

Animals in History. Studying the Not-So Human Past

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When Dorothee Brantz and Christof Mauch (both German Historical Institute Washington, D.C.) sent out their call for proposals for a conference with the title „Animals in History. Studying the Not-So Human Past“, they were hoping to organize a conference with maybe 20 presentations (see the CFP at http://www.ghi-dc.org/conferences/animalsinhistory_cfp.html). In fact, they ended up receiving no less than 184 proposals by the deadline. In the end, they had to settle for 34 papers for the conference which took place in Cologne from 18 through 21 May 2005 (for the full program see http://www.ghi-dc.org/conferences/animalsinhistory_prog.html).

While the response seems to signal that the historical study of animals has obtained a more or less secure position in present-day academia, a great deal of discussion at the conference in fact revolved around the question of the standing of this sub-discipline - or whether it could form a sub-discipline in the first place. Harriet Ritvo (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA) in her keynote address set the tone for this debate by showing up the advantages and disadvantages of the formation of a separate discipline. Rather than taking the road to self-ghettoization as parts of gender studies or ethnic studies did, she urged attendants to strive for mainstreaming animal studies. While this call was not contested, the final discussion on the last day centered around the necessity of a separate journal (two, „Society & Animals“ and „Anthrozoös“, in fact do already exist, although they rarely carry historical articles) or separate undergraduate programs in animal studies. Also, the idea was raised to create an international academic society for animal studies (a group in Britain has already been started) which might convene regularly. In general, however, the participants remained skeptical about the prospects of moving further toward disciplinarity, although some told of their positive experience in teaching classes on „animals in history“ or similar topics to a broad student audience.

The other major dynamic that shaped the conference was the desire to overcome representation as the sole means of dealing with animals in history which it has long been. While only a minority of papers did in fact attempt to look at the animal beyond representation, participants still considered this to be a significant departure from earlier conferences of this sort. It was partly due to the interdisciplinarity of the conference that other possibilities were sought out: Besides trained historians, scholars from disciplines such as literary studies, anthropology, disaster studies, comparative psychology, sociology, or animal ecology made sure that the discussion was multi-faceted.

The range of animals studied was somewhat less diverse. Dogs (five papers) were unsurprisingly the most favorite subject of study, followed by horses, apes, and elephants (three papers each). Only one paper each was devoted to rhinoceroses, crocodiles, wolves, moose, and cats, while the remaining papers did not deal with specific animals. Conspicuously absent were fish (or marine animals in general), insects, livestock other than horses, rats, and birds (except for one paper), as Dorothee Brantz remarked in the concluding round table discussion.

Perhaps more important than the kinds of animals actually studied was the way in which this was done. One of the explicit aims of the conference was to privilege „a more animal-centered perspective“ (CFP), and accordingly particularly such papers were selected which tried to move beyond representation and tried to somehow get at „the animals themselves“. One such attempt was „The Nature of Colonialism: Being an Elephant in German East Africa“ by Bernhard Gissibl (International University Bremen, Germany). Besides looking at the metropolitan debates in Europe and the colonial administration policy, he also took the individual encounter of man and elephant into consideration. It is in this latter respect, where elephants were portrayed as serious opponents and individual actors, that Gissibl hopes to „obtain at least a fleeting glimpse“ at the elephants themselves. One factor that particularly characterizes elephants as „actors“ in their own right is, said Gissibl, their „anarchism“.

This particular elephantine characteristic was also stressed by Susan Nance (University of Guelph, Canada) whose paper was entitled „On Animal Agency: Evaluating Aggression and Non-Cooperation by Animal Performances in the

Nineteenth-Century American Circus“. Nance’s paper was also an attempt to „get animals into business history“. Since circus elephants helped people make money, why, asked Nance, should their activity not be regarded as „labor“? Nance herself problematized the term „activity“ she used in her paper: What is the right term for describing what animals do? One suggestion from the audience was to instead use the word „utility“. The debate on the „agency“ of animals in history had been opened on the first day by the excellent presentation of Susan Pearson and Mary Weismantle (both Northwestern University, USA), „Does ‘The Animal’ Exist? Toward a Theory of Social Life with Animals“. Pearson and Weismantle argued that both the classical modern conception of the animal as the negative of man and the postmodern conception which stresses the blurriness of the border between animal and man denied animals their rights as fully social actors. Rather than just taking up the instrumental and symbolic roles of animals, we should focus on „their involvement in quotidian daily practice“. Nonetheless, Pearson and Weismantle denied the application of the concept of „agency“ to animals: Agency, argued Pearson, is imply too intimately tied up with what it means to be human.

This view did not remain unchallenged, however. Besides Nance, it was Robert W. Mitchell (Eastern Kentucky University, USA) who from his viewpoint as a comparative psychologist working with apes argued forcefully that animals „of course have agency - how else could they move?!“. In his paper „Anthropomorphism and Its Critics: Looking at Us Looking at Animals“, Mitchell criticized that the concept of consciousness is commonly thought to be a human specific characteristic. In reality, Mitchell contended, humans were far from always following rational consciousness, „so why should animals do so in order to have a consciousness?“ He analyzed the „bias against using anthropomorphism to understand animals“ as the result of a historical development in animal behavioral studies, which today mainly resembled an obstacle, for which reason it should be overcome.

