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Animal history: an interview with Professor Harriet Ritvo

História dos animais: uma entrevista com a professora Harriet Ritvo

Interview with

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Abstract

It was in the 1980s that a new field in historical studies began to emerge, the animal history, or more specifically the history of human-animal relations. Harriet Ritvo – an eminent American historian and Emeritus Professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology – is a pioneer in this field. Her career has been dedicated, among other activities, to researching, writing, teaching and lecturing on the subject. In this interview, Professor Ritvo talks about aspects of her academic trajectory, as well as important features of animal history, such as interactions between this area and other fields in which she also works: environmental history, the history of science and the history of technology.

Keywords: Harriet Ritvo (1946-); animal history; environmental history; history of science and technology; Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Resumo

Na década de 1980 começou a surgir um novo campo nos estudos históricos, a história dos animais, ou, mais especificamente, a história das relações entre os seres humanos e os animais. Harriet Ritvo – eminente historiadora norte-americana e professora emérita do Massachusetts Institute of Technology – é pioneira nessa área. Sua carreira tem sido dedicada à pesquisa, à escrita, ao ensino e à apresentação de palestras sobre o assunto. Nesta entrevista, Ritvo fala sobre aspectos de sua trajetória acadêmica e também sobre importantes questões da história dos animais, tais como as interações dessa área com outros campos nos quais ela também atua: história ambiental, história da ciência e história da tecnologia.

Palavras-chave: Harriet Ritvo (1946-); história dos animais; história ambiental; história da ciência e da tecnologia; Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

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Animal history, or more specifically the history of human-animal relations, is currently a vigorous and important field within historical studies. This field, which began to emerge in the 1980s, cannot be thought about, discussed, taught or investigated without including the name of the eminent historian Harriet Ritvo, Arthur J. Conner Professor of History, Emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Professor Ritvo is a recognized international authority on the subject and a pioneer in this field of research.



Figure 1: Professor Harriet Ritvo (Photo courtesy of Harriet Ritvo)

Initially interested in English literature, history and biology, Professor Harriet Ritvo completed her undergraduate and graduate studies at Harvard University with a period, while still in her formative years, at Girton College, Cambridge University.

She began her teaching career as a Teaching Fellow in History and Literature and in English at Harvard University and as a Lecturer in English at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. In 1979, she joined MIT as a Lecturer. Between 1980 and 1995, she initially worked as an Assistant Professor and then as a Full Professor. Since 1995, she has been the Arthur J. Conner Professor of History at MIT. From 2008 and 2010, respectively, she has also served as Faculty Associate at the Center for European Studies and at the Center for History and Economics at Harvard University. In 2017, in parallel with her work at MIT, she became an Affiliate of the History of Science Department at Harvard.

Throughout her fruitful career, she has been teaching, researching, lecturing and writing in the fields of animal history, the history of natural history, British history, and environmental history. In 2020, she received the “Distinguished Scholar Award,” granted by the American Society for Environmental History.

At MIT, among other courses, she has taught “People and other animals” and “Nature, environment, and empire”. Professor Ritvo has also held important administrative positions at MIT, such as Associate Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences and Head of History Faculty. In addition to these roles, she was President of the American Society for

Environmental History (2009-2011) and, since 2016, she has been a member of the Board of Trustees of the National Humanities Center.

Alongside her work at MIT, she has been a Researcher and Visiting Professor at leading universities and research centers in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia. She has also participated in dozens of conferences and seminars at prestigious institutions around the world.

Her academic output is extensive and highly significant. In 1991, together with Jonathan Arac,¹ she edited the book *The macropolitics of nineteenth-century literature: nationalism, exoticism, imperialism* (Arac, Ritvo, 1991). A few years later, for the Johns Hopkins University Press, she edited *The variation of animals and plants under domestication* by Charles Darwin (1998). In the area of environmental history, Professor Ritvo has also published articles in renowned scientific journals and, in 2009, she published the book *The dawn of green: Manchester, Thirlmere, and modern environmentalism* (Ritvo, 2009).

