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Hunting-Gathering Beyond the Order of Domestication

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Introduction

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Introduction

Hunting-Gathering Beyond the Order of Domestication

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As the nineteenth century modernist narrative goes, it was during the Neolithic revolution some 10,000 years ago that humans moved forward. They domesticated plants and animals for the first time, allowing human societies to transition from mobile hunting-gathering bands into sedentary settlements (Childe 1928). Crucially, this narrative of domestication is a story of progress: it presupposes an ever-expanding control of ‘Man [*sic*] over Nature’, allowing, for example, for the dramatic expansion of communities and their societal complexity. Thus, agricultural activities symbolise man’s alleged civilisation, as domestication went both ways: through the cultivation of crops and taming animals, humans *became cultivated themselves* (ibid.).

This domestication narrative has also been the main trope through which anthropologists have engaged with hunter-gatherers. One famous example is the

symposium ‘Man the Hunter’. In April 1966, Richard Lee and Irven DeVore brought together a group of anthropologists in Chicago. Here, they discussed the latest ethnographic evidence on hunter-gatherers, with which they meant societies where people draw their sustenance from foraging plants and trapping and killing wild animals. Described by the organisers as ‘a crucial stage of human development’, the premise of the conference was that any theory of society or the nature of mankind must incorporate knowledge of ‘man’s once universal hunting way of life’ (Lee and DeVore 1968).

Domestication, here, figures as a discursive ordering device (Lien, Swanson, and Ween 2018). Framing hunting as the ‘original’ source of livelihood not only devalued women’s work (e.g. Collier and Rosaldo 1981), but also places the hunter-gatherer squarely at the start of this evolutionary trajectory. At the confer-

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ence, studies of modern hunting-gathering societies were presented as evidence of how humans lived in the Palaeolithic Age. Through this frame, contemporary hunting-gathering societies appear both as ‘arrested development’, a relic among modern civilisation (Kelly 2013: 6), and an image of romantic nostalgia. We see the resonances of an early 20th century obsession with humans living closer to nature, as compared to modern societies embroiled in processes of industrialisation and urbanisation – an obsession that has been central to the beginnings of our discipline.

The hunter-gatherer, it seems, is always ‘other’ to something, caught in the dichotomies that shape modern thinking (Ghosh 2021): nature and culture; wild and domestic; savage and civilised. But what becomes of the hunter-gatherer beyond the modernist order of domestication? What if we see hunting and gathering not as labels for a kind of society, but rather as a set of practices through which humans relate themselves to ecologies? These questions become pertinent in times where climate change, pollution, urbanisation, and issues of food (in)security have prompted a theoretical reorientation within anthropology towards political ecologies and the commons, and more-than-human socialities and relations. In fact, as this issue attests, it is in these two (often overlapping) directions that a renewed scholarly interest in hunters and gatherers moves.

Hunting and gathering, political ecologies and the commons

Contemporary anthropologists engage with domestication in critical ways, emphasising the political dimensions of progress ideals and civilisation narratives. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2018), for example, describes domestication as a world-making process, based on the premise of control, discipline, and alienation. Conceived this way, domestication is a project closely connected to state and capitalist expansion, with at its zenith the plantation, in which relations are stripped to a bare minimum, all to the benefit of extractive economies of scale (Chao 2022; Li and Semedi 2021). It is these processes, among others, that have led to vast tracts of ecological ruination and economic precarity.

In times of such ruination, practices of hunting-gathering are good to think with. As noted, that is not because hunting-gathering societies are relics among modern society, which provide snapshots of life outside global capitalist structures. Instead – and as Tsing’s (2015) ethnography of matsutake mushrooms and their foragers exemplifies – contemporary hunting-gathering practices are very much implied in these structures. They therefore provide critical entries into questions of access, property, the commons, power, and discipline. That is, current hunting and gathering activities are enrolled in, conflict with, or emerge at the fringes of capitalist modes of production, governance modes, and nature conservation and wildlife management.

In this issue, three papers could be considered as illustrations of such critical perspectives. Two, incidentally, focus on fallen wood. Lianne Oost-

erbaan, for example, in her article *Authorised Access Only: Bureaucratising Hunting and Gathering in India into Disappearance*, describes how foraging – of, for example, firewood – in the forests of south-eastern India increasingly becomes bureaucratised, as forests are reduced to a series of user rights for forest dwellers. As a result, previously intimate relationships between forest dwellers and their surroundings – in which the forest is considered as a ‘complex, interdependent, and integrated natural resource’ – are reduced to one in which forests are mere places of resource withdrawal.

