

Requirements and grade percentages:

- Mid-term paper 20% (approx. 4,000 words plus bibliography)
- Final exam 20%
- Oral presentation 15%
- Final paper 20% (approx. 4,000 words plus bibliography)
- Participation 25%

Weekly response papers to specified readings (300-500 words) should be posted on Blackboard (Communication/Discussion Board) by *4pm* at the latest on the date specified in class (usually Monday *or* Wednesday). Each response should be posted as a new thread with your name as the title. In your response papers, feel free to ask questions or state difficulties you may have encountered while reading the text.
You must read *everyone's* papers for the next class and be able to comment on them. Be specific in your comments, always mentioning which passage in whose paper you are referring to. You are also encouraged to post comments directly in the forum on Blackboard. Please be frank but respectful. These discussions will count towards your grade for participation.

Dates:

Mid-term paper due on March 13.
Final paper due on May 12. Strictly no extensions.

Week 1

Introduction. Philosophy and the social sciences on boundaries and personhood

Both philosophy and the social sciences (sociology and anthropology) tackle questions such as:

- *What is the difference between humans and animals? Do animals have rights, and how are they related to the rights of humans?*
- *What is a person? When does an embryo or fetus become a person? Is abortion ever justified?*
- *What does it mean to divide humans into races and ethnic groups? Does or should this division imply inequalities, and if so, what kinds of inequalities?*
- *What is the relationship between humans and things? Do all things have an economic value? Can things ever act on humans? Can we even think of human beings outside their relationship with things?*

Focusing on the topic of vegetarianism and animal rights, we will discuss differences between the philosophical and the anthropological/sociological approach. The rest of the course will adopt the latter perspective, but we will also reflect on ways to reconcile the philosophical and the social scientific stance.

Reading: there are no required readings prior to attending the class.

Week 2
What are boundaries? How do boundaries shape identities?

The study of boundaries has been at the core of anthropology and sociology since their inception, although it only emerged as a specialized field of study in recent decades. Focusing on the constitution of ethnic and national groups, we will look at some of the ways in which people draw boundaries to define themselves as members of groups. We will also discuss whether we even need the concept of a "group" to account for the ways in which people relate to each other.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives, 2nd edition (London: Pluto Press, 2002), chapters 2-5 (p. 19-95)

Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without groups*, *Archives Européenes de Sociologie XLIII* [2] (2002): 163-189

Optional:
Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, *The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences*, Annual Review of Sociology 28/2002, p. 167-195 *(good survey and reference article)*

Frederik Barth: Introduction, Frederik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 9-38

Week 3
How are boundaries maintained? The role of things and animals in shaping and preserving human communities, part I

The idea that things, animals, and human beings constitute three different classes of objects is historically recent. It is a hallmark of "modern" societies, and only one possible way of classifying the world. In particular, material objects and animals (or hybrid animal/human figures) perform important ritual functions in "traditional" societies. Ever since Emile Durkheim, social scientists have argued that such non-human entities have an important role to play in constituting and maintaining human communities. We will discuss whether this role is "merely" symbolic (i.e. sacred objects "stand for" the community, like a flag "stands for" a nation), or if non-humans serve a more "material" purpose. Maybe they can even be said to be "members" of human communities?

Reading:
Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* Book II: Elementary Beliefs

optional:
Philippe Descola text on Blackboard

Week 4

The role of things and animals in shaping and preserving human communities, part II

Reading:
Durkheim *continued*

René Girard, Violence and the Sacred (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), Chapter 1: Sacrifice (p. 1-38)

Week 5

Things-1: The "Bad Side" of Things: Commodification, Reification, Fetishism, Consumerism

Are things merely instruments that serve human purposes? Or can they, in turn, act upon human beings, controlling and enslaving them and shaping society?
Ever since the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), philosophers and social scientists have pointed out the impact of inanimate objects on the society that produces them, and the ways in which human beings turn each other into "things." These processes have been critically examined under the headings of "commodification," "reification," and "fetishism." This week we will discuss a number of critical analyses of the relationship between people and things.

