

Parasitic and Symbiotic -- the Ambivalence of Necessity

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Abstract:

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This issue of *Semiotic Review* began accidentally, when, in 2010, we began talking about the possibility of parasites and anthropology for the purpose of putting together a panel for the American Anthropological Association meetings in Montreal, it came out of mulling over the recent turn to 'multispecies' anthropology, and reflecting on the role of Anthropology in the contemporary American university. Our interest at the time was to bring together anthropologists from across the field to consider parasites of all sorts: the organic and inorganic, the individual and institutional, the actual and the virtual. What our panelists – many of whom are represented in this issue of *Semiotic Review* – brought us were papers that did precisely that work, and much of their analyses were soundly within the tradition of semiotics, which opened up the possibility of translating that panel into this issue, and to open up the conversation to others interested in the parasite and its figurations. In this brief introduction, we review our thinking that led to the panel and eventually this issue, thinking that stems from trends in anthropology regarding multispecies analysis and the place of Anthropology more generally. We conclude by offering some suggestions on how parasites might help us thinking about societies, subjects and semiotics.

One of the problems we had begun to pay attention to in multispecies analyses of human societies is the largely anthropocentric and humanistic turn in our attention to human relationships with non-humans, however ironic this might seem: are we avoiding human/non-human relationships that unsettle the agentive role of humans in the world? Where, we wondered, were the multispecies ethnographies of tapeworms, ticks and bedbugs? One of the early promises of multispecies scholarship was to displace the figure of humans at the core of so much social analysis (Haraway 2003, 2008); instead, we've found that humans – if not Man – have bounced back and established themselves at the center of a post-Copernican universe where the sun may not rotate around us, but microbes, baboons and mosquitoes surely do (Mitchell 2002). At the same time we wondered whether particular non-human agencies were being over-represented. Historians have long noted the deterministic agency accorded some technologies, e.g., trains, electricity and information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Marx 1964; Segal 1994; Urry 2009). These agencies are often figured as utopian or dystopian -- while some viewed trains as precipitating peace through travel,

others have viewed them as bringing destruction in the name of progress; while some have accepted ICTs as ushering in a new age of social connectivity, others have argued that ICTs are alienating and fragmenting (Turkle 2011). Separated, abstracted and rationalized, genes have, in Haraway's classic formulation, become "disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert" (Haraway 1989). Or, rather, some of us have become more lively – the neoliberal subject, for which "selfish genes" serve as proxies, develop along multiple rational-choice axes, while the rest of us, rendered supine, are buffered by their endless proxies: "selfish genes," corporations, information and communication technologies. Parasites, we thought, might more appropriately capture the powers of these non-human actors; parasites might also restore the potency of the posthuman critique to multispecies scholarship by embracing harmful or negative relationships between actors.

Simultaneously, and due to quite different concerns, we began to think through our discipline's role in the contemporary university, especially in the context of waves of budget cuts across the United States. Are anthropologists to the university as Michel Serres describes humanity's relationship with the world, are we those who "take without giving back" (Serres 1982)? How might we move beyond thinking of parasites as "interruptions" in Serres' sense, and instead as necessary, ambivalent constituents of our worldly milieus? This might apply both to the persistence of Anthropology as a discipline in the contemporary university, where budget cuts make Anthropology sometimes appear redundant, and to the interrelation of humans and non-humans – or non-humans with other non-humans. This is to ask how the parasite might be "inventive" (Braun 2008), how it might make new forms of life possible, and how parasites are enabled in these forms and the worlds they inhabit. Doesn't Anthropology – and all disciplines for that matter – make possible the contemporary university inasmuch as the university makes the disciplines possible? This is no relation of strict parasitic interruption, but rather that of ongoing symbiotic invention.

In this way, couldn't we begin to understand Anthropology as a particularly parasitic discipline? First, the primordial mythology of fieldwork places the anthropologist as an outsider who inserts herself (parasite-like) into the lives of people who never asked for her attentions. Second, fieldwork itself is subject to multiply parasitic encounters, notably the intrusion of unwanted encounters and discourse that turns out to be revelatory – as well as the intrusion of local microbes and insects that parasite the anthropologist. Finally, anthropology is the parasitic discipline because it is continuously beset by social and cultural theories from the outside -- ideas that invade and multiply within anthropology itself as the discipline plays host to the thoughts of others.

