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Book review: One health and multispecies organizational ethnography

Rabies in the streets. Interspecies camaraderie in urban India
by *Nadal D.*
The Pennsylvania State University Press
2020
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Some illnesses have a well-earned and horrific reputation. Rabies is one such, being "the deadliest disease on earth, fatal in over 99% of cases" (Nadal, 2020, p. 2). Without going into gory detail of its symptoms, the worst is that there is no final cure against it. It is a zoonotic disease, which means it is transmitted from animals (specifically other mammals in the case of rabies) to humans, and the other way around. All mammals suffer equally. Since zoonoses, such as rabies, are a multispecies phenomenon, the World Health Organization has developed the One Health concept that looks at them from both the perspective of human and animal health and welfare. Deborah Nadal has tried to do justice to this multispecies disease by ethnographically researching rabies in the streets of two cities in India, Delhi and Jaipur. She devotes chapters to some of the key actants, including dogs, macaques and cows. She also places them in the context of the religious and other customs of India. Nadal's work is truly a "multispecies ethnography" in that it challenges the conventional anthropocentrism of the craft. The cultural contexts are not essentialised as Nadal describes the often paradoxical and puzzling nature of cultural beliefs and practices. On the one hand, animals are venerated and taken care of in remarkable ways in Indian culture. Indeed, the feeding of stray dogs, wild macaques and venerated cows is at the centre of the many connections she draws. On the other hand, animals are abused, neglected and often left to die horrible deaths. Cows are a good example. They are considered holy and treated as such while, at the same time, they are left to feed on garbage, turning into "plastic cows." 85% of them "experience an excruciating death under the weight of the plastic they have consumed" (Nadal, 2020, p. 74). Our received wisdom about the place of cows in Indian society is revealed as naïve.

The same cultural paradoxes basically apply to other major players in the interactions between rabies, dogs, humans and macaques. Beauty and cruelty go hand in hand. Cruelty is not reserved for animals and beauty for humans. The caste system, for instance, does not make a clear distinction between the two. Some animals are seen as higher than some humans, while other humans are seen as higher than other humans and non-human animals. Nadal's chapter 2 on "food in the middle" makes this point in very convincing strokes. You might expect, on the basis of the title of the chapter, that it is about the food humans usually eat. But no, the chapter is about the food that animals eat, both consciously and unconsciously provided by humans. One telling example? Vultures, considered by many the quintessential scavengers, took care of cleaning up a lot of decaying carcasses in India in the past. They have evolved to do just that. But, since the 1970s, vultures have all but died out, despite the plentiful supply of carcases and garbage heaps. Populations have fallen between 97 and 99.9% (Nadal, 2020, p. 54–55). The main reason? Overuse of diclofenac in human and veterinary medicine. We now know that

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diclofenac is highly toxic for vultures (Nadal, 2020, p. 55). Vultures die of kidney failure within a few weeks after eating carcasses of livestock treated with diclofenac. There is no real replacement for the vultures.

This book is a remarkable multispecies ethnography. Nadal reveals something of the way she conducted her ethnographic research in the introductory chapter of the book. Allow us an extensive quote as we consider it revealing of multispecies ethnography:

> My research also greatly benefitted from my diverse and extensive experience in three veterinary hospitals and shelters for street animals in both cities where I lived [Delhi and Jaipur]. I agree with Donna Haraway that in order to talk about animals responsibly and usefully we must get "dirty and knowledgeable" (2008, p. 80). As it is impossible to get dirty without using the body in a direct, close, even intimate way, I always inaugurated my experience in the veterinary hospitals and shelters by performing the grimiest tasks: removing guano from the pigeon cages, cleaning up kittens' diarrhea, bathing mangy dogs, and helping during autopsies. . . .. These one-on-one interactions with animals *were essential* to this kind of research. (Nadal, 2020, p. 24, emphasis added)

In conclusion, a word about the subtitle of the book, "Interspecies *camaraderie* in urban India" (italics added). Where is this "camaraderie" in the context of this deadly disease? Research has shown that most children die of rabies because they are bitten by unvaccinated domestic dogs, often from their neighbours (Nadal, 2020, p. 197). Nonetheless, these children are culturally reluctant to speak of a domestic dog, *paltu*, as a "mad rabid dog", *pagal kutta*. To the level that they even excuse "the dogs" biting behavior' (Nadal, 2020, p. 195). "The children's empathy for *pagal kuttas*, (. . .) helped me frame the context for interspecies camaraderie . . .. [which] is a very rare finding in infectious disease research, where victim blaming is generally the norm" (Nadal, 2020, p. 196). Nadal returns to the concept of "camaraderie" in her concluding chapter, where she explains its two connotations for her. "The first echoes the intense feeling of attachment experienced by soldiers towards their fellows in war", an "instinct to survive" together (Nadal, 2020, p. 223). The second is based on its etymology of "living together by force of circumstance . . . also suggests complicity, empathy, solidarity, and closeness" (Nadal, 2020, p. 224). All good reasons to embrace and develop the One Health concept further!

The above is only a small selection of what to take from this empirically incredibly rich and well-researched multispecies ethnography. We dare even to suggest that we consider it a benchmark study for multispecies ethnographies to follow!

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