Karl Marx, *Capital,* Vol. 1, Part I: Commodities and Money

Igor Kopytoff, The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process, in: Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 64-91.

Optional readings from Pierre Bourdieu on Blackboard

Week 6

Things-2: The "Good Side" of Things: the moral sociology of inanimate objects

The ways in which things shape our identities may be perceived as "slavery," but can we even think of human identity, or human society, without things? Things perform important social roles. Some even argue that things (rather than e.g. power relations) are what really holds society together. In any case, things are not mere neutral appendices to relations between human beings: they make these relations more complex, and more interesting to study.

Laurent Thévenot: *Which road to follow? The moral complexity of an "equipped" humanity*, in: John Law, Annemarie Mol (eds.), *Complexities: Social Studies of Knowledge Practices* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 53-87)

Bruno Latour, Where are the missing masses? Sociology of a door, in: Wiebe Bijker and John Law (eds), *Shaping Technology – Building Society. Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, Cambridge/Mass.: MIT Press, pp. 225-259

optional:
Donald Norman, *Things that Make us Smart. Defending human attributes in the age of the machine* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), e.g. ch. 4 (p. 77-114)

Weeks 7 & 8
Nationalism, racism, and cultural boundaries

Racism is perhaps the most hotly contested way to introduce fundamental dividing lines inside humanity, and indeed to de-humanize some human beings. However, both racism and anti-racism have been highly variable in their approaches to unity and difference. The term "racism" has been used to designate attitudes and ideologies appealing to both biological and cultural distinctions, and variously seeing human "races" as hierarchically ordered or simply strictly distinct. During weeks 7 and 8, we will look at the evolution of racism as a social practice (including the ways in which it has changed in response to anti-racist movements). We will also discuss why the the racism/anti-racism debate is more prominent in some cultures than in others.

Pierre-André Taguieff, *Racism and its doubles* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001), Part III: Racisms and Antiracisms: Paradoxes, Analyses, Models, Theory (p. 197-279)

Michèle Lamont: "The rhetorics of racism and anti-racism in France and the United States," *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States*, ed. Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 25-55

Christopher Bail: "The Configuration of Symbolic Boundaries against Immigrants in Europe," *American Sociological Review*, 73: 1/2008, p. 37-59.

Mischa Gabowitsch, *Reasons against nationalism: comparative reflections on anti-racisms and anti-fascisms in Russia, Germany, France, and the USA* (see Blackboard)

Optional reading and/or reference work *(good overview of the main racist and anti-racist arguments from a theoretical and historical perspective)*:

Tzvetan Todorov, *On human diversity: nationalism, racism, and exoticism in French thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998)

Week 9
Vegetarianism, veganism, animal rights, animal liberation

Lyle Munro, *Compassionate Beasts: The Quest for Animal Rights* (Westport/Connecticut; London: Praeger, 2001). Part I

Tristram Stuart, *The Bloodless Revolution*: A Cultural History of Vegetarianism from 1600 to Modern Times, ch. 27 (Epilogue)

Week 10
Fetal personhood: when does a fetus become a person, and who decides?

See readings by Elizabeth Armstrong and Luc Boltanski on Blackboard
and
Faye D. Ginsburg: Contested Lives. The Abortion Debate in an American Community. Updated Edition (University of California Press, 1998), Part III ("Procreation Stories"): p. 133-200.

Week 11
From feminism to posthumanism & posthumanities

Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), pp.149-181.

Optional:
Donna Haraway: *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), Part I: We have never been human

Week 12

Evaluations, final discussion.

Final exam.

Attendance and classroom rules

Attendance is mandatory. Let me know ahead of time if you cannot come to class and/or will be late or leave early for health reasons or due to a *bona fide* emergency. *Two* unexcused absences will make your overall grade drop by a full point (e.g. from B to C).

Please ***do not eat*** in class. Drinking is OK.

