



## The Changing Valuation of Dogs<sup>1</sup>

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*In recent decades, the United States has witnessed profound changes in the sociocultural valuation of dogs, variously described as humanization, sentimentalization, or sacralization. A broad look at this “sacralization” of dogs in the United States reveals that this changing valuation has altered dogs’ place within economic processes. In particular, these changes parallel Viviana Zelizer’s work on the changing valuation of children a century ago. In this article, we further specify Zelizer’s insights by arguing that these accompanying economic transformations are best understood as shifting of a dogs’ place within budgetary units: from objects for human consumption to fellow actors humans consume with and around.*

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**KEYWORDS:** animals; budgetary units; relational work; consumption; economic sociology; human–nonhuman interaction.

### INTRODUCTION

“Dogs Are People Too” reads the title of *The New York Times* opinion piece by neuroscientist Gregory Berns, author of “How Dogs Love Us,” and more recently, “What It’s Like to Be a Dog.” Based on fMRI data demonstrating functional homology between humans’ and dogs’ brains, Bern states, if we “granted dogs rights of personhood. . . Puppy mills, laboratory dogs and dog racing would be banned for violating the basic right of self-determination of a person.” Is this new neuroscientific evidence sufficient to foment such legal and institutional changes? Bern answers, “I suspect that society is many years away from considering dogs as persons.”

Since as early as the 1980s, several scholars noted a trend in our relationship to pets in general, and dogs in particular (e.g., Pallotta 2019; Sanders 2010). According to Nast (2006), this is “a shift from considering pets (especially dogs) as a species apart, to a reconsideration of pets (especially dogs) as profoundly appropriate objects of human affection and love.” For example, the mission statement of Cesar Home Delights—a brand of dog food that won Nielsen’s 2017 Breakthrough Innovation Award—was to “create dog food that was worthy of a plate.” Citing the fact that pet owners are increasingly feeding their animals high-end, organic or grain-free options, along with vitamins or other supplements, the American Pet Products Association (APPA) concluded from their 2017–2018 National Pet Owners Survey: “The humanization of pets continues to be a driving factor for the pet industry.” People in

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the United States are taking their dogs to veterinarians more often, going to pet-friendly restaurants and “Bed ‘n Biscuits,” preferring dog-friendly stores, buying their dog designer items or other gifts on special occasions, as well as holding parties for their dogs. “In this sense,” Nast concludes, “the prototypical Fido who slept on the floor and ate scraps from the table has been replaced by Lucy, a companion with increasing legal rights who sleeps on a bed and eats upscale foods” (2006:894).

Although growing steadily in recent years, in general, sociology encounters the social lives of nonhuman animals in fits and spurts (e.g., Cerulo 2009; Irvine 2008; Jerolmack and Tavory 2014; Ramirez 2006; Sanders 2010). This is surprising because, as many scholars of animal–human relations have noted, “there is virtually no area of social life that is untouched by animals” (Bryant 1979; see also Tovey 2003). Recent sociological research on the roles of animals in society highlights the ways pets allow for owners to engage in their own “selfhood” projects (Arluke 2006; Irvine 2004; Laurent-Simpson 2017; Mayorga-Gallo 2018; Ramirez 2006; Sanders 2010), and the boundary-work associated with animal experimentation and animals as food (Arluke 1991; Arluke and Hafferty 1996; Ellis 2014; Peggs 2012). More germane to the present paper, prior work documents the “humanization” of animals, broadly understood, through the lens of social movements, professions, and the family (Cherry 2010; Irvine and Cilia 2017; Sanders 2010). We continue this line of research into the domain of consumption by considering the dog as a *de facto* consumer.

Both the subject matter of economic sociology and the work of consumers and consumption scholars bump into the “sacralization” of certain animals. The subfield of consumption considers nonhuman animals primarily as inputs in production processes and as used in consumption practices, specifically as food and efforts to change this animals-as-food relationship (DeSoucey 2010; Ellis 2014; Skov 2005). Economic sociology, in contrast, engages nonhuman entities mostly in terms of technologies or natural resources; nonhuman animals, if mentioned, tend to be only in passing<sup>5</sup> (although see work on production from political economy, e.g., Gunderson 2013; Stuart et al. 2013). As a result, the shifts in sociocultural attitudes and behaviors surrounding the intersection of companion animals and consumption remains under-explored.

In this article, we draw on economic sociology and the sociology of consumption to specify the shifting sociocultural and economic relationships between people and nonhuman animals in the United States through a content analysis of advertisements, news articles, and social media (see Table I). First, we consider Viviana Zelizer’s research on the valuation of children to explain how shifts in sociocultural attitudes through a process of “sacralization” can be extended to explain recent shifts in the relationship between humans and likely the currently most sacralized nonhuman animal in the United States: the dog (Beck 1974). Zelizer’s approach—which is sometimes called the connected lives or relational approach—often implies a high degree of idiosyncrasy (or a pragmatic creativity) in respect to the strategies

<sup>5</sup> The Handbook of Economic Sociology (Smelser and Swedberg 2010) refers to the aversion to purchasing cats and dogs as food in the United States, and aside from the phrase “animal spirits,” the “animal” only shows in a brief passage about animal rights organizations. In the International Encyclopedia of Economic Sociology (Beckert and Zafirovski 2013), the animals are only (briefly) discussed in the entry on Social Rights.

people use to resolve potentially profaning economic arrangements, and yet we see that strategies are often widely shared. Therefore, we turn to Erin McDonnell’s (2013) development of the Weberian concept of the “budgetary unit” to provide a framework for understanding patterned changes in economic processes.

The concept of budgetary units, we argue, gives a parsimonious account of the pervasive shift in dogs’ place within consumption markets, and the widely shared (seemingly coordinated) nature of these transformations. In short, we argue, the boundaries of the ideal-typical family budgetary unit in the United States has changed so as to allow dogs as proper members (cf Huang Hickrod and Schmitt 1982; Irvine and Cilia 2017). As dogs have become increasingly “priceless,” they have moved from objects humans *consume*, to actors humans consume *with* and *around*.