Oosterbaan’s conclusion is ironic: the bureaucratisation she describes is an attempt to mitigate post-independence land- and environmental laws that did not recognise forest-dwellers’ customary rights and livelihoods, and thus an effect of efforts to return formal access to them. Yet, bureaucratisation – through its desire for control and discipline (see Scott 1998) – reduces the very viability of hunting-gathering livelihoods as it selectively allows only a limited number of activities. These are the violent and destructive ironies of modern ordering thought through which we can problematise state efforts to control the commons.

In a similar manner, Amiel Bize asks in her article *On Fallen Wood*: what remains of gathering ‘against the ever-expanding enclosure of natural resources?’ In her photo essay, she focuses on post-agrarian rural communities in western Kenya, where gathering fallen wood remains important as (gendered) household labour. Access to the forest, however, is disputed and policed. While gathering fallen wood is allowed by forest rules, felling (cutting) trees is not. The photos not only show how village residents aim to carve out a space in the forest for themselves, but also how trees themselves,

by growing, interfere with the public forest’s enclosure efforts for both conservation and timber production, blurring lines between fallen and felled wood.

Through conversation with Marx on political economy, Bize brings the practice of gathering in relation with thinking on property, entitlement, and dispossession. Gathering fallen wood may seem to mark a form of appropriation and labour that is not susceptible to capitalist alienation, denoting a relation close to ‘nature’. Yet Bize argues that gathering in her field site emerges as part of a ‘complex entanglement between capitalist and non-capitalist framings of property and resource access’. Gathering fallen wood, here, figures not as a historical right, but as one derived and formed in relation to contemporary capitalist expansion. Forests and their unique resources, then, retain a notion of the commons and its customary entitlement, but they are also commodities caught in capitalist relations of value.

In a different example of gathering, yet similarly shaped by capitalist expansion and concerned with a common ecology, Linda Musariri and Eileen Moyer focus in their article *Hunting Treasure, Gathering Trash: Politics and Precarity in the Plastic Recycling Industry* on extremely poor waste collectors (*bagerezi*: ‘hustlers’) in Johannesburg, South Africa. These waste collectors earn their living by separating recyclable materials from trash. With corporate donors paying for their labour, these men are an indispensable element of South Africa’s contemporary ‘green’ economy and central to imaginaries of the clean and sustainable city. The recycling industry offers them a role as ‘wastepreneurs’, but their presence on the streets is also policed, while they are exposed to the plastics’ toxicity.

The authors draw parallels between the waste-collecting practices of the *bagerezi* with hunting and gathering, particularly the mobility and skill that these practices denote. Pointing to the gendered nature of claims and access to public space, they show how for the male waste collectors, the streets become ‘foraging territories’. This form of hunting and gathering is enfolded in the massive economic inequalities that structure processes of ‘labour migration and urban mobility’, leaving the homeless and chronically unemployed to forage in the remains of the city’s affluent gated communities. By using hunting-gathering as a critical lens, Musariri and Moyer’s thus draw attention to *bagerezi*’s ability to ‘gather whatever is salvageable’ while vividly evoking the ‘failed promises of the circular economy’.

Hunting and gathering as multispecies relations

In the wake of the emergence of multispecies ethnography (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010) and ‘more-than-human’ anthropology, domestication practices have also been explored as a multispecies relation. Such studies analytically centre the multiple, mutual, unintentional and unforeseen transformations of all entities involved (Swanson, Lien, and Ween 2018). In parallel, hunting and gathering can be described as activities where animals or plants do not just figure as food objects, commodities, or resources for subsistence, or hold symbolic meaning, but emerge as lively participants themselves in social worlds (Kohn 2013).

Sophie Chao’s *In the Shadow of the Palms* (2022), reviewed by Irene van Oorschot in this issue, is a

case in point. Chao describes how the lives of the Marind people of West Papua have been irrevocably changed by the ecological and cultural devastation of large-scale oil palm plantations. Following Marind cosmologies and understandings of the threats facing their lifeworld, Chao asserts that capitalist extraction works *through* and *with* the oil palm plant itself, thus ethnographically centring the oil palm plant and what van Oorschot calls its ‘dark vegetal agencies’.