She is the author of more than 150 academic works, including books, articles, encyclopedia entries, book chapters and book reviews, and a significant proportion of these publications focus on the history of human-animal relations. Among her most recent essays is "The domestic stain, or maintaining standards" (Ritvo, 2017). In 2018, she contributed to the compendium *Critical terms for animal studies*, edited by Lori Gruen (2018), discussing the concept of "species" (Ritvo, 2018).

Some of her articles were collected and published in the book *Noble cows and hybrid zebras: essays on animals and history* (Ritvo, 2010). In 1997, from a perspective in which she approached animal history and the history of science, she published a sophisticated study entitled *The platypus and the mermaid and other figments of the classifying imagination* (Ritvo, 1997).

In the late 1980s, Professor Ritvo published her first book: *The animal estate: the English and other creatures in the Victorian Age* (Ritvo, 1987). In this interview, she talks about this award-winning book and other publications, reveals interesting aspects of her academic career and highlights important issues in animal history. Reading her words, we can think about the interactions between this area and three other fields, in which she also works: environmental history, the history of science and the history of technology. We are very grateful to Professor Ritvo for accepting our invitation to collaborate on this special issue on animal history.



Professor Ritvo, you were an undergraduate student at Harvard University, where you also pursued your graduate studies. Could you say something about your academic background? When and why did you decide to study the history of human-animal relations?

Actually, I never formally studied the history of human-animal relations, for several reasons. One reason is that I finished my undergraduate and graduate studies before that area had

been recognized as a focus of scholarship, and its institutionalization in university classes and degree programs came still later. In addition, as a student, my area of concentration was English literature, although I was also interested in history and in biology. My dissertation focused on the role of the agricultural countryside in 19th-century novels. I didn't begin to write as a historian until I joined the MIT faculty.

As a pioneer in the field of the history of human-animal relations, what challenges did you face in the beginning? How did the academic world see this subject when you started your research?

When I began working in this area, to many scholars, animals did not seem like appropriate topics for serious historical research. One of my first invited talks on the work that became *The animal estate* (Ritvo, 1987) (at the humanities center of an Ivy League university) was introduced with the assertion that "Many weird things have come out of the humanities lately, but this is the weirdest." It was fortunate that Keith Thomas (1971), an eminent British historian who had written a magisterial work about religion in the early modern period (an impeccably serious topic), published *Man and the natural world*, which deals with early modern plants and animals, in 1983 (Thomas, 1983). And gradually, skepticism about the topic has diminished, although I wouldn't say that it has completely vanished even today.

Although, at that time, there was unfortunately no opportunity for the kind of collegial exchange among historians of human-animal relations that is now routine, its absence did have an unanticipated benefit. Interest in similar topics was also emerging in other fields, and so conferences and workshops were apt to bring together a broad range of scholars, including physical anthropologists, veterinarians, sociologists, and zoologists, along with a few humanists. Such exchanges have become less frequent as critical masses of scholars have emerged within individual disciplines.

You started your teaching career in 1971 as a Teaching Fellow at Harvard University, and since 1979 you have been working at MIT. Could you say something about these experiences and especially about being a historian and a Professor of History in an institute of technology such as MIT?

Undergraduates at Harvard and MIT are both very similar and very different. From a teacher's perspective the most striking similarity is that they are very smart and (mostly) very disciplined. Their intellectual orientations are different – MIT students tend to be more mathematical and Harvard students tend to be more verbal, although the overlap is much broader than stereotypes would suggest. And there are differences in how they approach their classes. During the first class I taught at MIT, I was surprised when several students raised their hands to ask the meaning of a word that I had just used. In ten years as an undergraduate and graduate student at Harvard, I never heard a student admit the need for that kind of information; MIT students may have a more pragmatic approach to their classroom experience.

