

AMONG ANIMALS

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ABSTRACT

The tendency to see humans as special and separate influences even practices like scientific taxonomy which explicitly place them among other animals. The animal-related scholarship that has emerged throughout the humanities and social sciences often reveals analogous tensions. Animal topics have similarly inspired historians, including environmental historians, but historical perspectives have become somewhat marginalised within the field labeled 'animal studies'.

KEYWORDS

animals, animal studies, human exceptionalism, anthropomorphism

We seem to be a very special kind of animal. At least, that is what we incessantly tell ourselves. We say it explicitly when we celebrate our intelligence and technology and linguistic proficiency. And we say it implicitly in the categories we use to make sense of the world around us. Most obviously, our self-positioning within systems of scientific classification has tended to obscure the extent of our closeness to other apes, sometimes even while acknowledging that we are one of them. Thus Linnaeus invented the order *Primates* and put us into it, placing the genus *Homo* alongside

Simia (apes and monkeys), *Lemur* (prosimians) and *Vespertilio* (bats).¹ This led some fellow naturalists to reject his system outright, on the grounds of offended vanity or ‘the repugnance we feel to place the monkey at the head of the brute creation, and thus to associate him ... with man’.² Others expressed their dissent taxonomically by dividing the primates into two main categories: *Quadrumana*, which accommodated all the monkeys and (other) apes, and *Bimana*, occupied solely by humans. For much of the twentieth century, the family *Hominidae* included only humans and australopithecines, while the other apes were sequestered in the now-obsolete family *Pongidae*. In recent years, as *Hominidae* has been expanded to include chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans, new layers of discrimination – subfamily *Homininae* and tribe *Hominini* – have also been introduced.

Perhaps less obviously, the standard geologic time scale that measures the history of the earth reflects perceptions similar to those that produced the category *Bimana*. That is, the current epoch, labeled the Recent or the Holocene, is much shorter than any of the other Cenozoic epochs (mere thousands of years long so far, rather than millions) and its onset was not marked by changes on the scale that marked the onset of the parallel chronological divisions. Instead, it coincides with the beginnings of human agriculture; without this proleptic reference to our future impact, it could be understood simply as part of the latest Pleistocene interglacial.

The still shorter Anthropocene is currently more controversial, but if even a fraction

¹ Carolus Linnaeus, *Systema Naturae: Regnum Animale* (1758; London: British Museum (Natural History), 1956) p. 18.

² Thomas Pennant, *History of Quadrupeds* (London: B. and J. White, 1793) p. iv; William Wood, *Zoography; or the Beauties of Nature Displayed* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1807) p. xvii.

of the predicted anthropogenic changes in earth systems actually transpire, it will, unfortunately, turn out to be more persuasively grounded.

But even our impressive capacity for environmental transformation may not set us so very far apart from other life forms. Many organisms, whether as large as elephants or as small as locusts or fungi, can have devastating impacts on particular ecosystems. And, given time, smaller organisms can cause still more massive alterations. The evolution of the earth's atmosphere in its current form, containing plenty of oxygen for animals like us to breathe, is normally recounted as a story of progress, with a happy ending: the earliest atmosphere was inhospitable to such life, until the emergence of blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) that, through photosynthesis, slowly produced the air that sustains us. It can also, however, be cast as tragedy, since it resulted in the extinction of most of the anaerobic life that had flourished previously, including most of the cyanobacteria themselves. Phil Plait (also known as "The Bad Astronomer") has recently described it as 'an apocalypse that was literally global in scale, and one of the most deadly disasters in Earth's history'.³ This was the first of the mass extinctions that our planet has witnessed, and perhaps the only one before the present that was caused when the dominant organisms transformed their environment so radically that they could no longer thrive in it.

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³ Phil Plait, 'Poisoned Planet', 28 Jul. 2014 (accessed 4 Aug. 2014). I am grateful to William Cronon for drawing this post to my attention.
http://www.slate.com/blogs/bad_astronomy/2014/07/28/the_great_oxygenation_event_the_earth_s_first_mass_extinction.html