While many studies have explored hunter-gatherers’ understandings of their environment, adopting a multispecies lens enables a moving away from cultural representations or symbolist interpretations of such understandings (Ingold 1996). Instead, hunting-gathering activities emerge as ways of ‘making connections’ (Warren 2022), involving distinct social, economic, ecological, spiritual, and moral relations with people, animals, plants, or spirits. For example, where the Marind relate to the oil palm as, at worst, a greedy, selfish creature haunting their dreams, and at best, a pitiful, lonely victim of extraction, Chao (2022) describes how their relations to the local sago palm are all the more life-sustaining. Their long and collective journeys into the forest to ‘get to know sago’ not only nurture their bodies and communities, but also their relation to the forest.

Hunting and gathering thus spurs reflections on skills, care, communication, and subjectivity. In his ethnography of San trackers in the Kalahari Desert, du Plessis describes the tracking of truffles and wildlife as an indigenous ‘form of noticing that is both highly empirical and imaginative’ (forthcoming 2023: 96), allowing the tracker to become sensitive to the stories that landscapes and more-than-human others tell. This

‘art of paying attention’ may be all the more urgent in a time when the effects of ecological devastation and human exceptionalism are now noticeable around the globe.

Good relations with the more-than-human others thus become vital for collective survival. What constitutes ‘good’ relations with more-than-human others, however, is shaped by the forms of knowledge, respect, trust and agency that emerge in multispecies encounters (Østmo and Law 2018; von Essen and Allen 2020). Wider social, economic and ecological contexts in which such encounters are situated matter too. For example, as two contributions to this issue exemplify, *managing* animal and plant populations is an important rationale for hunting and gathering.

That population management may lead to heavy contestations about the ethics of hunting is evident in the article by Jordan Oelke, Frank Müller and Judith Miggelbrink, *The Urban Hunter in Times of African Swine Fever*. The authors focus on hunting practices in Germany, where a combination of a lack of food in monocultural industrial forests, urbanisation, and techno-scientific improvements to agriculture drive wild boar into urban centres. This migration causes great concern among authorities that they might spread the highly infectious African Swine Fever (ASF), which is particularly threatening to the pork industry. Hunters emerge as key figures in controlling their mobility. As a result, in addition to being managers of wildlife, hunters become part of biosecurity logics.

This new set of responsibilities, however, is contested among the hunting community, drawing local definitions of hunting into dispute. For instance, safely hunting in an urban environment, and hunting

for biosecurity reasons, necessitates the use of technologies such as infrared (heat) sensed gun mounts, night-time hunting, and the shooting of large numbers of animals. Such practices, however, clash with traditional hunting’s reliance on the hunter’s skill over technology, and the ethical principle that the animal should be given a ‘fair chance’. What hunting is, and when this shifts into culling, appears to hinge on the distribution of control in the human-animal relationship. Through ethnographic research and the analysis of media outlets and public statements of hunters’ organisations in Germany, and by developing the conceptual figure of the ‘urban hunter’, the authors shed light on hunters’ crucial role in securing the intersecting flows of pig industries, viruses, and migrating wild boar.

The distinction between hunting and culling also becomes pertinent on the muddy riverbanks of the Netherlands where Inge Dekker takes us in her article *Shooting with Empathy: Fieldnotes on Muskrat Trappers and Beaver Filmmakers*. These riverbanks are shaped by muskrats and beavers, rodents who both have historical relations to the fur industry. But where the muskrats’ ‘levee devouring’ habits pose problems to water management and mark them as pests to be eradicated, beavers are protected as ‘ecosystem engineers’ for their contributions to biodiversity. In her research note, Dekker compares the hunting practices of muskrat trappers with film makers attempting to ‘shoot’ beavers on camera. Focusing on skill and materiality, Dekker emphasises the role of empathy in both these practices. In order to catch the animals, both rat trappers and filmmakers need to develop an eye for the animals’ ways of being in the world, and their habits and perspectives. The technologies at their disposal, such

as traps and cameras, afford this learning, producing experiences of respect and wonder. Empathy, then, is not either a dark tool to facilitate the hunt, or an ethically sound way of relating to an animal; rather, in the comparison of trappers and filmmakers' skill, and the socio-material organisation of their craft, Dekker emphasises the ambiguities of killing and appreciating muskrats and beavers.

Each of the contributions to this issue, in its own way, takes hunting and gathering out of the modernist frames shaped by the 'ordering device' of domestication, complicating the assumed dichotomies that have shaped the figure of the 'hunter-gatherer'. They bring contemporary, ambiguous, destructive and sometimes hopeful ways of relating to ecologies squarely into view.

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