The preponderance of science and engineering disciplines at MIT makes it an unusual academic setting for a historian, but it has nevertheless been a supportive and energizing one. Although undergraduates don't usually come to MIT intending to study the humanities, a few of them do end up majoring in fields like history or literature or music, either as a

supplement to their major in a science or engineering discipline, or because they have belatedly changed their mind about their academic focus. In addition, MIT requires that all undergraduates choose about a quarter of their classes from the large selection of offerings in the humanities, arts, and social sciences, which signals the importance of such studies.

A lot of my teaching at MIT has been in the HASTS (History, Anthropology, and Science, Technology and Society) graduate program, which enrolls four or five excellent students every year. Working with them has been extremely rewarding. The program is distinctive in its interdisciplinary reach, but is structurally similar to related programs at other universities. For example, there are strong connections with the History of Science Department at Harvard, with easy cross-registration between the institutions.

Could you say something about your courses “People and other animals” and “Nature, environment, and empire”? What are the objectives and the topics covered in each? What is the profile of the students who enroll in these courses?

“People and other animals” surveys the ways that humans have interacted with their closest animal relatives (that is, other vertebrates). Each unit focuses on a particular kind of interaction, including such topics as hunting, domestication, meat eating, zoonotic disease, experimentation, pet keeping and zoo display (the class is interdisciplinary, listed under anthropology as well as history). In addition to the ordinary in-class activities, each student writes reports on a visit to an animal-related institution; their choices ranged from butcher shops to veterinary practices to zoos. As a group, we visited the historical animal collections (both the public displays and the behind-the-scenes storage areas) at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology.

The class includes both undergraduates and graduate students. Any student who enrolls is likely to have a pre-existing interest in animals, and almost all the students who have taken it shared the experience of living with pets. But they could differ widely about the many philosophical issues raised by the class. There were always at least a few vegetarians and a few people whose research involved living animals. One year the class included both a PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) activist and a livestock breeder, who had many lively (but, fortunately, civil) disagreements.²

“Nature, environment, and empire” is a more conventional graduate seminar in history. Focusing on the 19th century, it examines the relationship between the study of natural history, both in Europe and in the wider world, and the exploration and exploitation of the natural world. Readings include such primary sources as Charles Darwin’s *The voyage of the Beagle* (2001) and Captain James Cook’s *Journals* (2000), as well as recent scholarship on topics including the global transfer of plants and animals and interactions with indigenous people. This class also includes a field trip – to the Peabody Museum of Anthropology at Harvard, to see some of the material collected by the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1803-1806, which explored the vast western territory acquired by the United States through the Louisiana Purchase. Students in this class have come from the HASTS program, as well as from other graduate programs at MIT and other Boston-area universities.³

You have been mentoring several researchers in the history of human-animal relations. Could you talk about some issues that have been investigated in their studies? Are your former students still working in this area?

Several of my former advisees have turned their animal-related dissertation research into books, including Etienne Benson (2010), *Wired wilderness: technologies of tracking and the making of modern wildlife*; Laurel Braitman (2015), *Animal madness: inside their minds*; e Rebecca Woods (2017) *The herds shot round the world: native breeds and the British Empire*. Several others are in progress, including Michaela Thompson's work on sharks, Alison Laurence's work on dinosaurs, and Shira Shmueli's work on the enforcement of early British legislation on animal experimentation. Most of my former students, including those on whose dissertation committees I've served, as well as my advisees, have continued to work in the areas that they first explored as graduate students.

You have worked on editorial boards and served as series editor for leading journals and publishers, such as Johns Hopkins University Press, Journal of the History of Biology, Journal of International Wildlife Law and Policy, International Review of Environmental History, Society and Animals, Anthrozoös etc. Could you describe that experience? How important are these publications to the study of the history of human-animal relations?

As you say, I've been a member of the editorial board of various academic journals. Most often, editorial board members aren't asked to do very much. The journals that have asked me to take a more active role in encouraging and evaluating submissions in the area of animal history include the *Journal of the History of Biology*, *Environmental History*, and *Archives of Natural History* (the journal of the Society for the History of Natural History). None of them is exclusively focused on animal history, but that makes it more important that they publish work in that area, to make it available to scholars with related interests.

