

HISTORY FROM BELOW

ANIMALS AS HISTORICAL SUBJECTS

Georgina M. Montgomery and Linda Kalof

Why Teach Animal Histories?

It has been over forty years since the historian E. P. Thompson (1968) advocated the writing of “history from below.” This pioneering method of historical study examines the past through the everyday experiences of ordinary people. In the last four decades there has been a proliferation of histories from below, uncovering the myriad ways that “the ordinary” have shaped history, such as peasants (Darnton 1984) and women (Boulding 1976). With the rise in interdisciplinary scholarship in animal studies, especially that which explores animals as subjects and agents with their own histories, in the twenty-first century, it has become ever more clear that animals occupy the most under-represented of all historically invisible groups. Writing the history of animals, then, is very much the project of writing about animals as historical subjects. Thus, including a historical perspective of animals as subjects rather than objects is a major step in our rethinking of the relationship between humans and other animals.

Historians take somewhat different approaches to conceptualizing animals as historical subjects. Jason Hribal argues that the history of animals involves two interconnected factors: agency and class, which are inexorably linked to the human–animal relationship (2007, p. 101):

Agency refers to the minorities’ ability to influence their own lives—i.e. the ability of the cow to influence and guide her own life.... Class refers to the relationship(s) between historical figures—i.e. the relations between a dairy-cow and her owner, or between a dairy-cow and her fellow dairy-laborers. As for their interconnection, it occurs when the scholar discovers how the combined factors of agency and class have shaped the overall historical process. Hence, to simply study the history of cows does not mean then that the historical subjects, suddenly and without much effort, become actors.

Of course, any history of animals written from below must take into account a greater variety of evidence than the typical historical document, including both visual and oral sources (Burke 1992, p. 5). Indeed, Erica Fudge argues that the history of animals is actually a history of human representations of animals. Since

history is constructed from human documents, we are only ever looking at the representations of animals, representations that are grounded in the human use of animals (Fudge 2002, pp. 6–7).

Promoting a holistic history of animals, Fudge (2002) calls for a representation of animals that helps rethink human cultures. Zooarcheology offers a good example. In a study of the breaking (or unmaking) of deer in medieval hunting traditions, Sykes (2007) found that the distribution and consumption of venison was in fact not just an aristocratic social event, as has been recounted by most medieval historians. In a sample of deer body-parts from England after the Norman Conquest, Sykes found that only two thirds of each deer's body was transported back to the lord's residence, leaving unaccounted for a full one-third of the carcass. Using other documentary evidence gathered by historians, she argues that deer hunting and venison consumption were as meaningful to the lower classes as they were to the elite, particularly in the role that eating the leftover venison played in the construction of peasant identity.

But animal agency is still a useful organizing theme in the historiographical project. In studying the material remains of animals and their environments, zooarcheologists take into account animal biology and ethology in trying to understand animals in historical contexts. They argue that living animals were not passive objects, but rather had real objectives and motivations, such as food and sex (O'Connor 2007, p. 9), compelling indicators of animals as creatures with agency.

Analyzing animals as historical subjects adds new dimensions and new levels of understanding to a wide range of disciplines, including environmental history, medical history, history of science, gender studies, and cultural history. The history of the Black Plague, for example, is enriched by consideration of the role of animals in the epidemic; consideration of animal experimentation raises questions of methodology and ethics in the history of medicine; the role of animals in rituals of masculinity is central to the history of popular culture and entertainment; the historical connection between women's bodies and animal bodies informs both women's studies and gender studies; and the history of widespread animal massacres adds an important dimension to the contemporary discourse on zoonotic diseases, including food safety and public safety. This wide range of applications provides fertile ground for inclusion of animal histories in existing courses. Instructors, however, should be aware that there is now a wealth of research with which to explore one, or a number, of animal-related issues in a course dedicated to historical human–animal relationships.

The kind of intellectual engagement offered by histories that incorporate animals has resulted in increasing student demand for such classes. Established animal histories courses often enjoy high enrollment and attract students from a range of

majors, including sociology, anthropology, English, philosophy, law, agriculture, zoology, animal science, and medicine. Universities are placing increasing value on such cross-college collaboration and the student body echoes this enthusiasm. Furthermore, the everyday and vocational applications of animal histories are not lost on today's increasingly political and professionally focused students who enroll into animal histories ready to discuss everything from farming practices to the human/animal boundary.