**Table I.** Summary of Data

Type	Period Searched	Sources
News Articles	2000–2018	<i>New York Times</i> <i>Washington Post</i> <i>Los Angeles Times</i>
Magazines	2000–2018	<i>Fortune</i> <i>The New Yorker</i> <i>Entrepreneur</i> <i>Pet Product News</i>
Pet Insurance Advertisements	January 2018	<i>Rolling Stone</i> <i>Healthy Paws</i> <i>PetPlan</i> <i>Pets Plus US</i> <i>Embrace</i>
Animal Rights Organizations	January 2018	<i>FIGO</i> <i>PETA</i> <i>Humane Society</i> <i>ASPCA</i>
Pet Industry Reports	2000–2018	<i>Animal Legal Defense Fund</i> <i>American Pet Products Association</i> <i>American Veterinary Medical Association</i>
Social Media <i>Instagram</i> <i>Facebook</i>	January 2018	<i>Top dog accounts</i>  -@dogsofinstagram -@itsdougthepug -@marniethedog -@tunameltsmyheart -@manniethefrenchie -@toastmeetsworld  <i>Top Hashtags</i> -#NationalDogDay -#Dogsofinstagram -#Catsofinstagram -#adoptdontshop

*Note:* To search for materials, we used Google Scholar, Google News, LexisNexis, and the New York Times API. Our searches included keywords like pets, pet owners, dogs, dog owners, dog lovers, dog laws, dog markets, in addition to similar searches for cats and animals.

As a result of this change, consumer markets have changed to accommodate the needs and wants of these new, nonhuman family members. While we limit the scope of our study to dogs and consumer markets in the United States, we sketch the broader implications of our framework and findings in the conclusion.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### *Zelizer and Pricing the Priceless Child*

Over the course of her career, Zelizer developed a general typology to critique how academics tend to conceptualize the economy and its relationship to other aspects of social life. First, in a *Hostile Worlds/Separate Spheres* approach, she illustrates how scholars assert that there exists two “spheres” of social activity: one for intimacy and solidarity, and one for calculation and rationality. While some argue these two spheres cannot be mixed (e.g., Fine and Lapavistas 2000; Weber 1946), others argue that, should they mix, one or both would be polluted (hostile worlds, e.g., Walzer 2008). In particular, Zelizer notes scholars warning of pollution were overlooking a great deal of evidence of pecuniary interests in all facets of social life (see Zelizer 1989, 2007). Zelizer is also critical of reductionist “Nothing But” explanations (e.g., Becker 1998; Posner 1994), which see the intermingling of intimacy and economy as evidence of *nothing but* the normal operation of the market, or *nothing but* the normal operation of culture. Against these approaches, Zelizer’s *oeuvre* reveals that the sacred does not chase away economy, nor vice versa, but rather form “connected lives” of interwoven social relations.

In her first major work, *Morals and Markets* (Zelizer 1977, see also 1978, 1979), Zelizer traces the history of the insurance market in the West and the problem of “valuing” human life. She argues that the expansion of the life insurance market was preceded by a major cultural shift in the valuation of human life. In a footnote, she describes a controversy regarding low-cost children’s insurance at the turn of the century.

The details of this footnote provided the impetus for a follow-up article, “The price and value of children: The case of children’s insurance.” Here, Zelizer finds that child labor laws instituted from 1870 to 1930, precipitating in the mass exodus of children from the labor market, created a unique conundrum for insurance companies: “If children were economically worthless but emotionally priceless, how could insurance companies determine the economic loss created by a child’s death?” (Zelizer 2010). Rather than providing the family with a windfall should the laborer die, children’s insurance now provided a means of affording an appropriate burial for the “sacred” child.

In addition, several economic changes beyond the insurance market accompanied this *sacralization* of children. To summarize, these changes were the emergence of child work reform; insurance as a means of paying for a proper education (Zelizer 1981); changes in how the legal system valued children in the event of wrongful death; the decline of the “buyer’s market” for unwanted children; and a rise of a “seller’s market” in which would-be parents were willing to pay a heavy premium for cute, young girls (Zelizer 1985). Taken together, Zelizer demonstrates that, rather

than the civilizing market bringing about more “humane” treatment of children, the changing cultural valuation of children brought about significant changes in the economy—not only in labor practices but also consumption and consumer markets.

### *Reviving Weber’s Budgetary Units*

Traditionally, consumption studies have been characterized as an “interdisciplinary field tilted against many of sociology’s core presuppositions” (Warde 2015). Substantively, this tilt emerges via a strong focus on individual preferences and retail spaces, rather than more sociological areas of interests. In contrast, Erin McDonnell’s (2013) work demonstrates the sociological utility of the “budgetary unit,” defined as a “relatively durable social collectives where a substantial portion of collective activity is devoted to consumption” (McDonnell 2013:309). Budgetary units have many similarities and important differences with their counterpart, the profit-making “enterprise.” Budgetary units, like enterprises, do include income-producing activities; however, such activities are primarily concerned with satisfying present and future consumption. That is, the core of budgetary units is their “orientation to consumption,” meaning they focus “action on the satisfaction of the needs and wants of budgetary unit members” (McDonnell 2013). The key value from introducing budgetary units into consumption studies is in allowing analysts to foreground the *collective* nature of resource acquisition and allocation, focus attention on consumption *activities* rather than products, and foregrounds how decisions are made with an orientation toward the *wants* and *needs* of group members.

While the “family” is likely to come to mind when considering budgetary units, McDonnell expands the scope to encompass a wide range of social groups (e.g., Russian organized crime, Catholic nuns, and immigrant remittances). Unlike market exchange, where buyers and sellers engage in fleeting interactions, budgetary units “impose some conditions of membership to control entry into the space of repeated interaction and help manage the social difficulties of sharing consumption by shaping the body of concurrent consumers” (McDonnell 2013). Indeed, as the size of the budgetary unit increases, so does the complexity of satisfying every members’ consumption wants and needs.<sup>6</sup> Despite an orientation to the needs and wants of the collective, this does not equate to equally distributed power in budgetary unit decision making. That is, a budgetary unit “includ[es] those who solely or jointly exercise authority over their consumption (e.g., parents) and those whose authority over consumption is abdicated to the former (e.g., children)” (McDonnell 2013).

Integrating McDonnell’s work with Zelizer’s, the budgetary unit provides additional analytic specificity for the changes provoked by sacralization processes. We can see how children were once primarily an input of labor and income for the household and only around the turn of the century a bona fide member of the unit, whose consumption needs are prioritized. For example, children’s earnings were widely considered the property of the family, but in 1939 California passed the Coogan Act, establishing “that half of a child’s earnings had to be set aside for the

<sup>6</sup> The limiting case being governments, which are better understood not as “businesses,” but as budgetary units concerned with the consumption needs of their constituents (McDonnell 2013).

child... [which] reaffirmed the new cultural and economic contract between parent and child” (Zelizer 1985). More broadly, “child labor was replaced by child work and child wages with a weekly allowance” (Zelizer 1985), and in order to accommodate this reorganization of the budgetary unit, consumer markets, like insurance, reoriented their offerings. We argue that the changing valuation of dogs has resulted in a similar shift in their role within budgetary units. Whereas previously dogs were (like children) valued for their labor and also (unlike children) valued as objects which satisfied consumption wants and needs, in recent decades, they have become consumers in their own right.