But Serres knows to turn the "interruption" on its head. What begins as an outside diversion ends as an intrinsic quality of the milieu itself. In this way, might the parasite offer another perspective on the relationship of individuals and their milieus, of power and its processes? Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari appropriated Jakob von Uexküll's discussion of ticks to discuss desire (Deleuze and Guattari 1987 [1980]), the interrelation of bodies, and bodily interactions with their milieus, which we'll return to presently. But Deleuze and Guattari limit themselves in their discussion. Might we ask: Doesn't the tick become something new through its host? Doesn't its host become something new as well? Doesn't the tick exert a subtle power in this new relation, and vice versa? We revisit Deleuze and Guattari's parable in light of both Serres and Bernard Steigler (1994) and their thinking, respectively, on the parasitic and the prosthetic. By way of example, we turn first to the interrelation of individuals and institutions and the arrangement of sleep in the United States (Wolf-Meyer 2012). Conceptualizing this relationship as one of power and resistance, or desire's lines of flight, is too narrow: In their parasitic interrelation with institutions, individuals shape and are shaped by the inertias and momentums of their social contexts. Through their interrelation, individuals and institutions become, like von Uexküll's tick and its host, something new. This emergent form of life, we argue, is neither positive nor negative, but rather always the prosthetic

basis of human life -- always modified by and modifying the social contexts and determinants of life. We draw on Wolf-Meyer's work here and focus on the invention of eight hours of consolidated nightly sleep during the industrial revolution and the debates over work and sleep time to illustrate the always-parasitic relationship of individuals and their milieus.

The story of American sleep goes something like this: prior to the consolidation of the work day in the 19th century, Americans slept in a variety of non-consolidated ways -- some were daytime nappers, others composed their sleep of two periods of nightly rest broken up by a period of wakefulness, some were late sleepers and late wakers, and others mixed these various elements. With the rise of the industrial workday, which paralleled the rise of allopathic medicine in the mid to late 1800s, normative models of sleep developed in tandem with the pathologization of non-consolidated sleep (Wolf-Meyer 2011). By all accounts -- namely medical monographs from the early 1800s -- insomnia was previously a complaint primarily of the elite classes; by the turn of the 20th century, insomnia was a complaint of the masses. How might thinking through parasitism open up understandings of this transition? Who or what is the parasite in this interaction, the sleepers or the institutions that compel their sleep? To answer this question, we turn to ticks, interruptions and technics.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the tick offers a reductive example of how entities develop alongside their environments, and how they are primed to interact with that environment. Their discussion of experimental ethologist Jacob von Uexkull's tick has them thinking through the few sensory abilities of the tick -- detection of light, movement, scent of prey -- and how these sensory input lead to events in the tick's life. Waiting, preying, reproducing, dying. The life of a tick, they suggest, is predicated on its parasitic relationship with its host -- that relationship is the event by which all other events are measured. That tick, if appropriated by Serres, would not look so different, although it might be inverted: as an interruption -- for it surely is for its prey -- its life is punctuated by its interruptive potential. From that interruption, both parasite and host, are given a temporal and material means to measure their interactions and being in the world more generally. In both of these cases, there's something powerful about the tick; the parasite is given particular privilege to shape the experiences of the host.

Another quick example from Collins' time in South Korea: taxi drivers in Korea seem to have a particular power to frame (and re-frame) discourse on nationalism and belonging; they have long challenged, re-framed and re-interpreted experience for their passengers. Driving small, economy cars with no Plexiglas windows separating them from their passengers, taxi drivers ask questions and share opinions with their passengers. Parasitically, anthropologists have often seized upon these moments for their ethnographic interpretations. Equally parasitic, the taxi driver's discourse re-interprets the work of the anthropologist, the identity of the tourist, the meaning of the event. It is, in Serres's classic sense, the "third man" that upsets the closed world of discourse between passengers. Finally, the anthropologist-parasite incorporates the discourse of the taxi driver, turning disruption into regularity, diversion into nomothetic generalization. As Paul Stoller writes of his early experiences among Songhay peoples,

When a Western visitor to Songhay country rides a bush taxi, he or she is suddenly thrown into a social universe in which many of the advantages of being a "prestigious" European are pushed aside. No matter a person's status in the pecking order of Songhay society, riding a bush taxi in Songhay country is a rude initiation both to the uncomfortable conditions of public travel in the Republic of Niger and to the "hardness" of Songhay social interaction. (Stoller 1982:750)

What makes the experience so invaluable is precisely its over-turning of conventional relations through the parasitic discourse of the taxi driver who re-frames and suspends social class, privileged and colonization within the bounds of his vehicle.

