

The Sociological Significance of Pigeons

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In the opening pages of Darwin's "On the Origin of Species" the peculiar positioning of the pigeon is put to use as a succinct representation of artificial selection (Darwin, 1859; 1996). Darwin found through ownership and study of specialized varieties of fancy pigeons that through careful breeding, phenotypic tendencies could be directed in one way or another. Through pigeon fancier's records and his own observations, pigeons "could serve as a metaphor for the mutability of life" (Humphries, 2008). If this mutability seemed logical to the reader, then hopefully to the audiences of 1859, the concept of natural selection would seem less extreme. Utilizing this "mutability of life", I intend to showcase the sociological significance of pigeons. For the sake of addressing my positionality as it pertains to my own and others interpretations of this research, I must identify myself as college-aged, gay, white, and male. While I have gone to great lengths to avoid bias, I acknowledge that this research may be influenced by any or all of those factors.

Columba livia, better known as the rock dove, rock pigeon, common pigeon, or "rat with wings", (Jerolmack, 2009) has had a very colorful relationship with humans, including but not limited to the following roles: pest, work animal, lab animal, food, racing bird, show bird, and pet. Pigeons are estimated to have been the first domesticated bird, around 3000 B.C.E. (Humphries, 2008). With a shared history that long, one could imagine that it would be a convoluted story. I think that is what makes our relationship with them worth examining. This paper uses queer and symbolic interactionist theories to analyze the largely negative attitudes towards pigeons found in the United States. The discussion that follows is relevant to the fields of both Gender and Human Animal Studies.

The gendered aspect of this investigation deals with pigeons transgressing their ascribed role of "bird" by existing aside humans in very un-bird like ways. These categorical transgressions are met with a wide range of negative reactions from the public (scorn, extermination, disgust). This reflects elements of prejudice experienced by gender role deviant persons as studied by Lehavot & Lambert (2007), where they found that anti-gay prejudice is stronger towards those who exhibit more gender role deviance. I assert that deviance exhibited by the pigeon can be seen as a form of role transgression, and can be effectively analyzed through the lens of queer theory, because the role of "bird" is a component in a binary system within which the pigeon is an "un-bird" (Dillon, 2010). The tendency to ascribe certain attributes to various animal types isn't limited to just "bird" either; we have specific expectations for many overarching animal categories. Birds, dogs, bird dogs, cows, cow dogs and countless other animals are subjected to categorization based on specific societal expectations for animals fulfilling that role. By gaining an understanding of the pigeon as a role deviant we can gain a greater understanding of all beings that step out of their boxes.

A symbolic interactionist standpoint is also relevant to this discussion through the way that society attempts to pigeonhole animals. The urge to categorize animals into work, companion, food etc. and the specific symbolic values we imbue each of these definitions with designate strict cultural definitions that animals must stay within. For example, in American culture the cat is generally considered to be a companion animal, not a food animal. If we encounter a culture that reverses these expectations, we are likely to harbor a bit of disdain towards them, as their definition of "cat" does not match our own. This idea of "roles animals are expected to play in society" is touched on in Arluke and Sanders' 1996 book, *Regarding Animals*. They propose that animals exist on a "Sociozoologic Ladder" based on "how willingly they accept their subordinate place in society" (p. 169). Because historically and presently

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pigeons are and have been capable of performing many if not all of our symbol laden “animal jobs” fluidly if not simultaneously, they have no neat place on our cultural “sociozoologic ladder”. This may be bothersome at a very subconscious level due to our societal emphasis on definition and categorization. There is a paucity of research on a set of characteristics that American culture ascribes to these different “animal jobs” of companion, work animal, food, show animal, etc. As such, this paper will outline a system of analyzing those “animal jobs” in order to appropriately address the topic at hand. If we wish to learn why we categorize things, we must first understand how we categorize them.

