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## Animal History

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## CONSTRUCTING AN ANIMAL HISTORY

*Éric Baratay*

Since social sciences, from America to Europe, have become interested in animals, their focus has been almost exclusively directed on the human side of the question, dealing with human uses, actions and especially representations, in line with the ever-growing popularity of cultural readings since the 1980s. After years of such practice, as a historian working on the history of the relationships between humans and animals, I have been led to think that these approaches are often too limited because they have established and maintained a gaping black hole at the centre of their discourse: animals are never considered beings endowed with feelings or the capacity to act and react. Studies say much about humans but very little about animals, which are simply absent or transformed into mere pretexts, mere objects on which humans' representations, knowledge and practice come to bear.

### **Looking at real animals**

It is necessary to discard this approach, which is largely reliant on Western cultural conceptions, and which offers a sadly reductive view of the dialectical interaction between humans and animals, limiting it to a one-way relationship (from humans to animals) and overlooking or pushing aside a great deal of its reality and complexity. It is essential to investigate the influence of animals in their relationship to humans, their active role, at a time when ethology is increasingly insisting on the behaviour of animals as active beings, individuals or even persons (even if only certain species are considered, their number is steadily rising), on their cognitive capacities, on their group behaviour and culture, so that purely human approaches are now found wanting. Moreover, source material shows if one does not reject this aspect as anecdotal, that humans have seen, guessed and appraised the actions of animals and that they have responded, acted and thought accordingly.

Social sciences started to conceive of animals as active beings in the late 1980s, in the wake of a general positive reappraisal of the notion of action (Ingold, 1988; Haraway, 1991). Yet one has to admit that, other than such reflexions, truly innovative work is still scant (Shapiro, 1990; Sanders, 1999; Goode, 2007; Vicart, 2014). The last authors mentioned also chose to position themselves at an equal distance from animals and humans to evaluate their interactions.

In my work, I have tried to view things exclusively from the side of animals to gain a *greater* understanding (saying a better one would depreciate existing studies) of situations which are always more complex than one initially thinks. My aim is first to gain a *greater* understanding of these active beings who deserve to be studied for themselves, for their lived experience (their physiological, psychological and behavioural ways of experiencing conditions, circumstances and events), by positing that they – at least the species under study – are complete and complex active beings, who even act as specific individuals. As a result, I hope to gain a *greater* understanding of their relationships with humans.

Recently, philosophy has started to tackle this ‘animal side’ of the question (Bailly, 2011), and ethologists have raised the question of point of view (Bräuer, 2014; Udell *et al.*, 2014), but effective studies are scarce (Kohler, 2012). Taking the side of animals means standing next to them and trying to adopt their geographical perspective, to understand what they experience and undergo, the way they act and react; it also means trying to project oneself into their minds in order to grasp their psychological point of view, what they see and feel. It can, of course, only be an intention, an attempt at self-projection, a method, as used by naturalists, hunters, taxidermists or ethologists, but it leads to a decentring of the self and may yield many positive returns, as ethnologists have for a long time experienced.

All this means that it is necessary to expand our current definition of history – ‘the science of men in time’ – still favoured by many historians, where there is nothing sacred about it, as it is a historical construct. The definition of history must now once again be broadened, becoming the science of living beings in time and directing its attention to their evolutions, at least where there is a historical record enabling the historians to do their job and make use of their skills.

At the same time, it is necessary to go beyond, if not to discard, the cultural approach which tends to reduce social sciences to the task of deconstructing discourses in order to bring out underlying representations, as if they were the only reality that could be studied. This is a necessary task, but the triumph of cultural interpretations has transformed this indispensable preliminary investigation into the ultimate goal. We must go back to the study of reality, using the concept of ‘situated knowledges’ (Haraway, 1991) which helps to construct knowledge without ignoring the context of its elaboration; we must apply it to the various people who use, approach and watch animals and describe them through a combination of observations and representations, which means that we must take into account the conditions of production of their texts, working with partial and biased information that will have been ‘situated’, criticized, connected together, and thus controlled, revised and completed, allowing us to gain access to the reality of things.