If resistance to the primate order has not completely disappeared in the centuries since Linnaeus, it has significantly diminished. But the reluctance to understand ourselves as animals among animals that troubled many naturalists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has found oblique expression in modern scholarship. Thus animals have always been part of the environment, however environment has been understood, but they have not always loomed large (or been the focus of separate attention) among the concerns of environmental historians. But they are looming larger and over the past few decades they have attracted increasing attention.⁴ This increase can be documented in the pages of *Environment and History*, among other places. A survey of its tables of contents reveals no articles focused on animals in its first four years, while in the last decade most volumes have included two or three.⁵ The programmes of national, regional, and global environmental history conferences show a similar growth of interest. The American Society for Environmental History now designates animals as one of its major categories, so that, if logistically possible, panels dealing with such topics are not scheduled in competition with each other. Not all of this growth in interest reflects increased or newly uncloseted zoophilia (though this is surely a factor – most scholars who choose to write about animals do like them). It can be at least partially explained internally, as part of an increasing inclination on the part of environmental historians to examine the components of the environment (plants,

⁴ See Harriet Ritvo, 'Animal Planet', *Environmental History* 9 (2004): 204–220, for an overview.

⁵ This rough count includes articles that mentioned animals, animal products or animal-related activities in the title. Some of these articles have been collected in Sarah Johnson (comp.) *Animals, Themes in Environmental History* Vol. 4 (Cambridge: The White Horse Press, 2014).

microbes, soil, rocks and air, as well as creatures), to see the environment as a *Gestalt* or landscape, or to explore ways that the environment has been understood, appreciated or regulated as an abstract or as a whole.

But the animal turn in environmental history also reflects a trend that extends throughout the humanities and social sciences, where attention to other species had been similarly sparse. Many disciplinary and subdisciplinary organisations now feature panels devoted to animal-related topics at their annual meetings, and some support affinity groups that are less ephemeral; articles on animal related topics have appeared more frequently in their journals, as they have in *Environment and History*. The standard reifications of such academic attention have also proliferated: book series, college classes, textbooks, workshops and anthologies. The multidisciplinary rubric of animal studies has emerged to juxtapose and institutionalise this dispersed scholarship, although with mixed success. The panels at annual disciplinary meetings are, unsurprisingly, largely populated by members of the sponsoring organisation, whether they are anthropologists, geographers, literary scholars, sociologists or historians. Similarly, a number of presses now publish scholarship on animal-related topics by humanists and social scientists, but their lists are far from interchangeable: thus Columbia University Press emphasises philosophy and law, the Rodopi Press features critical animal studies, the University of Minnesota Press inclines to literary and cultural theory and the Johns Hopkins University Press⁶ focuses on history.

⁶ Full disclosure: I am the editor of the Johns Hopkins series.

Both this divergence and the emergence of ‘animal studies’ offer additional evidence of the liveliness of animal related scholarship. They also provide information about the evolving relation of the history of animals to animal studies. In particular they indicate the extent to which, even as historical scholarship in this area, environmental or otherwise, has flourished, it has become peripheral to animal studies, despite having similar origin stories and parallel subsequent trajectories. Both have roots in the political and cultural sensibilities of the 1960s and 1970s, distilled in Peter Singer's influential *Animal Liberation*, whose title clearly connected the experience of animals with that of oppressed humans.⁷ And both initially shared outsider status within the community (or communities) of humanists and social scientists. But as the volume of scholarship devoted to other animals has increased, mere shared interest in such topics has become less powerful as a binding force. Perhaps it is only natural that, as more and more colleagues came to share their interests, scholars gravitated to those who also shared their disciplinary language and methods. Thus work within animal studies has tended to replicate the disciplinary divisions and oppositions of the larger academic world. Or it may simply be that ‘studies’ in practice is less capacious than it is in principle. In many fields that share that label, literary and cultural studies tends to provide the dominant or default approach. ‘Interdisciplinary’ may be defined relatively narrowly, to refer to the incorporation of material that is conventionally the province of another discipline, rather than the deployment or appreciation of

⁷ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: Towards an End to Man's Inhumanity to Animals* (New York: HarperCollins, 1975).

alternative methods. To take a practical example that is less trivial than it may appear, the citation form required by many interdisciplinary journals does not readily accommodate the use of evidence that is required by historical argumentation. More substantively, anthologies designed for the university reading lists in animal studies classes tend to include relatively few historical contributions.⁸ The largest animal studies event is the triennial Minding Animals conference. At the most recent one, held in Utrecht in 2012, the marginal position of history was very striking. The meeting was large, lively and full of interest, lasting four days and attracting more than 500 participants from many parts of the world. The list of plenary speakers was correspondingly robust. It included one novelist, one lawyer, one animal activist, one sociologist, one specialist in animal behavior, one political theorist, six philosophers and one historian. The letter of invitation made it clear that the organisers understood historical scholarship as part of the background of animal studies, not as part of the foreground:

