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Animals as Neighbours: The Past and Present of Commensal Animals by Terry O'Connor

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***Animals as Neighbors: The Past and Present of Commensal Species* by TERRY O'CONNOR**

Michigan State UP, 2009 \$29.95

Reviewed by **DEREK WOODS**

Animals as Neighbours is a strong synoptic discussion of human-animal commensalism from the Pleistocene to the present. O'Connor adduces substantial evidence from historical, archaeological, zoological, ethological, and ecological studies, with a focus on the histories of cats, raccoons, monkeys, foxes, rodents, and birds which have come to adapt to landscapes altered by humans. For the purposes of the book, O'Connor defines commensal animals as those that "utilize the modified or constructed environment of human habitations for living space or food," but that are not domesticated like cows or pigs—humans do not control their breeding nor are they, for the most part, human property. The book explores the "time depth of this mutual adaptation," necessarily addressing human as well as animal behavior. In this frame, O'Connor's central thesis is that the commonplace distinction between wild and domestic animals misses too much of the subtlety of human-animal relations.

Given his goal to theorize commensalism rather than simply address specific commensal animals, O'Connor's choice to include more general and methodological chapters makes good sense. "The Human Environment" will be of interest to ecocritics, with its discussion of the (now much debated) concept of the Anthropocene. This chapter takes up environmental changes caused by human dwelling, and how these in turn become environments for commensal animals.

O'Connor focuses here on the ecology of the human environment. Here, he uses "ecology" in a refreshingly specific sense, referring to G. E. Hutchinson's trophodynamic model of ecosystems, which describes the flow of energy through food webs. As O'Connor writes, "one of the big opportunities for commensal animals comes from [the] freeing up of food webs" through human disturbance of ecosystems.

"Sources of Evidence" discusses the relation and relative value of understanding commensalism, of historical, archaeological, and DNA-based evidence. O'Connor cautions against too much reliance on textual evidence. For him, material evidence is "less susceptible to deliberate 'storytelling' than are most historical documents." DNA evidence is unlikely to completely replace morphological identification, because the latter makes it easier to distinguish *ecomorphs* within species, which are defined by behavioral adaptations not necessarily legible at the genomic level. "Commensalism is a phenomenon of the behavioral ecology of populations, not of the anatomy of species."

"The Archaeology of Commensalism" works to answer the question of how far back human-animal commensalism extends. O'Connor seeks to trace commensalism to our earliest hominin ancestors and to avoid the assumption that forming affiliative relationships with other animals is "exclusively a human, not a hominin trait." O'Connor's cautious answer to the chapter's central question minimizes the importance of the Neolithic and the emergence of agriculture, tracing commensalism instead to the Nartufian stage of the Upper Paleolithic, with its evidence of associations between people, animals, and corvids. The Nartufian stage

sees hunter-gatherer populations become sedentary, but without agriculture. Built structure predates agriculture, but O'Connor argues that the concentration of food is the most likely attraction for commensal animals. We should not explain commensalism with reference to human technological or cognitive capacity, since it is the animals that initiate these relations. Throughout the book, O'Connor emphasizes the autonomy and agency of animals.

One topic that O'Connor raises, but does not elaborate in detail, is the mechanism whereby animals become culturally integrated as symbols, "living metaphors representing some concept, principle, or deity." An important question for literary critics, art historians, and posthumanist cultural theorists is just how non-linguistic cultural techniques and environmental modifications influence the translation of nonhuman species into the symbolic and imaginary realms.

The next three chapters—"Mesomammals," "Rats, Mice, and Other Rodents," and "Birds"—address the specific histories of commensal animals. These dense chapters are the least readable, but they do the most to support O'Connor's overarching thesis that the domestic/wild distinction is misleading. One of the most engaging discussions here takes up the "longue durée of cats." In these chapters, O'Connor is often at his most equivocal. On the one hand, he does an excellent job of maintaining and conveying the ambiguity of the archaeological record—of avoiding over-confident claims. On the other hand, this makes for slow reading. But the level of detail in these chapters make them an excellent reference. "Commensalism, Coevolution, and Culture" and "Planning for the Future" bring the argument home, returning to the broad scope of the opening

chapter. Here, the crucial argument concerns the usefulness of the species concept and of arguments grounded in the genetic "nature" of a species. For O'Connor, "commensal adaptation is at the level of the population, not of species." Only certain populations of the species studied in *Animals as Neighbors* adapt to anthropogenic spaces. What this means is that commensalism "is a cultural coevolution, a mutual process of learning to live together that has gone on sometimes locally, and sometimes quite temporarily." This "process has been a cultural one *on both sides*, and therefore the animal species concerned must be regarded as cultural entities." The crux of culture is not only tool use, but the ability of animal populations to pass on learned behaviors across generations—a process that does not necessarily require genetic mutation. In this chapter, O'Connor argues successfully that biopolitical distinctions such as that between pet and pest, domestic and wild, livestock and companion, are not species essences, but historically specific couplings between human and animal populations.

Some engagement with recent work in animal studies and biopolitics, in the humanities, and symbiosis, in the sciences, might have added something to *Animals as Neighbours*. For example, work in the animal studies field by Carol Adams, Donna Haraway, Cary Wolfe, Stephanie Rutherford and many others does much to theorize and historicize human-animal relationships. Biopolitical theory from thinkers such as Michel Foucault or Roberto Esposito might also have been helpful, especially for interpreting the "vermin" category. Symbiosis research from Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, Angela Douglas, Jan Sapp, or Donna Haraway would also have been useful for the analysis of biological relation.

Another absence is any discussion of postcolonial studies and the politics of empire. Alfred W. Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism* is a missing point of reference, and the apolitical description of modern colonialism as the spread of a "culturally vigorous and expanding people" seems uncritical.

Finally, the book's Anthropocene framing may seem contentious to readers from ecocriticism, environmental studies, and conservation biology, depending on their ecopolitical leanings. O'Connor refuses to be nostalgic about human impacts on the Earth and its biodiversity, avoiding the kind of jeremiad about the 'end of nature' familiar from Bill McKibben's book of that title, and minimizing the question of human impact on climate. In part, this is the effect of the "big historical" scale of the book, which leads to an emphasis on a dynamic and evolving Earth system. O'Connor's book is compatible with thinkers like Ursula Heise, Timothy Morton, and Bruno Latour who stress the historicity of the Earth over and against a baseline, equilibrium nature. To quote from the text, "there is deep cause for concern in the loss of biodiversity around the world . . . but we should not allow acute conservation concerns to blind us to the success with which some animals

have adapted to us . . . we must not privilege the wild to the extent that we fail to explore and to learn from the familiar." In this context, O'Connor suggests that the study of commensal animals could be a good way to mitigate our impact and work toward more biophilic architecture and design. For its factual detail, conceptual work, and relevance to current ecopolitical debates, this excellent book should be read in the environmental humanities. It also has the advantage that, almost anywhere you read it, you can observe (or be observed by) its topic.

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