Queer Theory:

To understand the pigeon’s unique position as a deviant bird, one must first examine the ways in which it has become constructed that way, and why this deviance is so polarizing that entire industries have arisen to ensure its extermination. Fine & Christoforides (1991) examined the sparrow’s construction as a problem animal at the turn of the 20th Century. They contend, “Examining the metaphorical linkages among public concerns of the same period, we suggest, is a fruitful way of examining social problems”. They argue that the sparrow was villainized with the pre-established rhetoric of the anti-immigration movement at the time, and that metaphor was the chief means of attaching a particular negative meaning to the bird. The authors note that these connections were formed between one public sphere that is to be defined as a problem and a second that has already been defined as a problem (Fine & Christoforides, 1991). This theory provides the foundation for asserting that pigeons have been metaphorically attached to role deviance as a perceived social problem. In the same way that “(the sparrow’s) harm beyond that of being a nuisance has ever been demonstrated in the writings of those who condemn it” (Fine & Christoforides 1991), “Pigeons are no more dangerous to health than any other house-hold pet or virtually any other animal” (Jerolmack, 2008). The main accusation leveraged over pigeons as discussed by Jerolmack in “the cultural-spatial logic of problem animals,” is that they are a menace to the health of those they live around. If this isn’t true, why do we harbor such cultural disdain towards them? This metaphorical connection between pigeons and role deviance is also solidified when it’s considered that pigeons exist out of place and antithetical to the ordered, sanitized cities in which they live (Jerolmack, 2008). Since our cultural sense of “order” is consumed with confining things to binary systems like gender, the pigeon as antithesis to order morphs into to the pigeon as the enemy of gender categorization via metaphor. Another topic constructed as the enemy of gender that challenges binary thinking is that of same-sex marriage.

Langbein & Yost’s 2009 article “Same-Sex Marriage and Negative Externalities” examines how groups like the Family Research Council (FRC) use baseless “facts” to generate negative opinion towards same-sex marriage. They analyze the FRC’s claims that “same-sex marriage will increase the incidence of divorce and abortion” (Langbein & Yost, 2009). Paralleling the “pigeons are diseased” argument, the FRC presents no valid data to back up this accusation. At the heart of homophobia as exhibited by the FRC’s attempt to generate discontent towards same-sex marriage lies a fundamental disagreement with perceptions of gender role deviance. Lehavot and Lambert (2007) found that in respondents with higher levels of prejudice towards homosexuals there was a highly reliable pattern of increased prejudice towards more gender non-conformant persons, heterosexual, lesbian, and gay alike (2007). Because there is sufficient evidence to correlate levels of homophobia with perceived gender deviance, these

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prejudices can be read as primarily oriented towards the role violation itself. What this means for our discussion of pigeons is that homophobia as a reaction to the “social problem” of homosexuality is at its root hostility towards the transgression of binary roles. This war is made physical through the metaphorical application of it to pigeons as role violators. Jerolmack also found this to be true in that pigeons were assailed with the same negative descriptions and labels used against the homeless and homosexuals (2009).

While “the radical character of queer theory” resists definition by its very nature, the outline used for the development of this paper comes from Michelle Dillon’s text on sociological theory where she writes: “*Queer Theory thus aims to decenter the normalcy of our categories* (emphasis added)– whether “the homosexual” is a category used to discriminate against gays, or as a social identity by gays to celebrate their difference and/or to claim equal rights with heterosexuals. Queer theory rejects all such packaged categorizations”(Dillon, 2010).