We must also leave aside the Western, historically constructed conception of animals as passive and replace it with the idea that animals are endowed with the capacity to feel, to react, to adapt, or even posit that animals are not only able to influence humans through their actions or that animal agency enables them to construct relationships with humans, to use the current fashionable Anglo-Saxon concept of 'agency' (*History and Theory*, 2013), but that animals are individuals, with specific characteristics, persons even, with distinctive behaviour, or even subjects. Such ideas are no longer taboo (Miklosi *et al.*, 2014) and must be tested in the field, leaving definitions open enough. It is indeed dangerous to start with (too) well-defined concepts and try to verify their relevance, because the risk is then to adopt a familiar, human-centred or even European-centred and time-specific version of them, and thus to run into the pitfalls of ethnocentrism and anthropocentrism. We must keep in mind that our concepts are situated: in time, as historians show; in space, as ethnologists demonstrate (Descola, 2005); and in the world of living beings, as ethologists are starting to point out.

Testing strong concepts does not mean falling into the trap of anthropomorphism, just as leaving some openness and variability to these investigative tools does not mean indulging in some kind of blurry impressionism. This open, wondering, questioning form of anthropomorphism allows us to look at things with open-minded curiosity and to raise strong questions, to test strong concepts, without necessarily imposing human-derived notions on animals and denying their specificities. It also grants more potentialities to animals, which are still so little known. It allows us to see in what diverse ways some faculties can be actualized, and thus to adopt extended definitions of these faculties. Whereas physical capacities have already been admitted such latitude of definition (we know that many species do not see the world as we do, but we do not deduce from this that they cannot see), there is greater reluctance concerning mental capacities because they are usually considered proof of our superiority.

The goal is not to confuse all living beings together, but to get a sense of their diversity and richness, which means that we have to give up the vain, artificial, puerile and wrong dualistic opposition of humans/animals that philosophy and religion have been forcing upon us for 2,500 years. It is vain, because it opposes a concrete species, humankind, to a concept, animals, which does not exist in the exterior world, which is only a category masking the reality of multiple species, all very different from each other. Puerile, because enhancing the difference between a reality and a concept has never enabled humans to know animals better, but only to take pride in their own superiority. Wrong, because animals are still very little known (and often there is little desire to get to know them and a temptation to prefer convenient stereotypes over real knowledge) and differences are predicted on mere preconceptions. Anthropocentrism must also be discarded, because it leads to human-derived definitions and to a refusal to look at things from the side of animals, thus foreclosing all investigation.

Still, in order to build an *animal* history, other sciences must be marshalled next to history: ecology, which can study the environment and its influence on

behaviour, and ethology, which can interpret animal behaviour. This dialogue with the sciences of nature should not seem any more distasteful than that initiated by historians with economy, demography or sociology from the mid-twentieth century on; it merely represents a new stage in history's opening to other sciences and cannot be repudiated or considered illegitimate because it concerns other sciences than social sciences. Such a position would boil down to clinging to a restrictive, human-centred definition of history and to imitating those early twentieth-century historians who rejected the alliance between history and social science because they believed history could only be political.

It is necessary to link together history and ethology when working on the available documents. It may seem paradoxical to use such human-created documents to reconstruct the actions of animals, all the more so as they may seem unreliable, biased and incomplete, because these documents only focus on a few species, races or individuals and only on a few aspects, whose reality was not entirely recorded either at the time, the authors only recording what they could and what they desired to see, reading and distorting reality through the prism of their imagination, self-interest and preconceptions specific to a particular species, time and place. Still, such problems also abound in human history, and historians often have to resort to intermediaries: for instance, most records about peasantry were elaborated by members of the social elite, but they can still be used to write rural history. In our case, the problem is indeed greater, but not radically different. And, even today, animals can only speak through humans, their writings, photographs or films.

All available sources must be studied. Which does not mean that there should be no sorting. The people who did the recording must have been interested in animals' real actions, must have watched and transcribed them without their subjectivity totally obliterating their meaning. The texts may, of course, vary in their degree of observation or precision, and they should be confronted with today's most fruitful ethological hypotheses. The goal is not to use ethological theories as validation, because this could lead to repudiating or to distorting the texts to make them fit the theories, but to read together different situated observations and knowledge: those of contemporary observers, who may have missed certain aspects but just as well have seen what today's observers cannot see or do not want to see, and those of today's naturalists, who may know more and in a better way than in the past, but may just as well neglect certain sides of the question. Past observations should not be rejected or considered useless anecdotes, as laboratory ethology assumed for a long time, but treated as data collected on a field of observation situated in the past, in the same way as psychologists and cognitive ethologists are now dealing with contemporary stories and anecdotes (Bates and Byrnes, 2007).

Finally, placing oneself on the side of animals means standing next to them, showing empathy so as not to deny them anything prematurely but in order to adopt their geographical point of view, to understand what they experience, undergo, how they act and react; it also means trying to project oneself into them in order to detect their psychological point of view, what they see and feel. Once

all these goals have been set – knowing that they will be more or less difficult to reach depending on the animals under study – what kind of *animal* history can we try to build?