In what follows, we first rely on secondary sources to provide some background on the tension between dogs as property and dogs as pets that has unfolded in the United States in the last century. At the same time, we show, using survey data, the sheer rise in the number of households with pet dogs, and the overwhelming proportion of households who consider their dogs to be family members. In the face of this sacralization of dogs in popular culture, as well as the rise of dogs as “family members” among a large portion of U.S. households, we ask how have dogs impacted consumption practices? Our main argument is that dogs have shifted from being *objects* humans *own* and *consume*, to *actors* which humans *consume with* and *around*. That is, dogs are conceived as having unique consumption needs and wants which the remaining members (specifically those with decision-making power) are oriented toward and wish to satisfy in their collective consumption activities. The boundaries of the ideal-typical family budgetary unit in the United States has changed so as to allow dogs as proper members. To demonstrate this, then, we perform a content analysis of advertisements, news articles, and social media (see Table 1) and discuss how people in the U.S. approach markets of pets (i.e., pet stores, puppy mills, adoption); how established consumer markets (i.e., housing, veterinarians, insurance) accommodate these changes; and finally, how new markets and larger social units like municipalities cater to the consumption wants and needs of dogs.

## CONSUMPTION AND THE PRICELESS PET

### *From Dogs as Property to Dogs as Family*

A dog’s role in economic processes has been primarily that of an object for consumption or a source of labor. Yet, as they have undergone sacralization in recent decades and increasingly understood as family members (Berns 2013; Irvine and Cilia 2017), debates surface as to whether they are property or companions (Pallotta 2019; Sirois 2014).

For much of known human history, domesticated dogs have lived and worked side-by-side with human groups (Wang et al. 2013). In terms of labor, dogs have often been employed in various tasks, such as hunting and herding. In the European West, dogs were favored as pets among the higher socioeconomic classes (landed aristocrats and bourgeois middle classes) during the 19th century (Howell 2000, 2015; Morse and Danahay 2017). Often admired for their beauty above their usefulness, but nevertheless viewed as a luxury commodity (Kete 1994:55):



Luxury and pet ownership were now contingent themes. The definition of a pet had changed. Its indispensability was acknowledged and the old categories of function could not be maintained. The dog, useless when considered in light of its productivity, had become an essential household figure. . . . Ensnared within the family, the dog had become an affective end in itself.

Social clubs emerged around the ownership of properly “pure” dogs in the mid-century. At the same time, dog-showing became a popular and respectable pastime for the upper and middle classes (Kean 1998). The various dog breed clubs, for example The Kennel Club founded in 1873 and the American Kennel Club in 1884, were founded both to bring dog-owners together and also as guarantors of pure breeds. At the same time, advances in medical sciences in the West included such practices as “vivisection,” which often clashed with bourgeois values (French 2019). This, along with other ways industrializing nations treated animals, resulted in the founding of anti-animal cruelty organizations by members of the wealthier classes, such as Henry Bergh, an independently wealthy civil servant who founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1866.

In many ways, the American counterparts to British dog organizations did not strongly reproduce the elitism endemic in the latter (Derry 2003). Beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century U.S., the celebration of dogs spread from wealthier classes and into popular culture. For instance, several iconic dogs rose to fame during decades surrounding the First World War. Strongheart (1917– 1929) and Jean (1902–1916) became the first canines to have leading roles in motion pictures. Rin Tin Tin, a German shepherd found on the French battlefield in 1918, starred in several films during this era and rose to peak dog-celebrity. Outside of film, Balto (1919–1933), a Siberian Husky who led a team of sled dogs on a journey to deliver diphtheria antitoxin to remote Alaska, is lauded with a statue in New York’s Central Park. Around the same time, Warren G. Harding’s airedale terrier named “Laddie Boy” (1920–1929) became the first presidential pet in the United States.

A few decades later, the space race between the United States and Soviet Union propelled Laika, a stray dog from the streets of Moscow, into global fame. Aboard Sputnik 2, Laika became the first animal to orbit Earth. Laika’s death in this mission gave life to an impassioned debate surrounding the ethical treatment of dogs in scientific experiments with a fervor paralleling the antivivisectionist movement from a half-century prior. News of Laika, and the surrounding controversy, made front page news around the globe. Despite this public scrutiny, it was not until 2002 that the actual conditions of panic and overheating that caused Laika’s death were made public. A few years prior in 1998, Oleg Gazenko, a senior scientist on the project lamented:

The more time passes, the more I’m sorry about it. We shouldn’t have done it. We did not learn enough from this mission to justify the death of the dog (Wellerstein 2017).

Through Laika’s controversy, we see the fundamental tension between dogs as property versus dogs as companions, as well as the evolving sociocultural attitudes surrounding dogs over the last century.

Though we have briefly highlighted a few storied partnerships above, dogs have long been considered human property, especially by legal institutions, and thus valued primarily in terms of their utility in production processes. In the contemporary

court system, dogs continue to be understood primarily in terms of property. Damages paid in the case of injury to a pet is calculated as economic loss to the owner. Courts continue to be resistant to considering the sentimental value of dogs or the emotional distress an owner might suffer in the case of a dog's death. For example, in *Roman v. Carroll* (1980), the court argued the plaintiff could not receive damages for emotional distress simply because the dog was "personal property." While a few notable cases have offered damages for mental anguish (notably *Campbell v. Animal Quarantine Station* 1981), the "mere allowing of any recovery for mental distress is so new that there has not been much attention given to the criteria that might be used in judging the appropriate amount of damages in a given situation" (Favre 2003). This legal issue continues to be debated (Goldberg 2013; Martin 2011; Parker 2015; Sirois 2014).

The motif of companion versus property emerges, not only in the legal system but also in various production and consumption markets. While there are several ways dogs form a link in commodity chains—as guards, guides, hunters, pullers, and herders—we briefly consider the case of racing dogs. "Racing greyhounds," unlike pet dogs, "do not live in a home, sleep in a bed, or spend time getting cuddled, talked to, or walked by their human caretakers" (DeMello 2012). While greyhounds are bred and valued for what they can do, they usually have short careers. Along with uncompetitive dogs, retiring greyhounds create a major glut of unwanted greyhounds—stoking fears that they are at a high risk of being killed. As a result, numerous groups have emerged solely with the task of finding homes for racing dogs—such as The Greyhound Project in the United States (Carr 2015). "For those greyhounds that are lucky enough to be rescued or retired from the racing industry and placed into a home, their lives change entirely—not because they themselves have changed, but because they are now subject to a new system of classification: that of pet" (DeMello 2012).