This take on queer theory is in in large part drawn from Seidman’s 1996 book “Queer Theory/Sociology” where a theoretical framework is described that places less emphasis on the elements of sexual orientation and more on “the theoretical sensibility that pivots on transgression or permanent rebellion”(Seidman, 1996). In tandem with this theory, it is the concept of gender performance boxes as outlined in Paul Kivel’s 1992 text, “Men’s Work” which allows our discussion of these perverse pigeons to fully make sense from a gender standpoint. In “Men’s Work” Kivel describes a list of traits and actions commonly associated with mainstream masculinity and titles it the “Act Like a Man” (ALAM) box. The purpose of the ALAM “Box” is to illustrate that aggression, success, stoicism and a host of other primarily detrimental attributes are prized in a man. He goes on to explain how “as young boys we are supposed to learn how to fit in and live inside that box. It’s a list of expectations of who we should be, how we should act, and what we should feel and say”. He continues by describing the scorn leveled at those who step outside of the box, with classmates attempting to emasculate the deviant with names like “fag, sissy, punk, girl, . . . These words are little slaps, everyday reminders designed to keep us in the box”(Kivel, 1992). The fact that “girl” is one of the insults on the list says a lot about the socialization of both genders, and shows how each is thought to be the inverse of the other (though maleness is reinforced as the dominant position for which to aspire). Because of this, women are supposed to be submissive, dependent, emotional and a myriad of other “weak” attributes. These not only directly oppose male gender attributes, but also position the woman at a vast power deficit. In a society that stresses binary thought and dichotomies like gender so strongly, it is easy to see how a climate of rigid definitions can flourish. This societal obsession with categorization bleeds into areas other than gender as Seidman’s definition of queer theory illustrates.

Using Kivel’s gender role box, let’s explore what an “Act Like a Bird” box might look like. If one spends much time bird watching, studying casual ornithology, or even just some time on the Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s website, some basic idea of what a bird should be is quite easy to come by:

- Birds should be relatively colorful, and pleasing to look at.
- Birds should perch on plants/bird feeders and nibble at seed.
- Birds should make a pleasant chirping (not obnoxious!)
- Rare birds should occasionally show themselves so we can fawn over their majesty.

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- Birds should exist apart from humans, and in no way interfere with them. This means they also must respect our designated spatial boundaries like country/city & private/public.

When the pigeon is considered within these confines, it comes as no surprise that “Professional ornithologists as a group consider feral pigeons to be almost un-birds” (Humphries, 2008). Not only do pigeons fail to conform to what could be called the “Act Like a Bird Box”, in many ways they exist categorically opposite to it in the same way that Kivel’s ALAM box has its categorical opposite within our traditional societal gender roles for women.

- Pigeons are grey. (While in reality they come in *many* beautiful colors, shapes and sizes as described by Humphries, the average American knows only the stereotypic fat & grey street pigeon).
- Pigeons are scavengers, for food as well as nest building materials. They pick up after humans when humans neglect to.
- Pigeons like to congregate, and make a ruckus. They make lots of noise when they wake up in the morning and when they return to their nests in the evening.
- Pigeons are an unavoidable presence in the city. In any highly populated area they crowd the sidewalks and flutter around us while picnicking in the park.
- Pigeons, in part because of their previous domestication thrive on their connection with humans, and therefore utilize all space we occupy as their own.

(Humphries, 2008)

Keeping in mind the prodding those who step outside of their gender role boxes receive, what can be made of those who disregard the boxes all together? I hypothesize that this disregarding of role boxes is the commonality between pigeons and gender deviant persons such as homosexuals and those who define themselves as gender fluid. These groups have been metaphorically connected, even though the basic natures of the deviations are far removed from one another. Since both groups are perceived as role deviants on the whole, prejudice is leveled at both. The benefit of identifying this connection is that it gives sociologists a fascinating metaphor to consider when dealing with societal reinforcement of binary dichotomies, specifically when “decentering the normalcy of our categories”(Dillon, 2010). Because neither of these role deviant groups have demonstrated to possess any quantifiably negative societal consequences, suppression of the deviation can be assumed as the primary motivation for prejudice. Pigeons have been caught in the crosshairs of a society that has historically looked to crush any form of deviation from the norm, the norm in this instance being the gender binary. As discussed in Allan Johnson’s “The Gender Knot”, “To see the world through patriarchal eyes is to believe that women and men are profoundly different in their basic natures . . . It is to take as obvious the idea that there are two and only two distinct genders” (Johnson, 1997). Our American patriarchal structure is threatened by gender role deviance and therefore by the pigeon as a representation of it.

Symbolic Interactionism:

Turning to Michele Dillon once more, let us examine the symbolic interactionist elements of our discussion of the pigeon. The specific definition I am utilizing within Dillon’s S.I. paradigms is Blumer’s three premises:

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“[A] Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them (including other human beings and physical things in the person’s environment, social institutions)... [B] The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows...[C] These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (1969: 2)” (Dillon, 2010).