We would like you to discuss the human–animal relationship from a broad historical perspective. We would like you to put some interesting facts about the current human–animal relationship in a historical perspective. For instance, in relation to developments in the fields of politics and technology.⁹

⁸⁸ See, for example, Garry Marvin and Susan McHugh (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Human-Animal Studies* (London: Routledge, 2014); Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgeralde (eds) *The Animals Reader: The Essential Classic and Contemporary Writings* (Oxford: Berg, 2007); Clifton P. Flynn (ed.) *Social Creatures: A Human and Animal Studies Reader* (Brooklyn: Lantern Books, 2008); and Arnold Arluke and Clinton Sanders (eds) *Between the Species: Readings in Human-Animal Relations* (Boston: Pearson Education, 2009).

⁹ Personal communication 3 May 2011.

The disciplinary distribution of the numerous panels mirrored that of the plenaries. Most of the presentations shared a kind of abstractness, discussing animals in general or in principle or in imagination. Thus, despite the activist agenda of Minding Animals – according to its website, it ‘works to further the development of animal studies internationally and to help establish legal and moral protections for all nonhuman animals’¹⁰ – scholarly attention to actual animals was relatively sparse.¹¹

It is possible to understand this marginalisation of historical scholarship as an implicit critique since the quality that I have just called as ‘abstractness’ could, at least in many instances, also be expressed as the explicit focus on theory. It is also possible to understand it less tendentiously as just another example of the compartmentalisation that characterises much of academia. And, in either case, it might not make much difference to historians as they cultivate their own gardens; as Mao said, ‘let a hundred flowers blossom.’ But, as the history of animals has diverged from the mainstream of animal studies (or has been sidelined), it has continued to engage a similar set of underlying questions – an engagement that, whether explicit or implicit, accounts for much of the novelty of current historical work on animals. After all, animals have frequently figured in historians' research on topics from Neolithic hunting, to early domestication, to agricultural improvement, to the history of science. In many cases, their remains have been (and continue to be) interpreted as proxies for irretrievable human evidence; for

¹⁰ Minding Animals website, accessed 9 Aug. 2014. mindinganimals.com

¹¹ Non-scholarly attention, on the other hand, was abundant, from the vegan/vegetarian catering to the range of causes

example one study used ancient horse bones and riding paraphernalia to support an argument about the emergence of the Indo-European languages.¹² Even their suffering has most often been studied in the context of changing human ethical and political sensibilities.

In contrast to this traditional use of animal evidence, much recent work in animal history attempts to take the experience and interests of other creatures into account, along with those of people. Of course this is easier said (although very frequently said) than done, especially for historians, since, challenging as this problem is with regard to the present, it is much more so with regard to the past. Most animals communicate without recourse to human language, and even people who know individual animals well can have trouble understanding them. A great deal of the evidence about the nature and experience of historical animals comes from the testimony of the people who observed them, interacted with them and exploited them, and most of the rest comes from bones, skins and other physical remains. (There is also a fair amount of testimony from people who mostly imagined them, but this, even more than other apparently animal-related evidence, primarily offers information about people. For example, it is hard to believe that the elephant Jumbo actually felt the loyal British sentiments that were widely attributed to him when the Zoological Society of London sold him to the American impresario P. T. Barnum.)

¹² David W. Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Attempts to make room for animals by displacing people must struggle with the distortion and diminution that inevitably accompanies such filtering. Thus Robert Delort, who highlighted this agenda in the title of his 1984 study *Les animaux ont une histoire*, produced a species-by-species account that did not fulfil his ambition ‘to privilege the animal, and not the history of men’.¹³ Much more recently, in *Le Point de vue animal: Une autre version de l’histoire*, Eric Baratay similarly proposed ‘to detach history from an anthropocentric vision’.¹⁴ His fascinating study foregrounds the historical role of animals and attempts to acknowledge both their responses to the situations in which people have placed them and, when possible, their resistance to human compulsions and constraints. But, for humans writing for humans, some version of anthropocentrism is difficult to avoid. Stories like the one that E.C. Pielou tells in *After the Ice Age: The Return of Life to Glaciated North America* may come closer to avoiding anthropocentrism, but they are stories from which people are (mostly) absent.¹⁵

The stronger version of this agenda – the claim to give other animals a voice – is still more problematic, requiring a greater leap of both empathy and imagination. Like many more general attempts to retrieve the historical significance of animals, it assumes an analogy between the experiences of members of other species and those of members of disadvantaged human groups. That analogy is not completely

¹³ Robert Delort, *Les animaux ont une histoire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984) p. 12.

