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Animal Geography

A very short introduction

Animal geography represents a sub-discipline of human geography, which in the last twenty-five years has been contributing to the development of a wider field of knowledge known as human-animal studies (see the reports in *Progress in Human Geography* by Buller 2014, 2015 and 2016; Hovorka 2017, 2018 and 2019; Gibbs 2020a and 2020b). This is a field with a strong interdisciplinary character, which has emerged in Anglo-American academic debates to 'give voice' to those non-human animals that the social sciences and humanities have long confined to the margins of their research.

Animals are however constantly present in our daily lives, in different forms and with different roles, as noted by the American geographer Julie Urbanik (2012) in opening her introductory text about the geographies of relations between human and non-human animals:

«Animals surround me right now as I write these words: Inside are three cats; sculptures of elephants, cats, water buffalo, frogs, birds, and an octopus; photos of cheetahs, elephants, seals, giraffes, and all sorts of birds; and a painting of coyotes. Pieces of animals decorate nearly every room (all found!) – bird nests, a porcupine quill, bison fur, a wild-turkey eggshell, too many feathers, a chip from a tree that had been visited by a beaver, seashells, pieces of turtle shell, a jaguar whisker, and the skeletal mouth of a sea urchin. Outside there are butterflies, a huge spider that lives by the porch light, mosquitoes, blue jays, cardinals, three species of woodpeckers, three species of finches, nuthatches, worms, crickets and other creepy-crawlies and creepy-fliers, starlings, humming-birds, chipmunks, squirrels, and occasionally our resident opossum, a Cooper's hawk, and the neighborhood bully cats. Furthermore, there is milk and cheese in the refrigerator, cat food made of cows, chickens, turkeys, salmon, and tuna, honey, leather shoes, a leather softball glove, and household products that have been tested on animals» (Urbanik, 2012, p. xi).

Interest in animals is by no means new to geography. According to Urbanik, the history of animal geography can be divided into three big waves. The first includes zoogeography of the late 19th century, which dealt with the distribution of ani-

mal populations. It studied and mapped the evolution and movements of species in space and time trying to understand how animals adapted to different ecosystems (see Hesse 1924 and Hesse et al. 1937). The main object of research was the fauna; that is, the populations of wild animals (see Newbigin, 1913). Domestic animals characterized the second wave of animal geography, whose best-known exponents were Carl Sauer and Charles Bennett. Sauer (1969) was particularly concerned with the history of animal domestication. In a well-known article published in *The Professional Geographer* (1960), Bennett invited his colleagues to do research on what he explicitly called „cultural animal geography“; i.e., a geography that should study the interactions between animals and human cultures that engaged with, for example, subsistence hunting and fishing.

The third wave of 'new' animal geography landed in the late 1990s, supported by the consolidation of diverse animal rights movements. It entered into the Anglo-American geographical debate more or less simultaneously with the diffusion of actor-network-theory (Latour 2005) in the social sciences and, more specifically, with the work of Sarah Whatmore (2002; see also Whatmore and Thorne 1998), but also of Jennifer Wolch and Jody Emel (1995). Actor-network-theory is an important approach in contemporary human geography and, by emphasising the agency of a wide variety of non-human actors in making the world, represented one of the first theoretical foundations in geography

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that opened the door to animals and their geographies.

In the last two decades, this new animal geography has dealt with two major themes that Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert (2000) have called "animal spaces" and "beastly places". The first are the spaces in which humans have ideologically and materially positioned animals. That is to say, first, ideologically, animals have been constructed as living beings inferior to humans, and also as the main alterity against which human beings have been defining and identifying themselves (Agamben 2004, Derrida 2008). Subsequently, animals have been ideologically positioned within the realm of nature, which is to say, according to modern, Western mainstream ways of thinking, a space to which human culture apparently did not belong.

