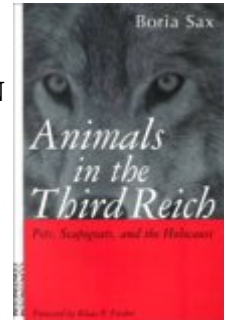


Boria Sax. *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats, and the Holocaust.* Foreword by Klaus P. Fischer. New York and London: Continuum, 2000. 175 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8264-1289-8.



Reviewed by Marion W. Copeland

Published on H-Net (April, 2001)

History Can Repeat Itself

Historians have been even more reluctant to look at Nazi animal protection legislation than at Nazi science. It was first examined in Sax and Arluke, "Understanding Nazi Animal Protection and the Holocaust," in 1992 in *Anthrozoos*, the journal of the International Society of Anthrozoology (ISAZ). ISAZ is a scholarly organization dedicated, as NILAS is, to the study of the human/animal bond. The essay met with controversy and accusation, the most disturbing of which accused the authors of trivializing what is rightly seen as the center of Nazi activity--the Holocaust and the attempted extermination of Europe's Jews and other non-Aryans under the guise of racial purity and racial and ethnic cleansing--by their focus on nonhuman animals. As Sax concludes in *Animals in the Third Reich*:

"That the Nazis might be capable of humane legislation was such a disconcerting idea that even the detached, academic style of our paper could not make it acceptable to many people. The topic of animals, like the Holocaust itself, evokes passions of great intensity and confusion." (p. 164)

Actually, in the essay as well as in this study, Sax makes two major claims. First, "that the Nazis, whatever their motives, were right in much of their [animal] legislation. They were right also to protect predators such as the wolf" (p. 165). And second, that an understanding of the complex, paradoxical nature of the Nazis' relationships to animals lends insight into what happened to humans during the Nazi regime as well as into our own relationship to animals and humans.

If one can examine Nazi animal public policy apart from the Holocaust as Sax does initially (only to reconnect it later in the book in deeply disturbing ways), it seems clear that it is, at least in theory, superior even to what we consider the most enlightened and humane of contemporary attitudes and laws. Legislation regulating the lives and deaths of farm and laboratory animals of all kinds was more far-reaching than ours (Sax provides both the actual law and a chronology of legislative action in the book's appendix and discusses the legislation in detail in the text). Nazi environmental policies and initiatives for the protection of and the reintroduction of endangered

species went further than our present policies (even pre-George W. Bush) and penalties for infringement of both animal and environmental laws were strict. For instance, Karl von Frish was reprimanded after one of his students reported that an earthworm von Frish was dissecting moved despite its supposedly being anesthetized (as the law decreed all creatures used in experiments must be; p. 117).

"[T]he term 'ecology' was first coined in the 1860s by [the German biologist] Ernst Haeckel" (p. 104) and "[in] 1934 Germany became the first nation in modern times to place the wolf under protection" (p. 75). So exemplary and efficacious were the Nazi forest management and "nature protection (Naturschutz)" program that in 1935 Aldo Leopold went to Germany to study their methods and policy. Leopold's Wilderness Society and "land ethic" reflect "in part...the Germanic example." Like him, the Nazis saw land not as a commodity but as a community to which humans, like all other living creatures, belonged (p. 79).

Leopold also had reservations. He found "the artificiality of the German woods" troubling. Indeed, paradoxes and ironies as deeply embedded in the Western Euro-American culture story now as they were in the culture story of the Nazis then allowed the Nazis to create, out of this base of exemplary animal and environmental policy, an alarmingly logical rationale for the actions that led to and were made manifest in the Holocaust. The contemporaneous eugenics movements in the United States and Britain make clear that, as Sax concludes in *Animals in the Third Reich*, "the Nazis were more like the rest of us than we care to acknowledge" p. (165). The legacy of anthropocentrism, hierarchical and dualistic reasoning that gave rise to the concepts of "racial purity" and eugenics, is still strong in the West--and perhaps now, thanks to our current hegemony, in the entire modern world. In the abyss between growing modern appreciation and respect for nonhuman animals and modern technology's ever more

economically efficient machinery for the control and management of animals and nature lies the potential for history to repeat itself. Sax advises readers to recognize and fear in ourselves what we condemn in the Nazis, but also to recognize that, at least where animal and environmental legislation are concerned, there may be positive lessons to be learned. There is, side by side with this insight, the caution that even what seem to be positive measures can be bent and twisted to evil ends.

What does it tell us that so many people react to a study like Sax's with the claim that it trivializes the human? Or react to animal protection and rights activists with accusations that they do not care about humans--even after being shown solid research to the contrary? How are we affected when we read Sax's suggestions that we, like the Nazis, are descended from cultures that held animals in totemic awe and admiration? How has evolution's evidence that we are but one species among many affected our relationship with other animals? Such queries lie, as Sax points out here, at the thematic heart of much of our art and literature. Our languages vibrate with animal metaphor, much of it paradoxical or ironic, much of it symbolic, used to either glorify or belittle--often through reference to the same creature! Perhaps the most suggestive portion of Sax's study is his investigation of the evolution of animal metaphors in Nazi rhetoric. These metaphors were, over time, twisted in a way that made it possible for the most inhumane of actions to emerge from what began as obviously humane legislation.