Key Figures in Animal Histories

Scholars from a diverse range of historical fields contribute to animal histories. When contextualizing human–animal relationships in cultural history, Harriet Ritvo's *Animal Estate* (1987) is a central text both for its analysis of animals' roles in Victorian England and as a methodological model for the integration of animals into human histories. Other notable scholars include: Coral Lansbury, author of *The Old Brown Dog* (1985); Kathleen Kete, author of *The Beast in the Boudoir* (1995); Virginia DeJohn Anderson, author of *Creatures of Empire* (2004); Linda Kalof, author of *Looking at Animals in Human History* (2007) and coeditor of the six volume *Cultural History of Animals* (2007); Jonathan Burt, author of Reaktion's highly successful Animal series; and Keith Thomas, author of *Man and the Natural World* (1983). There are also a number of important figures that write primarily outside the Western context, such as Brett Walker, author of *Lost Wolves of Japan* (2005).

When approaching animal histories with an emphasis on visual evidence and sources, Gregg Mitman's *Reel Nature* (1999) provides students with a readable, entertaining, and thoroughly researched history of wildlife film. In the classroom, this text pairs neatly with in-class film clips. Members of the film community have also produced documentaries that facilitate class discussion and reflection. Film director Frederick Wiseman, for example, created *Primate* (1974) and *Meat* (1976), which expose the commonly invisible practices of animal experimentation and meat production respectively. His use of minimal sound and no narration is aimed to stimulate a thinking audience and thus works wonderfully in an academic setting. Incorporating film and other visual media requires an introduction to film and/or art critique. For this, we recommend John Berger's "Why Look at Animals" in *About Looking* (1980) and Steve Baker's *Picturing the Beast* (1993/2001).

When exploring animal histories with a focus on the scientific study of animals, Donna Haraway's *Primate Visions* (1989) is critical reading for any upper-division undergraduate course and all graduate courses. To increase the accessibility of this crucial work in gender analysis, we suggest assigning primary sources, such as articles from *National Geographic*, prior to exposing students to Haraway's analysis of these sources. Richard W. Burkhardt's *Patterns of Behavior* (2005), which focuses

on the work of Niko Tinbergen and Konrad Lorenz, and Georgina Montgomery's (2005) analysis of the development of field methods and sites for the study of primate behavior, are also essential reading when analyzing the history of animal behavior studies.

Other key figures in animal histories are, of course, the authors of some of the many significant primary sources that should be central to a historical exploration of animals and human–animal relationships. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1905), Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877), and Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) are all rich sources with which to explore the role of animals in human histories and the human/animal boundary. In the classroom, many of these primary sources can be effectively combined with secondary literature and audio-visu­als. For example, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* can be read alongside William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* (1992), with both being enriched by in-class viewing of Frederick Wiseman's documentary, *Meat*.

Real World Applications

Intellectually, animal histories provide opportunities to attract students from across majors and connect with both undergraduate and graduate students. Pedagogically, animal histories hold great potential for innovative courses that incorporate experiential learning and connections with community-based organizations and businesses. These learning opportunities, discussed in detail below, are particularly effective because each student has a lifetime of experiences interacting with animals upon which the instructor and student can build. These personal experiences often include internal debates concerning consumer choices, biotechnology, and the environment. Contemporary issues such as these are central to the development of students as citizens in their local, national, and global communities. Animal histories allow these issues to be historicized, contextualized, and critiqued and thus play a crucial role in the development of students' political and personal identities. It is one of those rare courses that students will reflect upon in the grocery store, the living room, and in the voting booth.

In a recent graduate course in animal history at Michigan State University, students wrote research papers that provided good examples of the important real-world applications of animal history. Paper topics included: the historical practice of breeding dogs for bull baiting and the contemporary problematic of dog fighting among urban youth; the history of the chicken (to whom we owe "the deepest of apologies" [Masson 2003, p. 95]) and the contemporary move to bringing chickens into urban backyards; the history of meat eating and evolution of contemporary alternative food discourses; and the history of hunting and the de-listing of wolves in Michigan's upper peninsula. These projects illustrate the numerous

opportunities students have in making compelling connections between history and the real world, all of which provide both students and instructors with excellent intellectual scope.

Course Development

When developing an animal histories course it is important to consider what theme or focus will be used to provide coherency and structure. A well-selected theme will serve as a thread connecting discussion of key issues such as the history of domestication, agriculture, animal ritual, health, wildlife conservation, and ethology. This structure should be re-enforced by thoughtful selection of texts and sources. Below, we suggest a few of the many possible themes for courses. We then expand on some teaching strategies that can be applied to any animal histories course, regardless of the syllabus focus, class size, or course level.

