

Marietta Baba remarks

**Welcome Reception, Animals & Society Institute Researchers-in-Residence
Animals & Society Initiative (Department of Sociology)**

Monday, June 2, 2008

4:00-6:00 p.m.

Cowles House

Version 5

Good afternoon. I am Marietta Baba, Dean of the College of Social Science and Professor of Anthropology here at Michigan State University.

On behalf of the faculty of the College of Social Science, I'd like to congratulate all of the new Research-in-Residence Fellows from the Animals & Society Institute on your selection to this outstanding program, and welcome each and every one of you to our beautiful campus.

We're very pleased that the Institute chose Michigan State as the intellectual center for the fellowship program this year. MSU is emerging as a world leader in the realm of animals and society, and from an institutional standpoint, it's no wonder.

Our university grew out of an agricultural heritage, and long has been on the cutting edge in the animal sciences. We are an acknowledged world leader in these fields, and have one of the premiere schools of veterinary medicine here on our campus. But we also have expanded far beyond the traditional bounds of animal science to examine the complexity of animals and society through the multiple lenses of philosophy, zoology, law, and the social sciences.

The timing of your Residence is ideal, as we have just recently formalized an interdisciplinary graduate specialization entitled *Animal Studies: Social Science and Humanities Perspectives*. This is the first such graduate program in the United States. The Sociology Department and the College of Social Science are the lead in this effort. But it also involves the Departments of Anthropology, History, Philosophy, Fisheries and Wildlife, Community, Agriculture, Recreation and Resources Studies, as well as the Colleges of Law and Nursing. The overall faculty engaged in the program range even more widely, covering seven of Michigan State's colleges. We look forward to the contributions that you will bring to this new initiative.

The once unfathomable chasm that separated what we deemed as animals from our own human society is being spanned today as we learn more about the kindred nature of all life forms. The social and natural sciences are changing what we know about ourselves and about animals – how our brains process information, how we perceive and feel, how we form social relationships -- and this new knowledge has far reaching implications for animals and society.

As our knowledge about ourselves and the animal “other” (if I may use that term) expands, we are changing how we think about animals and their interactions with human society.

Our responsibilities to animals evolve as we learn. We are beginning to think about how to incorporate animals into our ethical systems. We are thinking about what is right and what is wrong with respect to humans and animals in new ways, and we are wrestling with how to bring these concepts to our students. Some of their careers will center around animals, but ALL of them should be prepared to thoughtfully consider the dynamics between human and non-human animal populations throughout their lives.

Last year, the Chicago philosopher Martha Nussbaum spoke at an animal ethics panel called *Facing Animals* at Harvard University. She spoke about the complexity of animals, noting that each type of animal has a story, including (and I quote) “at least some emotions, or preparations for emotion, some form of social bonding,...and complex forms of activity.” We should, she said, “learn a great deal more about these complexities, and we should test our ethical views to see whether they are adequate to them. We should then try to imagine ways of human life that respect these many complex forms of animal activities, and that support those lives.”

In the social sciences, one of our roles is to explore these questions from the vantage point of our disciplines – disciplines where we should take values rationality seriously, a point that Bent Flyvberg has argued so eloquently. While these inquiries may cause discomfort in some quarters, we must continue to ask the hard questions. That is why we have universities, and the reason for academic freedom and for tenure.

To the new Research-in-Residence Fellows, I recognize that I am not telling you anything you don’t already know. You are already experts in the fields of animals and society. I am making these statements to indicate that Michigan State University is dedicated to exploring these questions with you, and that we welcome these challenges and are committed to pursuing them.

We learn more every day about the dynamic relationship between humans and animals. For me, the compelling and exciting “problem” is the issue of WHAT we do with the knowledge we gain, and HOW we incorporate this new knowledge into our practices. Here, there is much that you can teach us.

Again, on behalf of our entire faculty, I would like to offer my thanks to you for these endeavors, for showing us the way forward, and for adding your scholarly strength, insights and integrity to our community. I wish you every success.