Julie A. Smith (University of Wisconsin, USA) attempted to endow animals with some kind of agency through the concepts of „contact“ or „emotional encounter“. Animal agency was also seen as coming to the fore indirectly in the constraints that humans (try to) apply to them. A much more radical solution of the problem was offered by Pascal

Eitler (Bielefeld University, Germany). From a La-tourian position he proposed that that even things can be social actors (they influence us, we talk to them, etc.), so why shouldn’t animals be? This line of reasoning was not pursued further during the conference, though.

Other papers had fewer problems with getting at the animals themselves for the simple reason that they focused on individuals. This was particularly true in the cases of Amy Jones (Virginia Tech, USA) with her paper on „Dogs in History: Celebrity, Sacrifice and the Soviet Space Dogs“ and Helena M. Pycior (University of Wisconsin, USA) and her paper „The Public and Private Lives of ‘First Dogs’: Warren G. Harding’s Laddie Boy and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Fala“. Pycior, who is pursuing „double biographies“ with the close relationship of ‘first dogs’ and the presidents at the center, presented dogs as „legitimate biographical subjects“, thus rendering the question of agency obsolete.

Yet, although it was primarily those papers arguing for animal agency that aroused lively debates, more traditionally oriented papers putting representation at their center still made up two thirds of the conference. Among them, no less than five dealt with the history of the animal rights movement. Mieke Roscher (University Bremen, Germany) linked the animal rights theme with a gender focus in her „The Struggle for Acceptance of the ‘Other’: Gender Conflicts Within the Late Victorian and Edwardian Animal Rights Movement in England and the Equalization of Women and Animals“. Many women participated in the British animal rights movement in the early 19th century, which was proof enough for some scientists to dismiss the movement as unscientific. While some leaders of the movement used „the animalization of the female“ themselves for tactical reasons, most of them tried to fend off frequent accusations of sentimentality and hysteria.

Several other papers among those dealing more conventionally with the human representation of animals stuck out as particularly convincing. Kelly Enright (Rutgers University, USA) presented the rhinoceros as ultimate symbol of the untamable wild in her paper „Why the Rhinoceros Doesn’t Talk: The Cultural Life of a Wild Animal in America“. While other animals imported to the USA in the 19th century and shown there to curious audiences were usually taught tricks, there were no attempts at taming or even naming the first rhinoceros coming to the USA in 1830. Tillman W.

Nechtman (University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA) in his paper „Untamed Empire: Domesticating Imperial Animals in Metropolitan Britain, 1759-1830“ showed how animals brought from the South Asia to Britain „were used as a cultural representation of the relationship between the domestic and the imperial world“. In particular the threatening hyena, however, reminded Britons symbolically of the instability of their relationship to the empire. Scott A. Miltenberger (University of California, Davis, USA) presented his concept of the 'anthrozootic' city in his paper „Promiscuously Mixed Together': Confronting the Paradox of the 19th-Century Anthrozootic City of New York“. New York before the 20th century could only be understood as „the product of a continuous interplay of humans, domestic animals, and the urban environment“. Only in the second half of the 19th century would middle-class New Yorkers begin criticizing the state of living together with animals, their waste, and animal-related related businesses.

One of the first approaches to animal history that has traditionally been taken and which was represented by several papers is the history of science. David A. Feller (University of Hawaii, USA) in his „Heir of the Dog: Canine Influences on Charles Darwin's Theory of Natural Selection“ argued that Darwin's growing up with dogs shaped his later theory much more deeply than has heretofore been acknowledged. Darwin had a regular correspondence with dog breeders and himself owned dogs throughout his life, which may well have helped him understand laws of inheritance and develop his theories of transmutation. In his paper „Man and Ape in 18th-Century Discourse“ Carl Niekerk (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA) looked at early modern European representations of apes. Due to the lack of opportunities at observation, the first „naturalistic“ depiction of an anthropoid monkey was not drawn until the 1780s. All the while the debate about the proximity of humans and apes continued in 'scientific' texts as well as literary and philosophical texts. It was particularly the latter which accepted the idea of an evolutionary relationship between man and ape more easily.

So what may be said to have been missing from the conference? Apart from numerous species, as mentioned above, one could especially point to the global comparative perspective, which the CFP had in fact highlighted as „one of the strengths of

this kind of history“. Comparative aspects surfaced only occasionally, such as e.g. when Aaron Skabelund (Hokkaido University, Japan) in his paper „Global Mercenaries: The Imperial (Battle)fields of the 'German' Shepherd“ investigated how the German shepherd dog came to be used in a similar way in Germany, Japan, South Africa, the US and the Congo and accordingly acquired the label of „the colonial“ or „imperial dog“. Other than that it was by individual contributions from the audience that comparative issues were sometimes raised. Indeed, the heterogeneity or rather multiperspectivity of the scholars brought together clearly was more an advantage than an obstacle for communication. One can only congratulate the organizers for their selection of papers. After having already had to discard five sixths of the original proposals, they are not to be envied for the daunting task they will next be facing: For the planned conference volume they will have to create yet another best of list from the papers given.

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