Arluke & Sanders (1996) remind us of the social construction of “the meaning of animals” by suggesting that the “meaning we imbue specific animals with passes from generation to generation within a culture.” They assert that different animals have various designations of social worth based on many cultural factors. These social designations are then utilized in their discussion of the ordering of a sociozoologic ladder based on how useful an animal is and how willingly they accept their subordinate place in society. Good animals and bad animals are ascribed moral status based on this idea of subordination (and therefore usefulness to humans) and non-compliance (uselessness to humans). They list moral (useful) animals as pets and tools where as immoral (useless) animals includes bad animals, freaks, vermin and demons. This hierarchy illustrates how societies construct a vast array of meanings for the animals they deal with, some of which are detrimental to grave extent (Arluke & Sanders, 1996). While the pigeon fits neatly into the category of “vermin” as Arluke and Sanders describe it: “they are thought to be literally or symbolically dirty” (1996), I propose that an equally useful classification system could be uncovered that centers on the specific purposes we ascribe to certain animals, or “animal jobs”. Although the topics of animal roles (as discussed in the gender portion of the paper) and “animal jobs” sound quite similar, these topics offer two angles of approach with distinct differences in sociological significance. The following outline is proposed that could be expanded upon/explored in further research dealing with the topic of animal jobs:

- Work: Work animals include police K-9 units, lab animals, messenger animals, service and emotional support animals, hunting animals and all manner of large animals used in agricultural settings.
- Companion: Animals people can be emotionally close/attached to.
- Consumable: Not just animals we eat, but also animals we consume in other ways such as horses for glue, or cowhide for shoes.
- Sport: Sport animals include those that participate in various types of racing, shows, and rodeos.
- Wild: Non-domesticated animals.

The secondary point to consider when utilizing this outline is that within each of these categories there are animals that are culturally expected to occupy certain jobs. While most Americans are likely aware that some people keep tarantulas as pets (companions), they are certainly considered less normative than cats. While most Americans are surely aware of the issues surrounding feral cats (wild), they are primarily perceived as companions. It is in this way that two layers of meaning can be obtained by utilization of the above form: First, we categorize animals based on their *specific* use to us. Second, cultural expectations grant perceived normality to animals based on how natural we find their occupation of a particular job or combination of jobs. While this outline requires further research and refinement, for now it

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should be viewed as a general idea and one that will supplement the remainder of the discussion pertaining to the pigeon's relationship with American animal categorization.

Animals encountered can be (and are) classified under one or more of the categories above. The fewer of these categories an individual animal occupies, the more readily it is culturally accepted. When an animal begins to occupy more than one category it starts to threaten the established sense of order, described by Arluke & Sanders as the "sociozoologic ladder" (1996). For example, in the USA domesticated cats are generally considered companions. Although they can fall under the categories of work (emotional support animal), sport (cat fanciers shows), and wild (feral), our overall perception of the cat is as a companion. On the other hand, the "animal job" of food is an absolute taboo for the domestic cat. Because we place great value on it as a companion, we subtly (and not so subtly) villainize any culture that may consider cats a source of food. The cat occupies one job primarily in the above system of classification, all others could be considered supplementary to its existence as a companion animal. The idea that a cat might simultaneously occupy all of the "animal job" categories is a foreign and detestable concept to us. This showcases the American tendency to construct sharp boundaries and exhibits the distaste for anything that challenges or traverses those boundaries. As a society we like cats because of their generally predictable and non-intrusive existence alongside humans. This is perhaps even more relevant to our relationship with the dog, due to their higher levels of obedience and therefore usefulness. Pigeons, on the other hand, "having no regard for territory and the definitions that humans give it...represent a large category of "nuisance animals" that create social disorder" (Jerolmack, 2009). Considering the concept of "animals jobs", one way pigeons create social disorder is through their unique ability to occupy all of the jobs fluidly, if not simultaneously.