This instance of "purification," in which a dog, previously valued for its labor as a racer, is adopted by a family and converted into a "pet"—and the fact it is considered a noble activity—is best understood in terms of the budgetary unit (cf Hickrod et al. 1982; Irvine and Cilia 2017). Specifically, the Greyhounds in this case are not simply a piece of property transferred from one owner to another owner. Rather, to become a "pet" for many Americans means incorporating dogs as active members in social units, and whose needs and wants other members orient toward in their consumption decision making.

For the last several decades, well-over a third of all U.S. households had a dog as a pet. In 1946, there were about 12 million dogs as pets in the U.S. rising to 22.9 million in 1965, 68 million in 2000, and 89.7 million in 2017 (APPA 2017; Block et al. 2018; Held et al. 1967; Shepherd 2008). In 1987, 52.4 million households had dogs (or 38.2% of all households), rising to about 60 million households in 2016 (or 48% of all households in the United States) (APPA 2017; Block et al. 2018; Shepherd 2008). A 2015 poll found that, among dog-owning households, 96% consider their dog a "family member" (Harris Poll 2015).

The 2018 GSS included a module on pet ownership for the first time (Smith et al. 2018), of particular interest being the question "How often respondent considers pet a member of the family." Among the dog-owners asked this question, nearly



all of them stated they “almost always” or “often” consider their pet a family member, and this pattern remains when we break this down by self-reported social class and race (see Figure 1). The percent stating “almost always” remains similarly high when comparing women (84%) and men (77%). There are no significant differences by political party affiliation, though the GSS reports dog ownership is considerably more common among white respondents.

### *Changes in Markets of Pets*

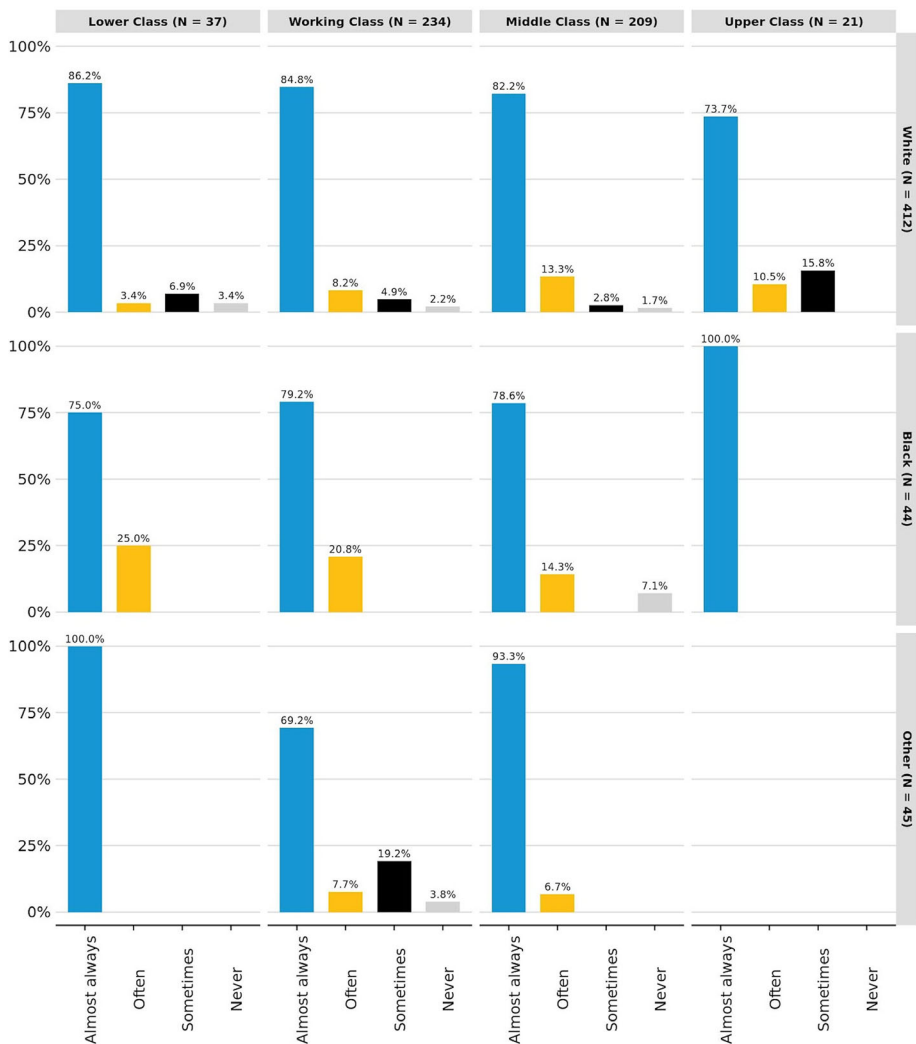
Although total dog ownership has risen rapidly in recent decades, from 1999 to 2015 the number of big dogs declined by nearly 1 million, the number of medium-size dogs by roughly half a million, while the small dogs grew by almost 15 million pets (Ferdman 2015). In 2008, small breeds became the most popular size in the United States, with 50% of households owning a small dog.<sup>7</sup> The reason for this trend is generally attributed to migration to urban areas, living in smaller homes and apartments, or the fact that Americans are delaying marriage and children. However, another interpretation is that, just as families went from adopting older boys to young girls at the turn of the century (Zelizer 1985), the decline in larger dogs may be another signal of a general trend away from valuing dogs for the labor and toward seeing dogs as “priceless pets” incorporated into the budgetary unit.

The transition is also evident in the contention surrounding the acquisition of new pet dogs. Advertisements tend to avoid fiscal language like “shopping” or “buying” (see Figure 2), and the hashtag #adoptdontshop—where “adopt” refers to getting dogs from shelters or rescues—has risen to popularity with now over 15 million posts on Instagram.<sup>8</sup> In this policing of language, we see what Zelizer (2007) refers to as relational work; people erect boundaries, mark them with names and practices, and establish distinctive understandings and practices within the boundary (Bandelj 2015; Stoltz 2018). Dogs are to be adopted, not “bought.” They are not items or services like “toys” or “pleasures” (Belk 1996), but are “members of the family.” As a family member, there are new expectations imbued in the role relations. As Berns describes, many “rescue groups already use the label of ‘guardian’ to describe human caregivers, binding the human to his ward with an implicit responsibility to care for her” (2013:n.p.).