Second, consequently, animals have been positioned within the spaces that humans designed for them: farms, aquariums, zoos, cages, laboratories, etc. Instead, "beastly places" are animals' own geographies, their everyday spaces, those spatialities animals make through their individual and collective cultures and practices. In other words, those geographers who have dealt with some of animals' bio-geographies and their beastly places (Bear 2011; Barua, 2014; Colombino and Giaccaria, 2016) have focused their attention on what I call, referring to the work of philosopher Giorgio Agamben, the bios of non-human animals, their social and cultural lives, as opposed to *zoé*, biological life.

Recently, Hodgetts and Lorimer (2015) have published an article in which they invite geographers to do more work on “beastly places” by offering some methodological suggestions on how to do research with animals. They have thus paved the way to the emergence of what scholars believe to be the fourth wave of animal geography (Hovorka 2018), which Hodgetts and Lorimer name “animals’ geographies”. The focus here is trying to find out ways (i.e. methods and theoretical frameworks) to look at the ‘animal side’ of human-animal relations, in opposition to animal spaces’ focus on the human side of such relations. This move implies paying more attention to animals’ individualities and personalities, and also their social and cultural life with other animals, including human animals.

This fourth wave of animals’ geographies is perhaps more exciting than past research that looked at where humans put animals in specific spaces because it allows researchers to decentre their explorations and make them less anthropocentric; that is to say, it supports geographers’ recent endeavours in exploring the world in ways which no longer place humans at the heart of geographical enquires, practices and reflections. That of animals’ geographies is both, at the same time, an intellectual project aiming at providing more holistic and richer understandings of the more-than-human world we live in, and a political project that calls for a more-than-human justice in a social world which keeps silencing animals and making them invisible.

It should be noted that ethology has long been dealing with non-human animals and their worlds by studying their behaviours. Writing from Graz, it is important to recall that one of the most re-

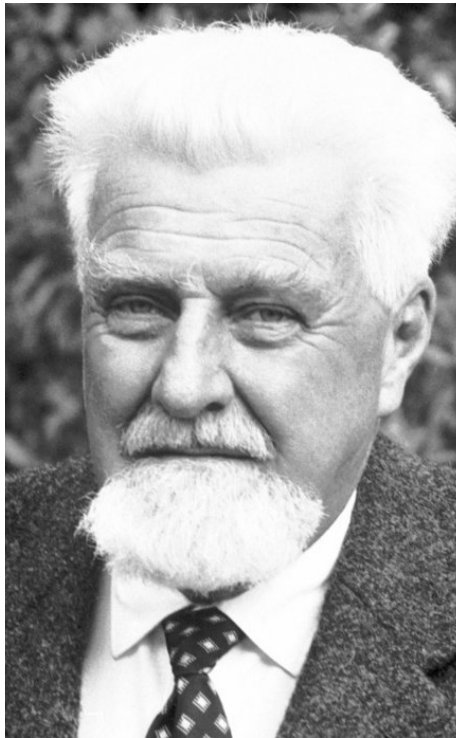


Fig. 1: Konrad Lorenz. Photo from the Nobel Foundation archive.jpg. Source, in Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository, CC BY-SA (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>).

nown Austrians worldwide is Nobel laureate Konrad Lorenz (1903-1989), who is considered one of the founders of modern ethology (see Fig. 1).

Cognitive ethology, one of ecology’s branches, has been very influential in human-animal studies as it specifically studies how animals think, feel and act. Animal geographers have started to collaborate with ethologist (e.g. Barua and Sinha 2019) and use published works in ethology to explore the geographies of non-human animals (see Jones forthcoming). Ethology in fact is the field we, as geographers, should rely on anytime we embark upon working and learning with specific animals (see e.g. Shapiro 1990 and 2019) to try to avoid anthropomorphising them; that is to say, associating human characteristics to animals, traits which scientists have not (yet) found to be typical of animals’ behaviours

