History According to Cattle

In the beginning there is a void. A void between us and history, between these words and our muted existence. How to cross this void? When language is by definition something we don’t possess? You think that because of your writing you are the author of the world, but you’re wrong. You were just an accident like the rest of us, floating in the sea of time. Everybody tries to explain the world. Even the stone, with its stony reasoning, finds order in its rocky little world. You are nothing special. There’s an inside in everything.

But here I am, with my horns and tail and compartmented stomachs and a line of ancestors queuing and pushing behind me as if entering the spring field. Why? When history itself has rejected us and rendered us invisible, language as its weapon? The answer is simple: because we were there. We saw it all. But to break my silence, or what you take as silence, I must enter your language and domesticate you, like the cow whisperer tames a wild bull by talking to him with words he knows. So I borrow your words and carve myself into them, make a hole through them the shape of a cow. You might not see me, but you’ll see my absence. This is where my story begins.

The history of cattle is divided into three eras. The Time Before History emerges gradually from the cooling climates of the Pliocene epoch more than two million years ago. There, in the grasslands of India our ancestors, the great Auroch, come to life. Tall and heavy, they graze in groups of twenty or thirty, changing location when in need of water and fresh edible grass. Their life is peaceful, as they do not practice war, and the power relations of the community are tested out in display fights in which both females and males take part. The young ones are born in the spring, staying at their mother’s side until strong enough to join the community on its endless travel. Beasts of the era, saber toothed cats, hyenas, hominins, hunt them down when they can, but can not conquer them, as they are far too many in number. Roaming in millions they gradually expand their presence Eastward and Westward as far as the great grasslands extend. Over a million years later they inhabit most of the old world from Asia and northern Africa all the way to the western coast of Europe.

With the emergence of the common ape and its culture, we enter The Historical Time. At the beginning of the Holocene, more than 10 000 years ago, the great Auroch starts to live side by side with the ape, gradually forgetting its traditional customs and learning a new way of life. Why this anomaly in history, this exchange, takes place, we don’t know. The last free Auroch who could have passed down this knowledge died alone in the remote forests of Jaktórow in 1627, taking the secret with her. We have only guesses and interpretations, unreliable traces of evidence. What we do know is that we, all of the 1.3 billion of us living today, are the successors of approximately 80 individuals living with the Mesopotamian common ape 8000 years ago. From that moment on our destinies have been intertwined. The great Auroch had become cattle, and the ape the human as we know it today.

If the time of the Auroch had been cyclical, determined by the subtle changes in the weather and by the signs and traces of its companions, this new era was moving forward like a bull. From our manure, milk and flesh the history of the human rose like a wave, generating wealth and prosperity beyond imagining. Cultures emerged, wars were fought. New lands were conquered and more and more of our kind were needed to support the lives of the human. Technology and writing and the rituals of the afterlife were invented. Richness emerged wherever there was a need: what was excess to some, was luxury to others. Corn, potatoes, antelope skins, pearls, rubber, children, women, men of all sizes exchanged owners. Animals crossed oceans but so did parasites and diseases. Populations collapsed as new ones emerged. Kings were declared and then beheaded. The generation and distribution of wealth sought no balance but threw around destinies, fortune and misery in a random order. Soon hurricanes joined together with rains and flooding, walls of fire and drought. Sucked by economic vacuums and pushed by ecological masses, everything was on the move.

Meanwhile, unaware of our life as richness itself, we lived a modest life. The great tides of history arrived to us as streams so small they could hardly be noticed. Wars killed us, but so did peace. The food was the same, century after century. Barns were smaller or wider, our companions fewer or more, but the daily routine remained. Birth, grazing, feeding, sleeping. Our centuries were defined by the hot breath of our companion in the silence of the shelter, night after night, the thousand returns to the same fields and by the light absence of the weight of the plough or the sledge or the carriage when the day fell. So deep inside history were we, that we did not see it happening to us – nor did we notice, when it abandoned us altogether.
In the early ages we lived in the world knowing it was only for us on loan. Everything passed, and we accepted it. As we did not possess things, we did not have a word for owning. We were poor in words for things: our vocabulary was verb-based, built from the doings of ourselves and of our companion beings. But after joining the flow of human history there was not much to do and the native names we knew were lost; soon we did not have a name for who we were. In replacement we got a name given to us by the human. That name rendered us objects, subjected to the other’s doings. Our world had been reversed: around us, everything remained – it was we who passed on, eternally.

The Ahistorical Time has no linearity, nor cyclicity. Inside the factory the passing on of heritage became impossible. Calves were taken from us immediately when they were born, and family lines were scattered out of our sight. Doing was reduced to so little that all that was left of our habits died away. We did not learn from our mothers but from the machine that told our bodies how to stand and how to eat. Stuck in the industrial process we would live in collective isolation, cut off from all relations that could anchor us to time, history, culture. For how could we have culture, if culture was the transforming of things into objects? How could we have history, if history was the weaving together of times from the present moment into the past with a chain of words? We did not even have time – the only time we had was clock-time, ticking away in unison, counting. All we had was destiny, as unchangeable as the rotation of the sun in the sky, and even that we did not possess before it took us.

If we were to see outside the factory, we would have seen the humans digging and carving, moulding, melting, cutting, jointing, burning and growing everything that passed their way. Like the earthworm that eats its way through the soil the humans worked through the world, processing everything into products of their culture. But what they could not see was that they were followed by eyes, eyes everywhere.

So here I am, claiming what is mine and my ancestor’s by law: history, that which we so generously gave to you. Eager, enlightened, generations and generations push behind me, waiting for a verdict. By incorporating your tongue we, the foundation, the mute, are pulled into existence, into the spotlight of human thought. There, once acknowledged, we become real. But as we face the threshold of history we realize that outside language we are still nothing. You only hear the foundation when you can teach it to speak. I can only point to my absence, hoping that in this failure of properly portraying me a hole would appear in the world, through which a cow could enter. That’s what this is. A trial, nothing more.

But as I leave you now I do not evaporate into the realm of ideas and imagination. Instead, I melt, I dissolve into your body, as my bovine colleagues have dissolved into the bodies of your family and friends. I remain close, hidden between your concepts, curled up in your muscles, waiting to be noticed. And, some day, I will enter.