Just as the *sources* of dogs are potential sites of profanation (cf Zelizer 1989), so too are the ways people treat unwanted dogs. That is, even people with unwanted dogs withhold from treating them as another object of consumption that is to be used and tossed in the trash. In a survey of households who had “re-homed” a dog, an incredibly small percentage (1%) set the dog free, while the most likely responses

<sup>7</sup> “U.S. Pet Market Outlook, 2014-2015” Retrieved on February 2nd, 2020: <https://www.packagedfacts.com/Pet-Outlook-8136111/>.

<sup>8</sup> The “#AdoptDontShop” movement also has an increasing presence offline as well (cf. Sassman 2019). For instance, in Portland, Oregon, “Fido’s” claims to be the country’s first “dog taphouse” that doubles as a foster home for rescue dogs. This taproom caters to dogs and dog owners by listing menu entrees with dog-themed food for humans and human-themed food for dogs. They also house dogs from high-kill shelters and enable patrons to play with the rescues and adopt.



**Fig. 1.** How often do you consider your pet to be a member of your family?  
*Note:* Race and social class are self-reported. Data only includes dog owners, excluding three respondents saying “No Answer” or “Don’t Know” on the social class question, N = 501. Source: General Social Survey, 2018.

were to give to a friend or family member (41%), being taken to a shelter (34%) and being taken to a veterinarian (14%) (Weiss et al. 2015).

As McDonnell argues, “the extent that budgetary units are organized around exogenous social categories, they negotiate with preestablished, often institutionalized, schema, norms, and practices” (McDonnell 2013). Sociocultural changes are always piecemeal, and the ongoing tension between dogs-as-property versus dogs-as-members of budgetary units is often foregrounded in key controversies. This tension is particularly evident in the various debates surrounding the sources of new

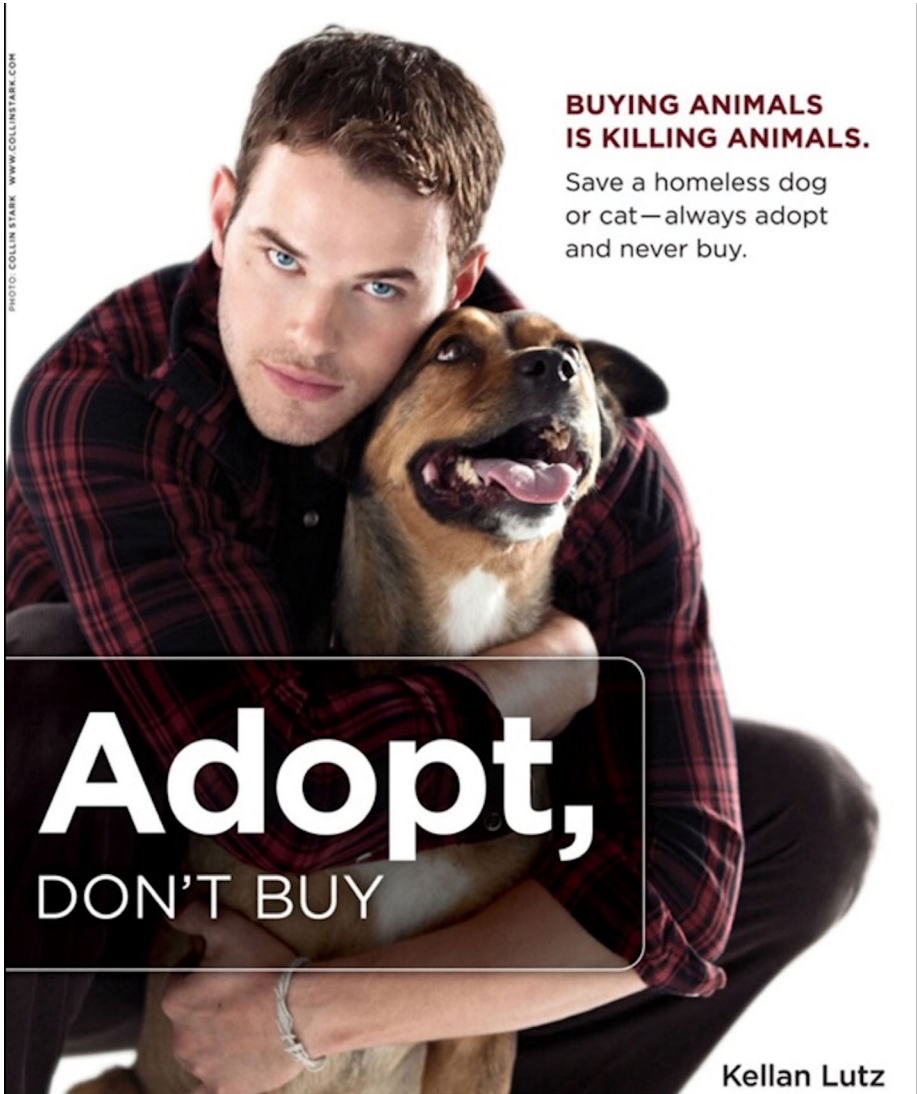


Fig. 2. “Adopt, Don’t Buy”.

dogs. For example, the Westminster Dog Show experienced backlash after cutting ties with Pedigree over advertisements which encouraged adopting shelter dogs (see Figure 3). The brand communications manager for Pedigree stated, “they felt that our advertising was focused too much on the cause of adoption and that wasn’t really a shared vision” (Nir 2012) Rather, the Westminster Dog Show is committed

to the “purebred mission,” which includes acquiring pure breeds (usually from licensed breeders) over mixed breeds (usually found in shelters).

Although one could adopt a purebred shelter-dog and money does exchange hands, this is widely considered morally superior to breeders and pet stores. For example, a recent survey (using best-worst scales) found the largest “mean preference share” (80%) of respondents preferred adoption (Bir et al. 2017). The rapid growth of pet stores in the United States is often linked to “puppy mills”—defined by the ASPCA as a “large-scale commercial dog breeding facility where profit is given priority over the well-being of the dogs.”<sup>9</sup> While the ASPCA publishes a database of “good” and “bad” pet stores to inform adopters, and California even requires pet store cats and dogs to be rescues (Fortin 2017), many see pet stores as irreparably contaminated by a market logic which ultimately leads to puppy mills. Jeff Goodwin, the director of the puppy-mills campaign for Humane Society of the United States, is quoted in a *Rolling Stone*, “If you buy a puppy from a pet store, this is what you’re paying for and nothing else: a dog raised in puppy-mill evil” (Solotaroff 2017). Dedicated breeders are no exception. For example, in the *The Ethicist*, a column of *The New York Times Magazine*, a letter writer bemoans, “I got my wonderful, loving dog from a reputable breeder about eight years ago, but sometimes I feel guilty that I didn’t adopt a shelter dog instead” (Appiah 2016).