### History as lived by animals

The simplest kind of history records animals' enlistment in great human historical phenomena, because documents are aplenty and it is possible to understand the way animals experienced these phenomena in their mind and in their flesh. Let me refer to what I tried to do (Baratay, 2012a) concerning the period of the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, when animals were widely used, rather well observed and listened to in order to be made more productive and widely written about. It is thus possible to gain access to the experience of pit horses, placed at the heart of the Industrial 'Revolution'. The same is true of dairy cows, who found themselves at the heart of the agricultural 'revolution'.

Let us also mention the case of the animals that participated in the First World War that I studied in depth and expanded to an international scale in another book (Baratay, 2013) in order to present the role played by ethology when it engages in dialogue with history and what history can contribute to the dialogue. Thanks to ethological knowledge, it is possible to better understand and interpret historical accounts, for instance, to conclude, when reading vets' records of requisitions in Europe or sales in America, that horses suffered indeed from stress, and so to better analyze and use witness accounts. Ethology can also reveal things that were still unknown at the time and led to misinterpretations or neglect on the part of the soldiers, and so help grasp the causes of the misunderstanding between horses and soldiers: for instance, horses refused to get into railroad cars, so much so that several men, up to seven or eight, had to force them into them, but this refusal was only due to their high degree of panoramic vision, leading them to believe that they were being rushed forward towards an obstacle, their optical field remaining empty otherwise. Or again, the high death rate of horses in the summer of 1914 was due to quick dehydration caused by hard labour and heat, but this form of dehydration did not provoke a thirst strong enough to serve as a warning and so did not lead horses to express this need to human beings.

Conversely, history provides ethology with data which can help it distance itself from present-day animal situations: for instance, it can point to the differences in the behaviour of the still wild horses of the American or Argentinian plains and domesticated European horses, or show how difficult it was to train dogs taken from kennels, which had not been abandoned by their masters but were wandering dogs, reluctant to cooperate, contrary to what today's ethologists state when studying present-day pet dogs, which they transform into universal, ahistorical, 'natural' dogs. Or it can reveal that travelling pigeons were not able to fly by night because they had not been trained to use their magnetic compass in that way, which seems to show that this is not an innate but an acquired skill, contrary to what today's ethologists maintain.



These approaches and methods make it indeed possible to build a new form of history, far removed from human versions of events, which does not emphasize the same points, helps to better see and understand animals' interactions with humans, grasp them in their complexity and historical context and get a sense of the important role of individual and group factors in the animal world.

## Animal biographies

The importance of individual factors must encourage us to build a second type of history, centred on individuals, through the composition of animal biographies. Writers have long entertained the desire to tell the story of an animal from its own point of view, as the Comtesse de Ségur experimented in *Mr Cadichon, Memoirs of a Donkey*, but this endeavour has often reached an anthropomorphic dead end. Aware of the danger, the few professional or amateur historians who have recently attempted to deal with the life of famous animals have preferred to tackle the subject from the human angle, by focusing on the intellectual, political, social or artistic upheaval these animals caused. Historians should, however, come to grips with the problem and try to account for the experience and feelings of an animal at a specific moment or during its whole life.

Because the question of the available records is of prime importance in history, famous animals provide the easiest cases to study as they were the object of many accounts, whereas there are none at all about anonymous animals. I am thus working on a few animal biographies, one of which, for example, will focus on the journey of a giraffe in France in 1827. The journey was documented through the judicious accounts of naturalists, recording the arrival of the giraffe in Marseilles and its walk to Paris. It drew crowds because it was the first time a living giraffe had come to France, and it raised as much curiosity, imagination and passions as would an alien landing on earth today. Yet it was no stuffed animal that people came to see, but a living being whose actions and reactions played a crucial part in shaping the event – the encounter between a European population and an exotic animal, in which both parties discovered each other and reacted in their own way, forming an interacting couple which must be analyzed from the point of view of each of the parties.