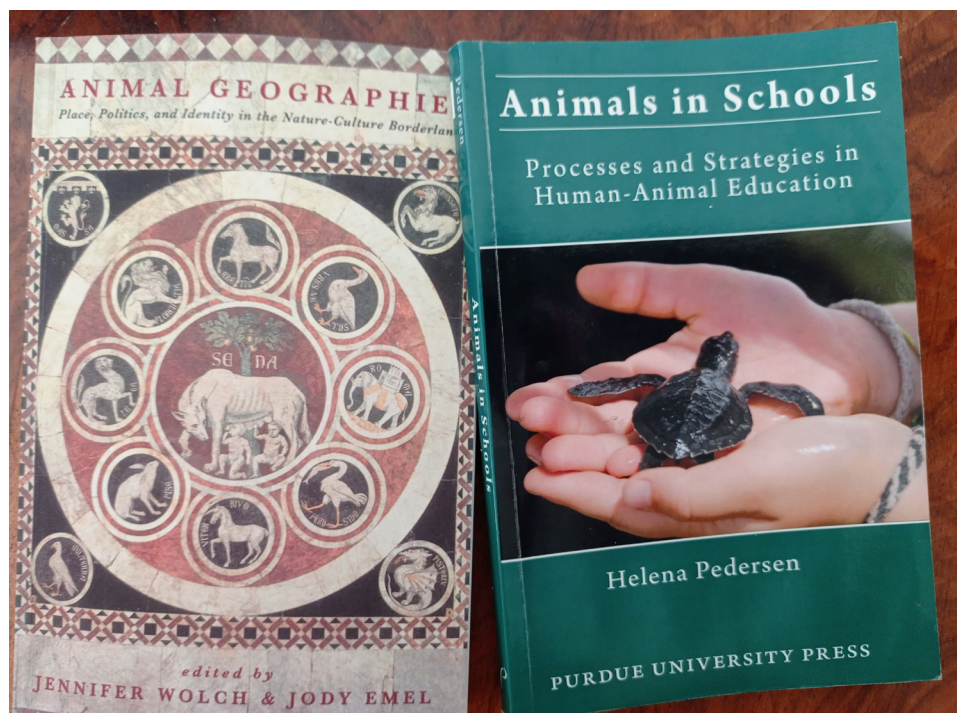


Fig. 2: Photos of copies of the first book published on “new animal geography” (Wolch and Emel 1998) and of Helena Pedersen’s 2010 seminal book on how pedagogy and its institutions produce and use a variety of social representations of animals.

and capacities. For example, whether fish feel pain is an issue which is still under debate.

From a social sciences' perspective, however, ethology may still have some shortcomings, which geography and cognate disciplines can overcome and contribute to a better understanding of non-human animals and how they shape the world. One of the limits of ethology, as noted by Lynda Birke (2014), is that it is a science that has studied animals without however considering the power relations between human and non-human animals and forgetting the wider context (social, economic, cultural) in which these interrelationships take place. When we speak of context, we are referring to "place", a key concept in human geography. The 'where' humans and animals interact, directly or indirectly, shapes how we understand such interrelations. It is important, in fact, that future research in animal geography focuses also on other than Anglo-American case studies, which seem to dominate contemporary geographical scholarship (Hovorka 2017).

An important book useful to start to engage with animal geography is Julie Urbanik's 2012 *Placing Animals: An Introduction to the Geography of Human-Animal Relations*. This volume is very well written and easily understandable for a readership whose first language is not English. It provides a nice overview of the history of animal geography and a good discussion of the main spaces where humans have been placing animals.

To reflect geography's turn to engage with the more-than-human, which includes animals but also a wide variety of plants and natural elements and forces, this Winter Semester the geographical seminar "Nature & the City" will host the 2020 International Lecture Series in Human Geography. During the seminar, scholars from countries in and beyond Europe will present their work by looking at how animals, plants and elements such as fire and water contribute to shaping contemporary urban spaces. The full programme of International Lecture Series will be announced in October.

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