But consider the tick from Steigler's discussion of technics, those necessary prosthetics for the species without qualities, namely humans. Like Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of Bodies without Organs, Steigler conceptualizes human life as necessarily exteriorized: our organs, our ability to exist in the world, depends on manifold material connections with our environments. For Steigler we are simultaneously indebted to the historical conditions of our prostheses' development as well as the future trajectories they imply, if not determine. We parasite our prostheses, taking from them as much as they can give; simultaneously, our prostheses take from us as well. This technical bind, rather than straightforwardly parasitic, might be more properly conceptualized as symbiotic: two parasites parasiting each other for mutual and collective gain. This symbiotic relationship is necessarily ambivalent: both gain, both lose. Their gains and losses may be unequal, but they are the necessary basis for both parties and their being in the world -- at least under persisting conditions.

It's in this context that thinking through parasitism and symbiosis provides a means for us to reconsider our conceptions of power. Rather than the old saw of actors and the acted upon, those in power and those who resist, rational and often nefarious governmental strategies and their subjects, we might see how symbiosis -- or even co-speciation -- is the basis of the social and interactions between individuals and institutions. Take, for example, the interaction of workers and workplaces in the 19th century: with industrialization, the workday filled up the lives of workers, and only slowly were work times chiseled away at to allow for the laboring classes to do anything other than work -- time for family and recreation, sleep and recuperation (Roediger and Foner 1989). Eventually, the 8-hour workday emerged, which, seen in this light, is a symbiotic compromise. However, in making this workday, other workdays became possible -- working second or third shift, working flextime, telecommuting. And the workday extended itself in unseen ways, including commute times, the proliferation of communication technologies, and the invention of workplace naps -- that are more likely to benefit employers than employees, as the latter stay late at work without fatigue (Brown 2004). What American worker only works 40-hour weeks? But to see this as a one-sided power relationship is necessarily reductive. From the pressures towards the formation of the 8-hour workday to the installation of flexible work times and workplace napping, workers are clearly influencing the institutions that lay the bases of their everyday lives. We parasite and are parasited; we change and are changed. We are the tick and its host. We are part of the institution, and the institution is a part of us. And through this mediated relationship, we find ourselves entered into unfolding and complex alliances with unsuspecting parasitic allies, some benign and others malignant, but all of which alter the basis of our being in the world and our worldly being.

Parasitic relations are inevitably also semiotic relationships -- which is to infer also that semiotic relationships are also always parasitic ones. Whether one ascribes to latter day poststructural or Peircian semiotics, the material basis of symbols inevitably leads to the interdependency of signifier and signified. And, following C. S. Peirce (1998), these semiotic relationships open themselves up towards constantly unfolding networks of meaning and social relations. Consider Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock's discussion of the 'social body' (1987), that relational understanding of the self and others. In their figuration, one comes to understand him- or herself as ill or well based on others and their claims to health. Moreover, doctors are able to diagnose individuals by their variance from norms of health and the diagnostic fit of categories to individual patients. One body

depends on others, who are linked together in chains of relations, some intimate, others distant or altogether alien. But we might also think about smaller and smaller bodies, preying one upon another, nested together; together they compose society as much as they compose one another.

This does not imply that parasitisms are all necessarily equal. It is not to suggest that the parasitism of anthropologists in the field is commensurate with the parasitism of the chance discourse they encounter that might divert or erupt into the scansion of their univocal field encounters. Too many parasites might kill the host, and there is always the possibility that the anthropology that begins as a master discourse on modernity and the West necessarily ends up in the same way. Nor is it entirely impossible that anthropology's continuous, rat-like poaching on the theories of its betters in continental philosophy might impact that theorizing in some demonstrable way: the parasitism of the modern itself. When this comes to pass, then the parasite logic of anthropology can become the self-knowledge of the West in the world. We are the parasites of the modern and make the modern possible through our parasitic action; and this leads to a symbiotic relation in which neither party – the world or the individual, the institution or its subject – gains from the destruction of their necessary relation.

This necessary condition of ambivalent interrelation is why thinking through parasites is particularly important, especially in the political context of immigrants, the poor, the disabled, the underemployed, the unwed, and the tax-evasive all being construed as parasites; and then there are all the human/non-human relations to consider: humans and their livestock, humans and their bacteria and viruses, humans and their environment, humans and their pets. How parasitism is identified is important; how it provides the basis for sociality at all is even more critical to conceptualize and detail. It's in this spirit that we open this issue of *Semiotic Review* to those who will help to explore human and nonhuman relations, and the many forms and implications of parasitism, materially and theoretically. The parasite is never alone, and we only stand to gain by exposing the many connecting ties of parasites to the world.

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