Let me here only mention the main aspects concerning the animal. First, the animal was in great stress, as can be deduced from its stereotyped movements in successive stables, the absence of deep sleep, which giraffes normally reach when lying in a particular position, which would have been recorded by the naturalists if the giraffe had adopted it and from the fact that, while awake, it was afflicted by fragmented bouts of somnolence. This stress varied according to time and place. It reached its peak when the giraffe arrived by night in Marseilles and refused to walk through the dark gate and the narrow streets, when it reached Aix and heard people yelling at the windows of their houses, when it was scared off by the crowds in Lyons and ran away and when it was presented to the king in Saint-Cloud and to thousands of Parisians in the Jardin des Plantes. The giraffe also felt

stress when in Marseilles it was handled by naturalists, who wanted to study its anatomy, when it had to learn to walk while being attached by tethers, to endure the frenzy of crowds rushing to see it pass along, when it was forced to open its hind legs and bend down its neck to be able to eat the leaves that were placed on the ground and that it loved – a position that giraffes adopt as rarely as possible when free and only use to drink from time to time, so as not to prove vulnerable to predators, and that, therefore, caused a certain anxiety to our giraffe.

It did survive. It may have been due to the fact that it had been captured when it was about six months old, young enough to accept substitute mothers and old enough to have learned to remain alone when adults went grazing. It was also female, destined to collective life in a group, and thus more liable to endure crowds than nomadizing males. But it was, above all, thanks to its individual character traits, which had already been noticed by the Arabian mahouts who were used to comparing their catches, that the giraffe was able to overcome all these trials, thus showing that animals are not passive objects, but that they invest a great deal of themselves in the parts they are being made to play: calm and submissive, the giraffe did not try to run away after being captured, unlike others; adaptable and obliging, it got used to walking, free, side by side with its captors; its delight in having fun, in jumping and rearing up, proved stronger than the stress and depression which caused many others to waste away.

In France, it progressively got used to the demands of the people and of the journey. It first accustomed itself to living in a narrow stable in Marseilles; it learned, while restrained by tethers, to jump up and down in the yard in order to relax and to enjoy the daily outings in the streets, even getting impatient as the time approached; it got calmer in the presence of the audience, so much so that it was only held by two drivers after a while instead of the four or even six that were needed at first. It also learned to alleviate stress by focusing on the foliage of the trees planted along the avenues and in the squares, in the roads around Marseilles and along the journey. It then slowly accepted being fed in front of the crowds, which it had refused in Marseilles, and to eat the hay given to European domestic herbivores, which it had refused during the first months. It also adapted itself to walking 25 to 35 kilometres a day, in about eight hours, and got into the habit, after a few days, of setting out on its own, progressively acquiring physical endurance, especially after Lyons, and familiarizing itself with the crew, men and especially animals.

Herein lies the main reason for the giraffe's survival. When it arrived in Marseilles, it was encouraged to enter the city by a horse that had been conveniently placed before her, a reassuring sight because the giraffe had been living with members of that species since its capture. In its stable, it lived with three cows, two draft horses and two antelopes which had been imported at the same time. The official reason for their presence was that they provided milk, kept each other warm and needed to familiarize themselves with Europe before being sent to Paris, but they were mainly useful in reassuring the giraffe, because it could look at them, smell them, listen to the sounds they made. These animals helped it to adapt, to endure,



while establishing a link with its previous experience in the savannah, where, due to the instability of giraffes' groupings and to the peaceful cohabitation with herbivores, other animals were well accepted, and even sought out. The giraffe soon learned to walk in the streets and paths as, having learnt from the initial experience in Marseilles, men now placed the dairy cows in front: it followed them quietly, feeling a strong affinity for those placid ruminants, which belonged to the family Bovidae like the antelopes it had encountered in the savannah. It was not only interested in those cows but in all those it met during the journey, and the cows in turn did not feel any fear, unlike the horses or mules which pricked up their ears in anxiety, pawed the ground when they were made to wait and rushed away whenever they could as the giraffe observed them, tried to follow them and watched them go. This fundamental link with other animals was reinforced by the fact that the cows played a crucial part when the crew entered a city or walked through it, walking in front, keeping the giraffe from bolting, showing it the peaceful attitude to adopt. It is certainly no coincidence that the giraffe's panic in Lyons occurred in their absence.

All of these elements resulted in a behaviour that did not smoothly go from stress to adaptation, but that was characterized by a series of ups and downs, the giraffe being strongly disturbed on arriving in Marseilles, progressively adapting to its new conditions during its stay in the city, being again affected by stress and fatigue on resuming the journey along the crowded Rhone corridor, experiencing a new period of peace after Lyons, especially when going through the quieter Morvan region, before undergoing new bouts of stress in Paris and finally adapting itself to life in the Jardin des Plantes, a period that is little known because of the lack of adequate documents. Our giraffe died in 1846.

This animal vision of the journey is far remote from the human vision of a festive exhibition: it rather presents us with the difficult encounter between two worlds and its attendant fears, anxieties, misunderstandings, trials and adaptations undergone by the animal but also by the humans, who sometimes took fright, were also puzzled but tried less hard to understand.