Laptop use during class is strongly discouraged. Our classroom discussions require your full attention. Making hand-written notes when needed and transferring them to a computer after class is an excellent mnemonic technique. If you feel you must check something online or in your electronic notes, please do so after class and tell us the result at our next meeting.
The only acceptable exceptions are:

- using your laptop for your presentation (if you must)
- using it to view readings or response papers that are being discussed in class

Communication

If there is a problem, talk about it. If you are having trouble understanding the material, talk to your classmates and try to do some additional research on your own. If that does not solve your problem, or if you are having more general difficulties with your work, please do not hesitate to talk to me.
I will do my best to answer all course-related e-mail enquiries within two working days. However, if you have a question about the readings or assignments, please make an honest effort to do your research *before* contacting me with your questions.

Please discuss your mid-term and final paper with me well ahead of the submission deadline. You should have an initial idea of the topic and the argument you wish to make by the end of February. If time allows, everyone will briefly present their ideas in class, and the others in the group will have a chance to comment. Do not worry if you think your ideas are “half-baked”: presenting and discussing work in progress is an important part of the writing process. Feel free to discuss your ideas with me before presenting them in class.

Princeton has fantastic resources available to help you with almost any imaginable problem. Talk to your college advisers, the Writing Center, and Firestone’s specialist librarians. They are there to assist you.

Do not let academic work depress or frustrate you. If it does, come see me and I will give you a list of more important things to worry about.

Grading standards: written work

Princeton's grading standards reserve the "A" grade for "work that is exceptional (A+), outstanding (A), or excellent (A-). Grades in the B range signify work that is very good (B+), good (B), or more than adequate (B-). Grades in the C range signify work that is acceptable in varying degrees."

A

"A" work is compelling, complex, sophisticated, original, and to the point. It displays confident grasp of the topic and the materials read as well as class discussions, and marshals ideas and evidence to argue persuasively in favor of the author's own central idea. It takes a complex approach to the question answered, and shows awareness of a range of intellectual implications of the ideas, authors, or questions discussed, as well as a profound understanding of social and historical context. It shows that the author has done enough research on the question to gain a firm understanding of the debate on it, and has developed an original position based on analysis, not whim. It clearly addresses the most persuasive counter-arguments to its own position, and presents the strongest possible case against them.

An "A" paper presents a clear and well-argued conclusion which plainly follows from the main body of the essay. In reading every line, the reader should be able to understand its function in the essay's overall architecture.

"A" work is clearly structured, accurate in its choice of words, and sophisticated in its style. ("Sophisticated" is not the same as "complicated.") In sum, it shows that the author has engaged with the question asked, the material used, and the paper's intended audience on multiple levels.

B

A "B" paper meets an assignment's expectations completely. It is clear and well-argued, but lacks the compelling approach, close organization, or complexity of analysis displayed in "A" work. It demonstrates the author's ability to respond intelligently to the question asked, to present an unambiguous thesis, to structure and focus his or her arguments clearly, to synthesize the material read while remaining aware of the central question asked, to choose words accurately, and to offer illuminating insights into the topic under consideration. The paper focuses on the question addressed and displays an awareness of its relevance to the topic of the course. It has no substantial flaws with regard to selection and analysis of sources, organization, or presentation.

C

"C" work is entirely adequate but not more. It does not stray from the question asked, has a structure that conveys the author's intent, presents enough analysis and relevant examples to make its central thesis appear plausible, and does so in a way that is easy to understand, even though the thesis may be weak or fuzzy. Its sentences are usually well-crafted, and its paragraphs usually coherent. Nevertheless, C work lacks the sharp focus, the full and purposeful development, or the analytical depth necessary for a higher grade. It may remain very general, relying more on summary and repetition than analysis. It may use straw man arguments instead of refuting opposing views.

D

"D" papers are clearly inadequate in at least one way. Although D work may demonstrate competence in other facets, its strengths will be outweighed by one or two pervasive weaknesses: failure to engage meaningfully with an important aspect of the question or to maintain a focus; skimpy or illogical development; significant errors in writing; no discernible thesis or argument; no analysis of the materials.

Grading standards: participation

A high grade for participation is not a reward for talking a lot and voicing any thought that happens to pop into your head. Someone who talks only two or three times during a class session may well get an "A" if her contributions are exceptionally intelligent and relevant and help move the discussion in a fruitful and rewarding direction.