Structure: Instructors can select one of a number of themes as the focus for an animal histories course or provide a historical and/or geographical survey of human–animal relationships. A semester-long course focused on one species, for example, would provide depth and would be well supported by a text from Reaktion’s Animal book series, or a historiography such as Bernd Brunner’s *Bears: A Brief History* (2007). Kalof adopted this approach for a graduate course, covering in depth the history of a different animal species each year, to lead students from prehistory to postmodernity. Place is another theme that provides a central thread with which to guide students through the history of the zoological garden, laboratory, and field while utilizing the wealth of recent research from cultural geography and animal studies. Students’ increasing concerns about the environmental and ethical implications of food production would make an animal histories course based on food both intellectually stimulating and highly applicable to their lives. Approaches such as Duke University’s inter-disciplinary *Earth to Table* program demonstrate the myriad of contemporary issues that can be explored through a focus on the production, transportation, and consumption of food. A historical approach to these same issues would provide much-needed context for our contemporary challenges.

Experiential Learning: Each of the above options represents a small sample of the possible thematic structures for syllabi. Regardless of the course focus, the application of experiential learning to animal histories enhances student understanding and participation in the creation of knowledge. Large, diverse campuses such as Michigan State University hold a wealth of opportunities for field trips to dairy farms, organic farms, and “wilderness” areas. These trips should be partnered with academic readings concerning such concepts as Nature, domestication,

anthropomorphism, and the animal mind. These readings and experiences are then synthesized in reflection papers or larger assignments. University-affiliated natural history museums offer another opportunity for experiential learning, with many having furs, hunting equipment, and clothing in special collections that can be arranged in an exhibit that complements course readings. Montgomery, for example, paired sections from Julie Emberley's *The Cultural Politics of Fur* (1998) with an exhibit of furs organized by a curator at the Museum of the Rockies, Montana, for a class of sixty-five students. Although involving logistical and financial challenges, off-campus trips to zoos, shelters, or animal sanctuaries are also incredibly effective for the integration of experiential learning and can be extended into a service-learning course component. Kathie Jenni, a philosopher at Redlands University, successfully accomplished this combination of academic course work and service in a six-week, residential, summer course. Such a template could easily be adapted to an animal histories course that took place within the regular semester with either several days of service or a weeklong field trip over spring break.

Connecting with the Community: Courses focused on animal histories have the opportunity to embrace the experiences of members of the community. Who better to connect a discussion of historical farming methods with contemporary concerns about the ethical and environmental impact of battery farming than a farmer who has thoughtfully chosen to practice organic, predator-friendly farming? Montgomery invited a farmer who sold lamb and wool at the local cooperative grocery store to give a guest lecture in an undergraduate class. Students were thrilled to hear from someone with hands-on experience. Many commented that after the lecture they entered the grocery store with a new level of knowledge and appreciation for the process by which animal products made their way onto the shelves. Similarly, local advocates for women could be invited to speak about the connections between animal abuse and domestic violence in order to connect historical accounts of animal abuse with current concerns.

In-Class Activities: The power of personal experiences and emotional responses should be respected and valued within the classroom environment. In-class free writes are one strategy for giving students time to reflect on provocative theories or images. Montgomery used this activity after students read and discussed Marjorie Spiegel's *The Dreaded Comparison* (1988/1997) and after showing students a photo of a woman breastfeeding a lamb when discussing the apparent human-animal boundary. Time for such reflection and discussion is essential regardless of class size. Although the personal and complex nature of animal histories makes them best suited for a seminar format, activities such as those discussed above can be

applied in larger class sizes to encourage reflection with small group work and clicker-questions being utilized for discussion.

Challenges

Whenever teaching provocative, personal, and/or sensitive subject matter the instructor is guided by the students' backgrounds and experiences when presenting the course material. This type of awareness and sensitivity is essential when teaching animal histories to a student population that is often diverse in their past and present interactions with animals. Labeling, stigma, and judgment do not foster discussion or higher-level cognitive abilities such as synthesis and critical thinking. Presenting a range of academic perspectives allows students to become informed, critical citizens. When discussing views of companion animals for example, Harriet Ritvo's "Prize Pets" from *The Animal Estate* (1987) may be partnered with sections from Kathleen Kete's *Beasts in the Boudoir* (1995), Keith Thomas's *Man and the Natural World* (1983), Yi-Fu Tuan's *Dominance and Affection* (1984), and Marjorie Spiegel's *Dreaded Comparison* (1988/1997). Exposing students to various aspects of the relationship between humans and companion animals through the scholarship of a number of significant authors in animal studies fosters the comparison of approaches and class debate.

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COURSE SYLLABUS

ANIMAL HISTORIES

Georgina Montgomery

Description: This course analyzed the various ways in which human society understands, and interacts with, wildlife. Human–animal relationships were examined in a range of physical locations—including the laboratory, field, national park, and zoo—and in a range of cultural and social settings. Within these various contexts the course examined how humans relate to animals, how these relationships have been defined and represented, and the consequences of these relationships for human identity.