A recent trend which may appear, at first, as resistance to such a transformation (and therefore standing in contrast to our overall argument) is the rising fame of Instagram dogs—four of whom have over a million followers. Take, for example, Doug the Pug (@itsdougthepug), who has over 2.7 million followers on Twitter, 3.8 million on Instagram, 6 million on Facebook, and won a People’s Choice Award in 2019. Doug’s owners rely on him as their principal source of income, and even have written a *New York Times* bestseller about Doug (see Figure 4) (Mosier 2016). Therefore, they have monetized Doug to great success, this suggests that he is valued for what he does, in much the same way that the heroic dogs of the First World War, like Rin Tin-Tin, were valued. However, as McDonnell (2013) argues, budgetary units derive income from multiple sources and potentially from all members. Furthermore, Zelizer argues that child labor was not entirely eradicated, but rather transformed and purified (1985), similarly some dog work is still legitimate. Surveying the most popular dog breeds on Instagram, one *New York Times* commentator states, “Instagram puts a premium on superficial dog traits like cuteness over ones like intelligence or obedience” (Williams 2018). Dogs bred for specific activities, and even those that the Westminster Dog Show might consider an ideal specimen of their breed are not as celebrated on social media as mixed-breeds, rescues, and disabled dogs. Moreover, the kinds of activities these dogs are documented doing on Instagram are unlikely to be laborious, but rather tend to portray the idyllic (if silly) everyday lives of typical households.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.aspc.org/about-us/press-releases/aspc-urges-vermont-governor-sign-puppy-mill-bill>.



**He may be small,  
but you should see his heart.**

Shelter dogs aren't broken. They've simply experienced more life than other dogs. If they were human, we would call them wise. They would be the ones with tales to tell and stories to write. The ones dealt a bad hand who responded with courage. Do not pity a shelter dog.

Adopt one. And be proud to have their greatness by your side.



When you buy PEDIGREE® we make a donation to help shelters:  
The PEDIGREE® Adoption Drive.  
Help us help dogs.

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Fig. 3. “He may be small, but you should see his heart”.

*Changes in Established Consumer Markets*

Perhaps the strongest evidence that those households with dogs see their pet as a proper member of their budgetary unit, and therefore oriented toward its consumption needs and wants, is in the housing market. According to a 2017 Harris Poll, one-third of those 18–36 who purchased their first home stated the desire to



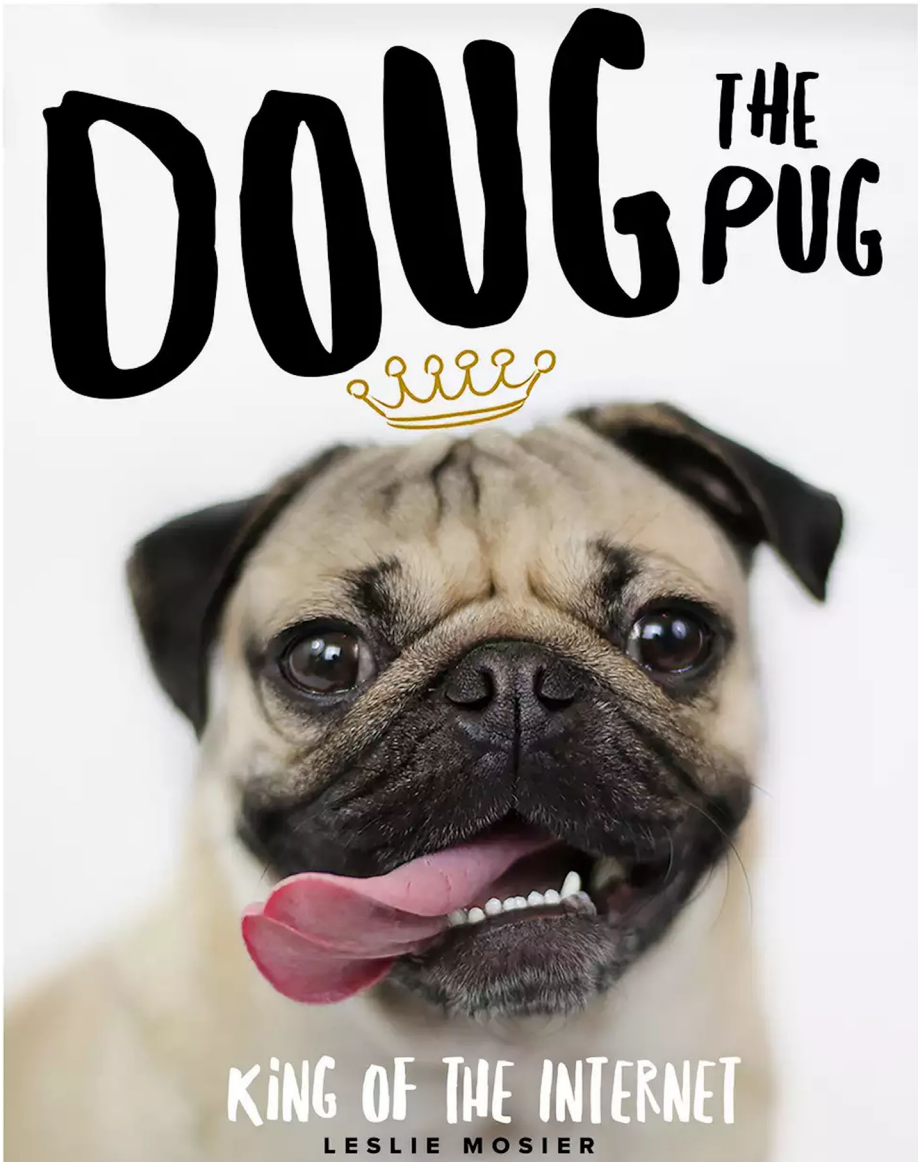


Fig. 4. Cover of the bestselling “Doug the Pug” book.

have a better space or yard for a dog influenced their decision to purchase their first home—indeed, more than marriage or children—while 42% of those without a home stated that a dog would be a key reason to purchase a home (Lewis 2017). In fact, advertising in other consumer markets, such as automobiles (see Figure 5), suggests that potential buyers are likely to bring into consideration the needs of their dogs when making purchasing decisions.



In addition to how households go about acquiring a dog or factor their dog into large purchases, old industries have also shifted to accommodate the demands of those budgetary units with dogs. For example, historian Susan Jones offers a convincing case of how veterinarians in the United States during the first half of the 20th century moved from primarily serving animals in production markets (livestock) to servicing family pets, like dogs. Jones argues, “this could occur only after veterinary practitioners learned to accept a new paradigm, valuing animals for sentimental rather than economic reasons” (2003:116). More recently, paralleling this transformation in veterinary practices, as well as echoing the rise of children’s insurance (Zelizer 1985), is the recent, but rapid, expansion of insurance for pets in the United States.