Humphries's 2008 book, *Superdove*, provides a lengthy description of all the roles domestic pigeons have played alongside humans throughout their 5000-year history together. Humphries discusses some ways humans have used pigeons as messengers, lab animals, show animals, as food, as pets, and for racing. She also provides a lengthy discussion of their complex status as a pest and their now limited existence as a wild bird. Her discussion of the pigeon's role as a test subject in the studies of psychologist B.F. Skinner will be used to provide some historical perspective on the versatility of the pigeon. During WWII, Skinner sought to aid the war effort by developing a pigeon-guided bomb delivery system. "Project Pigeon" restrained domestic pigeons in "snuggies" made of socks and pipe cleaners that allowed the pigeon to be suspended in front of a picture of a target (a bombing practice site on the New Jersey coast). When the pigeon pecked the appropriate area of the target it would receive grain as positive reinforcement, thus training the pigeon to fly towards the target if it were to ever see it. In the absence of government funding for strapping pigeons into missile guidance systems, Skinner secured a grant from the general mills cereal company and things really got cooking. It seemed ridiculous that pigeons were in fact "highly reliable pilots" (2008) when their behavior was reinforced properly. The pigeons were so reliable in fact that the primary obstacle Skinner faced in designing his pigeon guided missile system was reliably translating the pigeons signals into movements. Despite Skinner's demonstration that it was a startlingly accurate system, this "Organic Homing Device" lost all funding and Skinner was left with "a loft-full of curiously useless equipment and a few dozen pigeons with a strange interest in a feature of the New Jersey coast". The important thing that Skinner found out from this project and his studies that would follow is that due to their quick mental adaptability, the behavior of pigeons can change vastly if it means receiving

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food and shelter. The embodiment of this idea came when Skinner taught a random feral pigeon to bowl *very well* in a miniature bowling alley via careful application of grain, in just a few minutes (Humphries, 2008). Pigeons then, are extremely adaptable creatures by nature and will do whatever is necessary to secure hospitality. Whether they must follow large populations of humans around to scavenge for food, they must race, or learn how to bowl; pigeons are up for the challenge. The fluidity of behavior highlighted here shows that an individual pigeon would have no issues occupying all of their historic “animal jobs” within a short time period. The pigeon therefore flies in the face of the separate spheres in which we place animals based on their specific purpose to us.

“Each age has its central themes, and these themes transcend the way that they apply to a particular set of “facts”. There is a symbolic construction of current events, not only in terms of narrow problems, but in terms of a more universal Weltanschauung (worldview)” (Fine & Christoforides, 1991). One major theme of American culture is the categorization and definition of the natural world so that it makes rational sense when reflected back upon us Americans. This is problematic because more often than not, these broad categories and stifling definitions emphasize subordination to a norm and are the roots of larger social controls that perpetuate systems of inequality (as gender and queer theories often discuss). While the pigeons relative reliance on humans for food and shelter can be read as subordination, their disobedience to our authority nullifies this theme. This, along with the pigeon’s fluid encompassment all of our “animal jobs,” means that the pigeon’s identity is constructed as one existing in opposition to our culturally celebrated symbolic themes of definition and ordered categorization.

Conclusions:

Considering pigeons as they fit in with sociological theory, I have come to the following conclusion regarding their significance to sociology as a discipline. Pigeons are the targets of social disdain due to their status as a deviant bird. I found that this deviance manifests in two ways: 1) The pigeon’s status as an “un-bird” causes them to represent all negative components of dichotomously constructed systems such as sexual orientation and, 2) The pigeon’s lack of a clear position in our social ordering of animals causes them to represent a threat to our neat and orderly system of categorization as a whole. These fluid elements cause the pigeon to represent a perceived double-edged threat to the fabric of society.

“There is a correspondence between how human groups treat animal groups and how they treat each other” (Fine & Christoforides, 1991). As stated previously, further research is necessary on the concept of “animal jobs” as it pertains to socially ascribed purposes for certain animals. Because studies on animal categorization are infrequently published, the field of Human Animal Studies could greatly benefit from having another metric for evaluating human-animal relations. Moreover, pigeons, as well as other animals, would serve well from more extensive research because relations between humans and animals have much to reveal about our social existence.

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