Note. *Feminine personal pronouns are used to make this text easier to read, not to discriminate against male students.*

A

An "A" student will have studied all the materials assigned and engaged with them on more than one level, using additional study tools such as reference works to clarify opaque points ahead of class meetings. She will schedule her work to allow time for going through her notes carefully, rethinking the texts and putting them into context before writing the position paper and posting it on time.

Her position paper will display knowledge of all the texts read, showing how they are relevant to the specific argument the student chooses to make about a particular author or problem. It will not rely on summary, and devote just enough

space to reiterating the texts read to make it clear which arguments and portion of the text it is addressing. It will discuss the readings with reference to the central topic of the course, explain its choice of perspective on them, and present a well-argued opinion or intelligent question on the aspect of the materials that the student decides to address.

She will come to class with a clear idea of how the assigned texts relate to the topic of the course. She will actively use class discussions to argue and clarify her stance on the week's topic. During discussions, an "A" student will engage with the other participants' positions, displaying independence of thought and supporting her arguments with relevant evidence from the materials read, rather than anecdotes or reference to authority or "simple common sense." An "A" student will have noted relevant passages from the texts assigned for use in class discussions.

An "A" student will always keep her contributions relevant to the central topic under consideration, trying to steer class discussions back to the main theme if she feels they are moving in a wrong direction.

In his or her oral presentation, an "A" student will provide a contextualized and analytical summary of the additional texts read, choosing examples and distributing emphasis judiciously to give the audience a clear idea of the topic presented, its relevance to the course, and the presenter's own perspective on it.

B

A "B" student will display most of the qualities of an "A" student with regard to class participation. She will have read all the texts and engaged with them, submitted the position paper on time and presented a well-argued, analytical point of view rather than pure summary. However, her analysis of the texts will be less complex than an "A" student's, and she may not have done much to try and clarify any opaque points prior to class discussions.

A "B" student will regularly make relevant contributions to class discussions and stick to the central themes of the course, though she may frequently omit to respond to others' points of view. She will support her arguments with evidence from the texts read, although she may be unspecific about the passages referred to. The points she makes will be solidly argued, although she may display less independence of thought than an "A" student vis-à-vis arguments of an author she "sides" with (or the professor).

A "B" student's oral presentation will provide a good overview of its topic and convey a sense of its relevance to the other students, although there may be minor factual inaccuracies or a somewhat unbalanced choice of quotes and examples.

C

A “C” student will have read all the texts assigned. However, her position paper and her class contributions may reveal that she read some of the relevant material so cursorily as to be unable to grasp its central points. Her position papers may be worded carelessly. They rely heavily on summarizing, fail to convey her main thesis or question clearly, or stray far from the topic of the course. Her response to the texts, as displayed in both the position papers and class discussions, may constitute a simple gut reaction rather than an attempt to grapple with the authors’ ideas and take into account alternative interpretations.

Her contributions to class discussions may be frequent and interesting, but tend to be fuzzy. She may be unspecific in her references to authors, texts, and ideas from the readings. She may frequently stray from the central topic of the class, or fail to give consideration to other participants’ points of view.

Her talk will give an adequate presentation of the topic discussed, but may be inaccurate, strongly unbalanced, or overly descriptive.

D

A “D” student frequently skips some of the readings assigned and merely reacts to what she has read without trying to insert the texts into a broader picture or forming an original and grounded judgment on them.

He or she submits the position paper over two hours after the 4pm deadline more than twice in the semester. Her position papers may be written so sloppily that the points made are difficult to grasp, or may present striking misinterpretations of the texts. They rely heavily on summarizing, do not explain the choice of aspects focused on, and present only whimsical judgments rather than well-argued opinions on the texts.

A “D” student is clearly uninterested in many class discussions.

While he or she may occasionally contribute interesting ideas to discussions, her participation will be erratic and her input often beside the point.

Her oral presentation is ill-prepared and does not convey a clear idea of the topic or its relevance to the course.