I'm the editor of a book series called "Animals, history, culture," published by the Johns Hopkins University Press. The most recent additions to it deal with rabies in 19th-century New York (Wang, 2019) and pedigreed dog breeding in 19th-century Britain (Worboys, Strange, Pemberton, 2018); books about American livestock and horses in the trenches of the First World War are in the pipeline.

I'm also the co-editor, with Professor Mart Stewart of Western Washington University, of another series, "Flows, migrations, and exchanges," published by the University of North Carolina Press. Although it focuses on environmental history more generally, it includes books on such topics as ornithologists in the British navy (Greer, 2020), acclimatization societies in Australia (Minard, 2019), and imported cattle in Hawai'i (Fischer, 2017).

You have published articles, essays and reviews; in addition, you wrote three important books on the history of human-animal relations: The animal estate: the English and other creatures in the Victorian Age (Ritvo, 1987), The platypus and the mermaid and other figments of the classifying imagination (Ritvo, 1997), and Noble cows and hybrid zebras: essays on animals and history (Ritvo, 2010). Could you comment on these works? Your first book, The animal estate, was published by Harvard University Press in 1987. Three years later, it was also published by Penguin Books (Ritvo, 1990), and in 2001 it was translated into Japanese (Ritvo,

2001). In addition, it has won awards and been widely cited by other researchers. How do you view the trajectory of this book?

When I wrote *The animal estate*, I understood animals in 19th-century Britain as an appropriate topic for a historical monograph, not as the cornerstone of a new field. Because of the lack of colleagues doing similar work, as I've already mentioned, I was aware that the topic was unusual. And, probably, the absence of related work encouraged me to examine a variety of human-animal interactions, including natural history writing, livestock breeding, pet keeping, zoonotic diseases, animal protection, zoos, and hunting, which gave the book a much broader range than most monographs. Its subject also turned out to interest general readers to an unusual extent (at any rate, more than any of my other work has done) – it was reviewed in a number of newspapers and magazines, as well as in academic journals. It sparked a number of interesting conversations with colleagues, and of course, I am pleased that it continues to be of use to colleagues in the large and vigorous field that has now grown up around it.

The platypus and the mermaid had a somewhat narrower focus, and its subject is more closely connected to the history of science. It explored taxonomy construed in the broadest possible sense to encompass diverse systems of classifying animals, from formal zoological classification and nomenclature, to their appropriation by the breeders of domesticated animals, to hybridity and monstrosity, to edibility. People who worked with animals in barns and menageries, or with their remains in slaughterhouses and museums, understood their relationships differently than did the scientists who produced zoological systems. Since these understandings were not mutually consistent, they relied on conflicting definitions of expertise and conflicting acknowledgments of authority, a topic that seems unexpectedly timely in the context of debates about the current pandemic.

I have continued to explore topics in the history of human-animal relations in contributions to journals and to volumes of collected essays. Since such individual pieces are often difficult to locate, I was pleased to have the opportunity to gather them in a book, *Noble cows and hybrid zebras: essays on animals and history*. It includes pieces written over several decades, some of them extensions of topics mentioned in my first two books, some looking forward to my current book project on wildness and domestication, and some, like an article on BSE (mad cow disease), responding to the news.

You have also done important work within environmental history. In this area, you have been publishing numerous articles and essays, teaching courses and participating in academic and scientific events. In 2009, you published The dawn of green: Manchester, Thirlmere, and modern environmentalism (Ritvo, 2009). This book describes the history of the conversion of a lake into a reservoir for the city of Manchester in the nineteenth century and the conflicts around that transformation. Could you say something about this book and your work in environmental history? How close is research in environmental history and research in the history of human-animal relations? How do these fields of study impact the craft of the historian and the understanding of history itself as a discipline?