Two points must be emphasized to distinguish this scientifically aimed biographical project from the aforementioned literary experiments. First, the method used is radically different, because it rejects forced anthropomorphism and strives for a more modest result by only working on the elements mentioned by the witnesses of the events and refusing to add anything to them, so that the biographies rather read like slices of life, leaving aside (for instance) the life of the giraffe in Africa because the texts are too vague or incomplete. Still, there is some similarity in the writer's necessary resort to imagination, though it is here severely controlled, in order to project himself out of his condition and by the side of the animal, or even into its mind, in order to try to understand and to reconstruct its experience, as field ethologists are now increasingly trying to do through observation and participation. All of them are striving toward asymptotic goals, trying to break the walls and to push toward the other, all the while knowing that the two worlds will never perfectly meet but will only at best move closer to each

other, and that their reconstructions are human works and always contain hints of anthropomorphism, even if this danger is known and controlled, just as ethnologists use a form of controlled ethnomorphism when studying non-Western populations.

This biographical work should make it clear that in every species, each individual has its own personal trajectory and its own apprehension of the world, that these ways of seeing the world may change through time, as can be seen when working on a series of dog biographies, and that each individual experiences a unique type of encounter with humans, which also evolves through time, as shown by the biographies of great apes (Herzfeld, 2016).

### **An ethological history**

That is why these histories must be subsumed within an ethological history (Baratay, 2012b), centred on animals and on their transformations and working on the fundamental assumption that species, groups and individuals experience a continual process of adaptation to their ecological and human conditions, and so that there is a fluctuation in animals' behaviour, collective life and culture. This idea is discarded by the behaviourist and classical schools of ethology, the latter arguing that what defines a species are specific types of behaviour, which are therefore conceived of as unchanging. And yet, field ethologists have been struck by changes in individual behaviour within a species, resulting, by a process of imitation, in changes in group behaviour, from the spreading practice among Japanese macaques of dipping sweet potatoes into salt water, to the changes in humpback whale song. Some now even speak of animal cultures, though only adopting a geographical perspective and forgetting the temporal dimension which is necessarily linked to it because individuals and then groups adopt new social behaviours at a specific time. Besides, this approach is much closer to the Darwinian theory of evolution, which first affects marginal individuals before spreading to the whole species, an intuition dismissed by classical ethology and rediscovered by cognitive ethologists who are increasingly interested in animal inventions and their modes of transmission. Some ethologists point in the direction of a history of animal behaviour by resorting to the notion of evolutionary social competence, without yet perceiving the necessity of historical research on the subject (Miklosi and Topal, 2013). And those who advocate a social and cultural history of animals that would illuminate the conditions of emergence of new practices, inventions, blendings and transformations only do so in the future tense, compiling a sum of observations without any ancient documents or tools with which to read them (McGrew, 2010; Whiten, 2010). Nineteenth-century species monographs, indeed, did not pay any attention to behaviour or to its history until the last third of the century. The historian therefore has a crucial role to play in order to show that animal societies are not ahistorical, as was still thought not so long ago of 'traditional' human societies – which, by the way, suggests that granting or not granting a history to Others is not an innocent act, but a truly political one.

Herein lies the cross-disciplinary interest of an ethological history, that would insist on fluctuations, and of a historical ethology, that would study animals at a given time and measure the differences with other times, ethology being now revisited and cross-pollinated with concepts derived from the social sciences. A few studies, recent or ongoing, by French-speaking scholars show that such a task is perfectly feasible: Corinne Beck, Éric Fabre and Julien Alleau link history and ecology in order to define the areas appreciated by wolves, better understand their actions and inquire into the causes of their extinction in the nineteenth century (Beck and Fabre, 2010). Such an ethological history would link up with the attempts of various biologists to write a history of the species from the perspective of animals – for instance, the studies on domestication, showing that it not only results from a forced imposition on animals by humans, but also from animals' acceptance of humans' offers, the studies on the diversification of the members of a species after domestication (Coppinger, 2002); or on the evolution of the species to adapt to the human environment (Miklosi and Topal, 2013; Miklosi, 2014). All those studies, though, tend to consider that there has been no further transformation since, which is contradicted by history, or they neglect to delineate the different historical stages. Combining approaches and results must help establish truly cross-disciplinary modes of inquiry in order to develop a history of animal behaviour, of its modes of construction and transmission, of its different time strata – in a word, a history of animal cultures.

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