Insurance markets also straddle the two regimes of valuation. Although an insurance policy for an animal was first sold in 1890, written by Claes Virgin, founder of Länsförsäkrings Alliance, it was almost one hundred years later that Veterinary Pet Insurance became the first company offering pet insurance in North America in 1980 (Strauss 2014). The first pet insurance policy in the United States was sold only in 1982 and issued to Lassie—the television star (UPI 1982). According to the 2017–2018 APPA survey, by 1998 only 1% of dog owners had insurance, while in 2016 that number had increased to 10%—for nearly 9 million dogs. This is despite Consumer Reports and journalists noting that it is unlikely that actual medical costs would outpace insurance premiums for the life of most dogs (Walker 2016). Take for example, this exchange between a veterinarian and a journalist in the *New York Times*: “Stop thinking of it as a \$500 dog, but as a \$50,000 investment,” a veterinarian states, and the reporter responds, “But most pets are not investments. . . All

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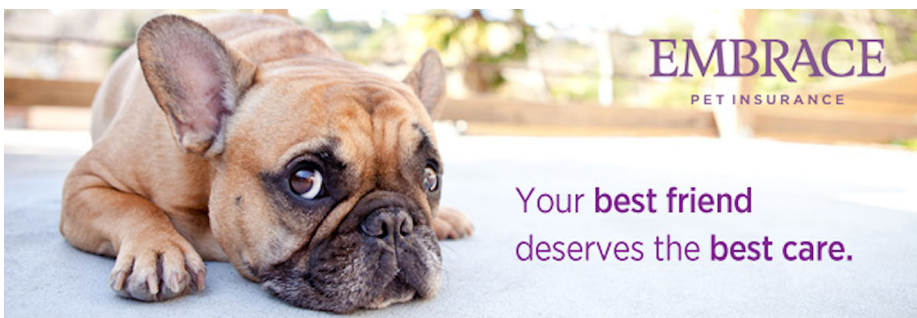
Fig. 5. BMW Advertisement.

the kibble, toys and vaccinations are not investments” (Darlin 2006). This tension between inclusion into the budgetary unit as a member versus a form of property is especially evident in the pet insurance industry. Farmer’s pet insurance website states “Contrary to popular belief, pet insurance is considered a form of property insurance.” That is, many pet owners may be surprised that pet insurance is not *health* insurance. This disconnect, however, is likely propagated by the industry’s own advertising. For example, HealthyPaws Pet Insurance website states, “Your lovable pet deserves the best medical care,” and an advertisement by Embrace Pet Insurance reads “Your best friend deserves the best care” (see Figure 6).

### *Accommodating the New Consumer*

New markets have also emerged explicitly to cater to dogs as bona fide members of budgetary units. In total, the consumer market for dogs in the United States has grown rapidly in the last few decades from \$17 billion USD in 1994 to \$69.36 billion USD in 2017 (APPA 2017). The pet food market sits at \$26 billion USD, with the fastest growing sector being “premium” food at twice the rate of the regular pet food market, and accounting for \$8 billion USD share as of 2016. In fact, some industry insiders note, “pet owners are increasingly demanding products for their pets that are on par with, and sometimes even higher quality than, the products they purchase for themselves” (Sprinkle 2017). According to a survey from the American Pet Products Association (APPA), in 1994 67% of owners bought gifts for their pets, 80% in 2004, and in 2016 this number increased to roughly 88% of owners purchased an average of five gifts for their pets for various occasions. Forty-eight percent of households gave their dog a present for Christmas, and 28% for their dog’s birthday.

As revealed by a genealogical study of dog training manuals (Włodarczyk 2018), recent decades show a strong move away from behaviorist-inspired “total control” approaches to training premised on obedience, toward training which centers on owner’s discovering their dog’s “passions” and channeling them to appropriate activities. As a result, “this is accompanied by the emergence of numerous canine-related leisure and sports activities” (Włodarczyk 2018). In fact, choosing to



**Fig. 6.** Pet insurance advertisement.

engage in such activities as “dog sports,” which test the boundary between valuable and priceless pet, participants actively incorporate their presumed benefit to, and preferences of, their dog. Accordingly, goods and services that in previous decades were considered mundane aids for dog owners, such as groomers and boarding, are increasingly framed as providing a service that privileges the enjoyment for the dog. Biscuits & Baths, for example, is a “doggy gym” with six locations in New York City (Haughney 2009). While groomers and boarders have become “pet daycare centers,” “doggy hotels,” “canine country clubs,” and “luxury dog spas” (Baranauckas 2006; Sullivan 2017), human hotels have also become increasingly accommodating of the new furry member of the budgetary unit. According to the American Hotel & Lodging Association over half of hotel properties surveyed are “pet friendly,” and some high-end hotels include such amenities as minibars, beds, menus, massages, and on-call veterinarians for canine guests (Glusac 2016; Haughney 2009; Silver 2017).

As the budgetary unit encompasses households, but is not confined to them, we can also briefly consider how other budgetary units are accommodating dogs—specifically municipal and state governments (McDonnell 2013). This goes far beyond political candidates signaling they understand the value of dogs, such as Senator Elizabeth Warren’s dog, Bailey, and Mayor Pete Buttigieg’s dogs, Truman and Buddy, featured prominently in their outreach campaigns (Lyll 2020)—a tradition going back to President Nixon’s dog Checkers. Indeed, some municipal governments are transforming the way space is allocated in order to respond to the new consumers. Take for example, when Miles, a 9-year-old boxer-pug mix, who had been a regular at Ace Bar in New York’s East Village was suddenly banned from the establishment and met with resistance. Although Miles’ presence in the bar was always against the city’s health code, doggie-patrons were “one of the most widely—and gleefully—violated rules in the city” (Flegenheimer 2011). After the move to a graded health code system, however, bars were less inclined to allow dogs. This “stricter enforcement is apparently bringing to an end a rich tradition of dog-friendly bars in New York” (Flegenheimer 2011), although a “speakeasy underworld” of dog bars remained (Newman 2016). In 2015, in an effort to compromise with dog owners, whom lawmakers describe as “among their most vocal constituencies” (Mueller 2015:n.), the New York Senate passed a law (by 60-0 vote) allowing restaurants to welcome dogs into their outdoor eating areas.