¹⁴ Éric Baratay, *Le Point de vue animal: Une autre version de l’histoire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2012) p. 12.

¹⁵ E.C. Pielou, *After the Ice Age: The Return of Life to Glaciated North America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

encouraging, however. There are numerous examples of similarly well-intentioned ventriloquism on behalf of other people but, when previously silenced people gain their voices, they often say something very different (and not thank you). Not even chimpanzees or parrots are likely to have the chance to correct their self-appointed human representatives, but it might be more respectful to acknowledge their inscrutability.

Some of these difficulties are inherent in the term 'animal' itself, which refers to a category without clear boundaries. This essay began with the resistance that many humans have felt to including themselves in that category and, although I feel no such resistance, my uneasy alternation between 'other animals' and 'animals' in this discussion, mostly on grounds of euphony, suggests that to some extent the problem is embedded in the language itself. A similar tension surrounds the term 'anthropomorphic', which eliminates the possibility of easy slippage between humans and members of other species. That is, calling something or someone anthropomorphic is seldom meant as a compliment, and this negative connotation assumes that the claim that humans and non-humans share perceptions, behaviors, and so forth, is inherently naive, sentimental or otherwise misguided. But like other assumptions, sometimes it is right and sometimes it is wrong. Representations like Edwin Landseer's *The Noble Beast*,¹⁶ which foregrounds a stag accompanied by a doe and fawn, or the Akeley dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History,¹⁷

¹⁶ http://www.wikigallery.org/wiki/painting_201281/Sir-Edwin-Henry-Landseer/The-Noble-Beast (Accessed 9 Aug. 2014)

¹⁷ <http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent-exhibitions/mammal-halls/akeley-hall-of-african-mammals/black-rhinoceros> (Accessed 9 August 2014)

which show animals like rhinoceroses and giraffes in similarly improbable nuclear family groups, clearly deserve this critique. But it is hard to say the same of the many portraits and photographs that portray pets and children as part of the same social group. To describe that implied relationship as anthropomorphic is to erect or resurrect a barrier that may not have been perceived by any of the individuals involved. Thus the term 'anthropomorphism' inherently privileges the problematic human–animal binary.

And if, with regard to humans, 'animal' can seem too constrained, in other contexts it can seem too expansive. Biologically, it includes corals and starfish as well as gorillas and leopards, creatures that seem so different that the use of the blanket term 'animal' to cover them all brings the term into question yet again. Thus the elimination of boundary that separates humans from animals seems to require the establishment of another or others, although the location of replacement boundaries is equally problematic. If no obvious gap can be discerned between most kinds of animal and those kinds most similar to them, large gaps emerge when very dissimilar animals are juxtaposed. The claim that people are like cats or beavers or hippopotami (that they belong in the same general category with those kinds of creatures) is not the same as the claim that they are like jellyfish or fleas or worms.

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Fortunately, the difficulties involved in writing animals into environmental history have not prevented environmental historians from doing it. Recent work has been imaginative and varied, as can be illustrated by mentioning a few of many possible

examples. Alan Mikhail's *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt* uses the experience of animals as a way to examine major transitions in Egyptian history, including modernisation and urbanisation.¹⁸ In *The Nature of the Beasts* Ian Jared Miller recounts the history of the Tokyo Zoo in the context Japan's changing relationship with both the natural world and the world of human politics.¹⁹ *Riding High* by Sandra Swart examines an interspecies relationship – between humans and horses – that had major environmental impact in South Africa.²⁰ And Mark Barrow's *Nature's Ghosts* chronicles the dawning consciousness that even abundant wild species might be endangered in nineteenth-century America and the consequent efforts to preserve them.²¹ Such thoughtful work often incorporates an elegiac strain, since, from their perspective, the history of our relationship to other animals, at most times and in most places, has not been happy. But from the narrower human academic perspective of environmental history, things are looking up.

¹⁸ Alan Mikhail, *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt* (New York: Oxford, 2014).

¹⁹ Ian Jared Miller, *The Nature of the Beasts: Empire and Exhibition at the Tokyo Imperial Zoo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

²⁰ Sandra Swart, *Riding High: Horses, Humans, and History in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010).

²¹ Mark V. Barrow, Jr., *Nature's Ghosts: Confronting Extinction from the Age of Jefferson to the Age of Ecology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).