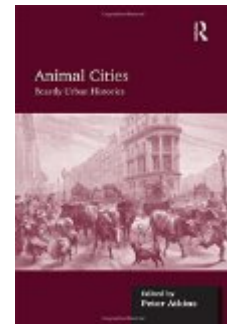


Peter Atkins, ed. *Animal Cities: Beastly Urban Histories*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2012. 270 pp. \$124.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4094-4655-2.

Reviewed by Chris Pearson (University of Liverpool)

Published on H-Urban (May, 2013)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari



The “Great Separation” of Animals and Humans in the Modern City

From pets to “pests” and from zoo animals to police dogs, animals populate contemporary Western cities. Yet compared to the nineteenth century, the number of urban animals today is insignificant. How and why did this happen? *Animal Cities* offers some answers. In particular, it identifies the leading role of nineteenth-century public health concerns and the related efforts of the sanitary movement: influenced by miasma theories of disease causation and keen to make cities more ordered and “rational,” doctors, public health officials, and local authorities sought to remove problematic animals, such as rabid dogs, and animal-based industries, such as slaughterhouses, from urban areas. Similar arguments have been made before, but *Animal Cities* provides a wealth of empirical material to shed light on the extensive animal populations of nineteenth-century cities and the ways in which they were de-animalized.

The four chapters (introduction and three empirically based chapters) by the volume’s editor, Peter Atkins, present these arguments most forcefully. Atkins proposes that a “Great Separation” occurred between “human residence” and “animal production” in Western cities from the mid-nineteenth century onward (p. 2). “Animal Wastes and Nuisances in Nineteenth-Century London” (chapter 2) demonstrates how influential public health reports in the mid-nineteenth century, such as Edwin Chadwick’s *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1842), paved the way for a slew of legislation aimed at regulating and/or removing urban livestock and animal-related trades. Up

until this point, animal labor and bodies had sustained urban life and fueled urban growth. In addition, the boundaries between the city and the countryside were highly permeable: pig rearing and cow sheds were common in London. Yet concerns over disease and the cleanliness and morality of the working classes combined with disgust at the smells and filth created by animals, slaughterhouses, and animal processing sites to push animals out of London. Atkins convincingly links this to other sanitary measures, such as the creation of sewerage systems. However, the “Great Separation” was a drawn out process: horses remained the main motor of urban transportation until automobiles replaced them in the early twentieth century.

In chapter 3, “The Charmed Circle,” Atkins continues his exploration of the linkages between the city and countryside, outlining the close relationship between animal manure and agriculture in the areas surrounding London and Paris. Animal (and human) wastes provided fertilizer for the farms that surrounded these two cities, which in turn supplied them with horse fodder and foodstuffs. This productive relationship ended, however, with the “Great Separation.” Chapter 4 maintains the focus on the role of animals in the urban economy through an exploration of London slaughterhouses and animal industries, such as “the land of leather” of the Bermondsey tanning and leather industries. The vivid descriptions of slaughter and tanning processes provide the volume with some gruesome color and underscore the sensual and bloody nature of urban animal industries that so hor-

rified officials and provided a spur to the sanitary movement. Taken as a whole, Atkins's chapters offer a compelling exposition of the significant place of animals in the nineteenth-century British urban economy and the ways in which regulations, sanitary concerns, and changing economic and technological practices led to their removal.

Sabine Barles's chapter "Undesirable Nature: Animals, Resources and Urban Nuisance in Nineteenth-Century Paris" outlines a similar history for the French capital. Domestic animals were vital components of the urban economy for much of the nineteenth century, but a range of economic and technological factors, such as the mechanization of transport and new chemical products, led to their eventual exclusion. But although Barles shows that many Parisians treated urban animals as nuisances and sources of disease, she does not provide evidence to back up her claim that "the disappearance ... of urban animals was greeted with relief" (p. 187). This may have been the case among public health officials, but was this necessarily the case among other groups?

In a similar vein to Atkins and Barles, Paul Laxton's chapter "This Nefarious Traffic: Livestock and Public Health in Mid-Victorian Edinburgh" reconstructs, in painstaking detail, the role of animals and meat in the nineteenth-century Scottish capital. But whereas Atkins is most interested in economic animal geographies, Laxton uses newspaper articles to show how the use and treatment of urban animals became an intense political issue. Although the wealth of detail sometimes obscures his wider claim that tighter regulations and inspection regimes led to greater control of livestock and meat in Edinburgh, Laxton's contribution provides a useful case study in thinking through the political ramifications of urban animals and the ways in which a range of actors, such as veterinarians, butchers, and livestock dealers, had a stake in the politics of animal control.

The focus on the economic importance and material presence of animals in urban environments builds on Clay MacShane and Joel A. Tarr's work, *The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (2007), on horses in the nineteenth-century city in providing a counterpoint to the more cultural perspectives on animals in the city taken by Harriet Ritvo, in *Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (1987), and Kathleen Kete, in *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (1994). But other chapters in *Animal Cities* adopt a more cultural approach than Atkins, Barles, and Laxton. In "Be-

tween the Muzzle and the Leash: Dog-walking, Discipline, and the Modern City," Philip Howell historicizes dog walking through an analysis of rabies fears and dog leash and licensing laws in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century London. He shows that the domestication of public space through the removal of stray dogs was not simply a history of coercion and repression. Instead, leashes allowed dogs and their owners to be welcomed into modern urban space as ordered and rational units. In such a way, Howell reads dog walking as both a history of human-nonhuman cohabitation à la Donna Haraway and "regulatory governance" à la Michel Foucault (p. 239). Although Howell covers relatively well-trodden ground, his use of theory adds a fresh perspective to the history of rabies in Britain.[1] Takashi Ito's chapter on the nineteenth-century cultural meaning of London Zoo is perhaps less successful, particularly as it fails to indicate its wider significance to zoo history. But its positioning of the zoo as a relatively clean, ordered, and compassionate space of human-animal interaction in contrast to menageries and slaughterhouses is persuasive. Ito's argument that "the inclusion and exclusion of particular animals occurred simultaneously at different places in the city" also adds to the volume's coherence and its claim that the "Great Separation" did not lead to the complete removal of animals from the modern city (p. 196).