Aside from the gray-area of restaurants, Manhattan is largely dog-friendly, including, for example, Grand Central Station, which encourages patrons to post pictures on social media with the hashtag #dogsofGCT. In nearby Queens, a basketball court was converted to a dog run beginning 2015, for a total of \$1 million USD. Although some saw this as a high price tag, “[c]ity officials said the projected cost was in line with the budgets of other recently built dog runs” (Semple 2015). In fact, just 3 years prior, the nearby neighborhood of Washington Heights spent \$800,000 USD to improve an existing dog park.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See also: “Dog Parks Lead Growth in Urban Parks,” The Trust for Public Land. 2016. <https://www.tpl.org/media-room/dog-parks-lead-growth-urban-parks>.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Some sociologists, philosophers, and other scholars consider unavoidable the negative moral consequences of limitless market expansion (Hirsch 2005; Sandel 2000; Satz 2010; Titmuss 1971). In contrast, Zelizer and those inspired by her work (e.g., Bandelj 2015; Haylett 2012; Mears 2015; Rossman 2014) demonstrate that money can and does enter “sacred” domains—markets intersect with love, sex, marriage—and often the sacred pushes back on market logic, causing changes in the economy more broadly. In such cases, actors engage in “relational work” (Bandelj 2015; Zelizer 2007) by going to great lengths to mark, separate, and purify these economic processes. In one of her most well-known historical case studies (1985), Zelizer charts the shifting valuation of children in the West, from economically valuable to emotionally priceless, and how this cultural change resulted in widespread changes in economic processes, insurance in particular.

We extend this framework to a new domain, that of dogs in the United States. We find remarkably similar economic changes surrounding the valuation of children are occurring in the case of pet dogs. Zelizer’s approach, specifically as codified in *Purchase of Intimacy* (2007), often implies idiosyncrasy in how people might resolve potentially profaning economic arrangements, and yet we see that resolutions are often shared across large parts of the population. Through a broad consideration of how households have altered their approach to acquiring dogs, how people have altered their consumption patterns for dogs, how old markets have shifted, and municipalities and new markets have accommodated dogs’ consumption wants and needs, we demonstrate how the Weberian concept of budgetary units (McDonnell 2013) gives us a parsimonious account of the pervasive shift in dogs’ place within economic processes, and the widely shared (seemingly coordinated) nature of these transformations. In particular, as dogs have become increasingly “priceless,” dogs have also moved from objects of human *consumption*, to actors humans consume with and around. This empirical exploration, therefore, demonstrates how the budgetary unit provides the theoretical means by which the sociology of consumption, instep with households, markets, and municipalities, can direct its gaze away from the consumption needs and wants of humans alone.

This paper also demonstrates the broader utility of the “budgetary unit” as a sociological framework through which to consider changes in collective consumption practices. A fruitful avenue of future research is how different categories of human and nonhuman actors are incorporated into different budgetary units through a comparative analysis (McDonnell 2013). As we focused on the family or household as the primary budgetary unit, it is also important to consider what this new member might mean for other practices within these institutions, beyond consumption. For example, one could explore the conflict during the breaking up of the budgetary unit when it includes these nonhuman members, as evident in the rise in “pet-nups” and “dogvorces.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For more on the rise of “petnups” and “dogvorces” see Vinopal (2020), “The Rise of the Dogvorce.” GQ, <https://www.gq.com/story/rise-of-the-dogvorce>.

Importantly, a focus on budgetary units includes not only how families organize their consumption needs around dogs, pets or other actors but also how national, state, and municipal governments incorporate various groups as actors with legitimate claims on consumption practices and therefore the allocation of shared resources. Given the similarities between children's rights and animal rights, and the pressures actors can place on government officials, the current study illuminates a fruitful intersection between the fields of consumption and social movements. Although the current legal status of dogs as property is a "countervailing force" to broader socio-cultural humanization (e.g., Pallotta 2019), legal institutions may still be altered to accommodate these changes to dogs' place within households as a member of a legitimate "collective" consumption unit. That is, rather than altering regulations or production to meet individuals' needs and desires—or changing laws in terms of individual claims to personhood—decisions about accommodating needs and wants of nonhuman animals may be made with this collectivity, as a whole, in mind. Those excluded from legitimate participation in the household are also excluded from the benefits flowing to that kind of budgetary unit, as well as the political clout it affords. The specific case of dogs in the United States raises the question of whether other kinds of nonhuman animals might follow a similar sacralization process, or whether certain animals will be systematically barred from being legitimate members of budgetary units. Future research should consider the ways members of a particular social category are, or become, constituents of budgetary units, and how this can be used to make broader claims to social legitimacy.

As we focused on the U.S. context, it remains an open empirical question as to whether similar processes are occurring in other countries. However, even within the United States changing the composition of budgetary units is rife with tension; whether dogs are property or members of a family carries legal, social, and moral consequences, and we can anticipate social movements mobilizing to challenge institutionalized norms and practices. As dogs are increasingly incorporated into the budgetary unit, the shifts in sociocultural attitudes can incite counter-movements and discourse of moral panic. For example, in a Fox & Friends segment on the shifting priorities of millennials<sup>12</sup>, a host warns:

people are embracing godlessness and they're also not just putting off having kids, they're not even really interested in having kids. The greatest responsibility they want is having a dog (I love dogs by the way!) but they're not interested in taking that step – getting married, having a kid.

By increasing analytic attention onto the changing consumption practices in budgetary units, social movement scholars are afforded greater precision for the underlying economic processes motivating the mobilization of activists, civil society groups, and other collective identities (e.g., NYC dog owners) (cf Van Ness and Summers-Effler 2016).

Finally, while we focused our analysis on how consumer markets are changing to accommodate the shift within household budgetary units, it may also be the case that production and labor markets are making similar adjustments. On the one

<sup>12</sup> For the full segment of Fox & Friends, August 27th, 2019 see: <https://www.foxnews.com/media/alliebeth-stuckey-poll-young-people-patriotic-religious>.



hand, it may be technological and economic efficiency that replaces nonhuman animals as sources of labor or other production inputs, as is likely the case for the “The Turnspit dog”—a dog with the unfortunate task of turning meat cooking near a hearth—replaced by the mechanical “bottle jack” in the mid-19th century (Schinto 2004). On the other hand, we may see changes in the use of nonhuman animals in production as a result of their changing role in households. For example, to the extent dogs participate in labor markets, they may be seen as providing for their budgetary unit, rather than just as inputs in the production process. Indeed, changes in dog labor regulations may be justified on this understanding. Therefore, just as the budgetary unit may help understand changes in consumer markets, it may also be used to understand new practices in labor and production markets.

Broadly speaking, considering how the changing social valuation of dogs is refracted through the budgetary unit opens up the potential for other domains of valuation to be understood not in terms of individuals’ assessments or desires, but rather in terms of the co-valuating activities of relatively durable social collectives.

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