The first part of the book traces eight animal metaphors in depth, moving from predators and the predator/prey relationship which became the Nazis' prime paradigm (p. 23), to trees, apes, sheep, pigs, wolves, dogs, and horses. Each discussion shows how Nazi attitudes toward the creature being considered contributed to the creation of the concentration camps and the extermination

of the Jews. Playing major roles in twisting what began as love of animals and nature were the technology, law, and animal psychology the Nazis inherited and developed. These become the subjects of Sax's ninth through eleventh chapters. The fatal turn of the screw that caused these metaphors to aid in establishing the reality of the "cult of death" and Auschwitz was the Nazis' conflation of slaughter and sacrifice, the foci of Sax's chapters twelve through fifteen. Each of his chapters is rich with evidence and story, all of which supports Sax's deeply felt and reasoned argument that more rests on humans' unresolved relationship to the other animals and to nature than we are willing to admit or examine.

It will be of interest to NILAS subscribers that in Sax's consideration of Nazi animal metaphor, literature and popular culture, including popular science writing, prove to be critical sources. Literary works sometimes emerge as key players in the formation of troubling attitudes and are sometimes catalysts in the development of truly enlightened and humane attitudes. Works by non-Germans like Kipling, Orwell, Sinclair, and Spiegelman (and one could now add Daniel Quinn's new novel *After Auschwitz*, which takes as its premise that Hitler won World War II and that human culture has had 2000 years since to bring the ideals of Nazi Germany to fruition) show both possibilities at work outside of Germany while a rich blend of German writers (Hess, Mann, Lorenz, Junger, Grass and Princi as well as the less--to me, at least--well-known Bolsche, Lons, Fink, Weil, and Melena) demonstrate how the same mix functioned before, during, and after the rise of the Nazis. For instance, in Grass's *Dog Years* (1965), the character of Prinz, Hitler's German Shepherd, illustrates the worst and best in his breed and breeders.

The dog known today as the German Shepherd, developed at the beginning of the 20th century to reintroduce what was believed to be "the primeval Germanic dog" (germanishic

Urhund),...was intended to embody the virtues of the German people, and anticipated the Nazi attempts to breed humans back to primeval Aryan stock" (p. 83). By emphasizing its "lupine descent," breeders meant to create not a pet but an animal whose predatory instincts would serve the state on the military field and, as it turned out, in the concentration camps. That the Nazis drew their concepts of racial purity from the ideals of animal breeding programs causes Sax, as it should cause his readers, to recognize the potential for abuse in current breeding programs, perhaps especially those involving DNA manipulation or mixing the genes of species. As Sax cautions, "The forces in our culture that once produced...Nazi racial hygiene could, if we are not aware of them, again produce the same developments" (pp. 103-104). To reinforce his point, Sax reminds his readers that the eminent biologist Francis Crick (who won the Nobel prize in 1962 for his discovery with James Watson of the molecular structure of DNA) once proposed "that all people be subject to reversible sterilization through a chemical...placed in food," leaving it to "Authorities...[to] license those who were considered genetically desirable to take the antidote and have children" (p. 104).

Though Sax doesn't allude to it, I find it more than coincidental that science fiction writer David Brin, in his Uplift series, shows humans of the future controlling the genetically improved nonhumans they have developed as helpers/slaves exactly as Crick suggested (and as proponents of eugenics applaud). Only when individual chimps, dolphins, etc. reach a level of development sufficiently like that of their human creators are they given the antidote and allowed to breed--and then, only if they breed true. Ultimately Brin's chimps revolt, demanding status and rights equal to those enjoyed by humans, and although there is no "happily-ever-after" ending, the series moves toward a world where such equity and harmony exist.

Contemporary animal legislation and policy remains unabashedly anthropocentric: one has to wonder whether outrage at studies focused like Sax's on animals rather than on humans arises not from sensitivity about the Holocaust but from fear of looking at the reality of the relationship between humans and nonhumans. Most humans, including those with valued companion animals of their own, don't give a second thought to a decision to spay or neuter a pet or to containment or removal policies or to reintroduction programs that radically affect the lives of wild animals and the environment. Euthanasia, not to ease intractable pain or a difficult dying but to eliminate pests, overpopulation, or to protect human life and property from potential harm, is seen as judicious and right. These attitudes are clues to our current paradoxical if not downright paternalistic attitudes toward animals, attitudes Sax demonstrates as the soil out of which the Holocaust grew. Consider each of these actions as it is applied not to a nonhuman but to a human and Sax's point is clear: the attitude, like the action, is not just inhumane. It is the seed out of which great evil once emerged and could emerge again.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-nilas>

Citation: Marion W. Copeland. Review of Sax, Boria. *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats, and the Holocaust*. H-Net, H-Net Reviews. April, 2001.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5089>



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