Lecture Schedule:

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| 1. Animals in Textual and Visual Forms | 8. Wildlife in Popular Culture |
| 2. Wildlife and Empire | 9. Wildlife Behind Bars |
| 3. The Scientific Study of Animals | 10. Wildlife in the Home |
| 4. Wildlife Management | 11. Wildlife in the Laboratory |
| 5. Humans, Wildlife, and Conservation | 12. Animals in Human Cultures |
| 6. Wildlife and Gender | 13. Animals, Anthropomorphism, and Human Identity |
| 7. Scientists as Celebrities | |

Course Texts: Mitman (1999) was a required text for this course, supplemented by a range of articles and book chapters representing secondary and primary sources.

Assignments: Weekly reading response papers ensured that students fully engaged with the reading and came to class ready to discuss the text(s) in depth. Such opportunities for reflection and analysis are valuable when exploring complex historical topics. Furthermore, the papers provided students with a forum to develop their skills of argumentation in preparation for their final research paper, the topic

for which was self-selected. We (Montgomery and Kalof) feel it is important to assign research papers that allow students to compose their own research topic and thesis within the themes of the course. The flexibility of such assignments encourages original research on topics of intellectual and often personal interest to the student.

Montgomery taught this 400-level undergraduate course in the Spring 2007 semester at Montana State University. The syllabus was adapted for a 100-level course that was taught in the Spring 2009 semester at Michigan State University. The course focused on approaches to place and space adopted in cultural geography and combined research from the history of science and environmental history.

COURSE SYLLABUS

PEOPLE AND OTHER ANIMALS

Harriet Ritvo

Course Description: A historical survey of the ways that people have interacted with their closest animal relatives, for example: hunting, domestication of livestock, worship of animal gods, exploitation of animal labor, scientific study of animals, display of exotic and performing animals, and pet keeping. Themes include changing ideas about animal agency and intelligence, our moral obligations to animals, and the limits imposed on the use of animals.

Lecture Schedule:

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| 1. The Hunt | 6. Animals and Infection |
| 2. Domestication and Breeding | 7. Animals on Display |
| 3. Meat (or not) | 8. Studying Animals: Field Observation, Experimentation, and Imagination |
| 4. Pets | 9. Studying Animals: Field Observation and Ethology |
| 5. Animal Exploitation and Animal Protection | 10. Studying Animals: Documentary Film |

Course Texts: A range of readings were assigned in addition to the following required texts: Franklin (2007), Guerrini (2003), Hearne (2007), Ritvo (1987), Sewell (1877/1905), Vialles (1994), Wells (1898).

Assignments: This course involves weekly-reading response papers and culminates in a final research paper. During the semester, students hand in a proposal, bibliography, and progress report. (*These materials enable Ritvo to become familiar with the student's writing style and connection with the material.*)

Harriet Ritvo, at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, taught this undergraduate-level course in the Department of History. In recent years, the course has been adapted to allow graduate students to take the class, with a longer final research paper being required for such students. Ritvo draws on works from the history of science, environmental history, the history of medicine, and historical literature.

COURSE SYLLABUS

ANIMALS AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Linda Kalof

Description: This graduate course is a historical overview of the cultural relationship between humans and other animals and how those relationships have changed with changing social conditions. We will use both visual imagery and extracts from historical and literary sources to experience the human–animal story from prehistory through postmodernity. The course draws on a wealth of information about the human–animal relationship, covering a range of topics rarely discussed in animal studies, such as the Black Plague; dead animal portraiture; and animal rituals that reflect hierarchies of gender, race, and class—including the medieval backwards ride, horning ceremonies, and animal massacres. *Animals and Social Transformations* is taught every spring primarily to graduate students in sociology, history, and anthropology, but is open to all interested graduate students.

Lecture Schedule:

Two to three weeks were spent on each of the following topics:

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| 1. Animals in Prehistory | 5. Animals in the Renaissance |
| 2. Animals in Antiquity | 6. Animals in the Enlightenment |
| 3. The Horse through History | 7. Animals in Modernity |
| 4. Animals in the Middle Ages | |

Texts: Kalof (2007) and Clutton-Brock (1992) were required texts that were supplemented by various articles and book chapters.

Assignments: Weekly papers summarizing and responding to the readings allowed for in-depth reflection and discussion of assigned topics. A final research paper allowed for original research on a topic of the student's choice.

Kalof taught this graduate-level course at the 800-level at Michigan State University. This course offers a species focus and uses a range of books and articles that explore the history of domestication, hunting, animal symbolism, and animals in art.

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MARGO DEMELLO, EDITOR

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