Of all the volume's chapters, Andrea Gaynor's "Fowl and the Contested Productive Spaces of Australian Suburbia, 1890-1990" most successfully combines material and cultural perspectives. She expertly uncovers the vast numbers of chickens that suburban Australians reared in their backyards in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: a 1933 poultry census in Victoria found that forty thousand urban dwellers kept nine hundred thousand chickens. Although these "chooks" were part of urban material flows—they ate kitchen waste and were in turn consumed in kitchens—they were also part of the emotional histories of Australian cities. Owners often felt a strong attachment to their "chooks," while their neighbors might be annoyed by the mess they created. Gaynor succeeds in highlighting the chickens' economic importance. Yet she argues that it was cultural factors that led to their almost complete disappearance from Australian cities by the 1990s. Whereas chicken rearing once formed part of Australians' pride in becoming economically independent and helped create "idealized suburban yeomanry" identities, the middle-class males who controlled municipal councils began to treat chickens as obstacles to the creation of clean and ordered suburbs (p. 213). Pub-

lic health legislation from the mid-nineteenth century onward stipulated that chickens should be kept a certain distance from human habitation, under which some chicken breeders were prosecuted. Removing chickens from the suburbs was also a bid to distinguish urban areas from the supposedly backward countryside. Despite some resistance from chicken breeders, this attempt to remove urban dwellers from nonhuman nature was ultimately successful and has become one of the ways in which urban Australians are now increasingly removed from the social and environmental consequences of food production.

Taken as a whole, this volume has much to recommend it. It provides a wealth of data into the role and presence of animals in nineteenth-century British, French, and Australian cities, and offers insight into how and why animal populations decreased. It therefore makes an important contribution to urban geography and urban environmental history. Its relatively tight focus gives the volume a strong sense of coherence, which is reinforced by the fact that almost half of it is written by its editor, Atkins. However, the volume's title implies that its scope will be broad, when in fact it covers only a handful of cities: London, Paris, Edinburgh, Melbourne, and Perth. We therefore need to be wary of extrapolating its findings to other cities. Furthermore, at a time when some scholars call for us to recognize the global connections between urban policies, practices, and technologies (see, for example, Jennifer Robinson's *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* [2006]), it is shame that the volume does not consider in any great detail the presence of animals in non-Western urban areas or reflect more on what, if anything, makes the animal histories and geographies of London, Paris, Edinburgh, Melbourne, and Perth distinct. The "Great Separation" would also have benefited from being better situated within longer historical trends. For instance, how did the presence, role, and use of animals in the nineteenth century differ from that of the early modern period? So while Atkins openly acknowledges that "our insights are ... limited to [a] narrow [geographical] context and to a number of animal species," it is a shame that the implications of this are not better reflected in the title or addressed more extensively throughout the volume (p. 17).

Furthermore, individual chapters and the volume as a whole could have been clearer in demonstrating the significance of their findings to urban history and our understandings of urban modernity. I was thoroughly convinced by the importance of animals in the cities cov-

ered by this volume, but was left wondering about the wider implications of writing animals into urban histories and geographies. For instance, how do these case studies challenge or complicate existing accounts of modern cities that all but ignore animals, such as Richard Dennis's *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840-1930* (2008)? In addition, the decision to largely bypass theory means that the book mainly overlooks current debates in animal studies on nonhuman agency, communication, and subjectivity. For although Atkins admits that its "fashionable jargon such as Actor Networks or assemblages aside, there is impressive momentum in ... posthuman approaches," he does not address how posthumanist concepts of nonhuman agency or subjectivity might inform his narratives (p. 50). This is not necessarily a problem in itself and I am not arguing that the volume needed to take a posthumanist or Actor-Network theory approach. But the book's chapters do tend to reduce animals to objects of human representation, repression, and regulation. The living, physical presence of urban animals is all too often overshadowed by statistics on slaughtered animals or cultural representations of them in images. To move beyond such asymmetrical narratives (to use some fashionable jargon!), the volume might have asked: did the animals have any "power" or "agency"? To what extent, if any, did the physical, emotional, and cognitive abilities and characteristics of pigs, cows, chickens, and other animals influence urban history? By neglecting such issues, the volume is a missed opportunity to show how empirically driven studies might add to theory-dominated debates within animal studies.[2]

Nonetheless, this collection of essays is a welcome addition to the growing field of animal history and geography. It makes a compelling case for the importance of animals in certain cities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It thereby encourages us to reflect on the histories and consequences of the "Great Separation" and provides a solid foundation for further research.

Notes

[1]. The history of rabies in Britain is well covered in Neil Pemberton and Michael Worboys, *Mad Dogs and Englishmen: Rabies in Britain, 1830-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007). On fears of rabies as a product of anxieties about modernity, see Kathleen Kete, *Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[2] For an example of how a largely empirical study might address the question of nonhuman agency, see

Sandra Swart, *Riding High: Horses, Humans and History* (2010), 194-220.
in South Africa (Johannesburg: Wits University Press,

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Chris Pearson. Review of Atkins, Peter, ed., *Animal Cities: Beastly Urban Histories*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. May, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37962>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.