Although I didn't realize this when I began my research on the history of human-animal relations, animals are an important component of environmental history. It is possible that,

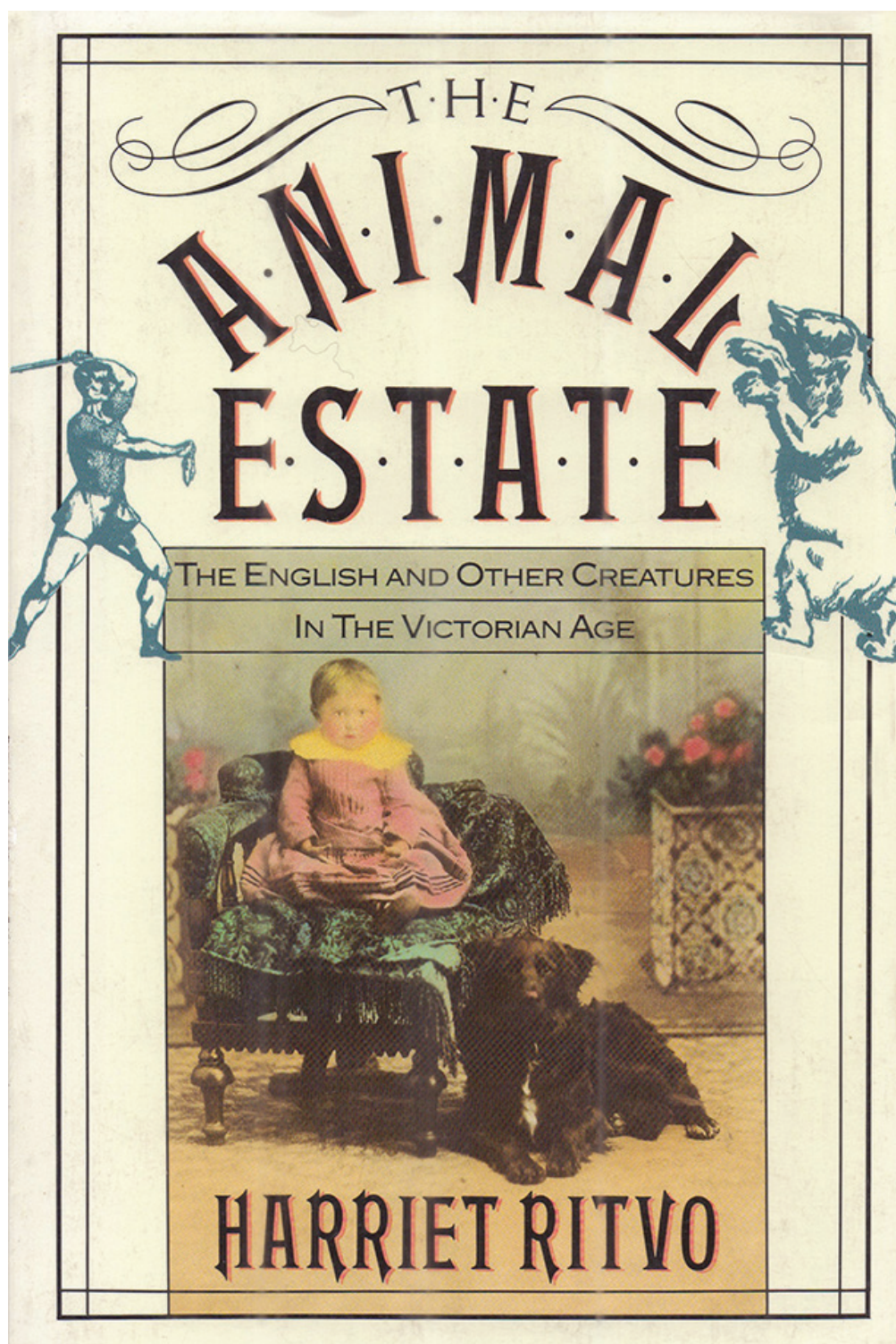


Figure 2: Book cover of *The animal estate: the English and other creatures in the Victorian Age*, by Harriet Ritvo (1987)

at that time, environmental historians didn't realize that either. Of course, the scope of environmental history is potentially enormous, since the environment is everywhere outside us, and even, if our microbiomes and ingestions are considered, inside us. It is currently among the liveliest historical disciplines. To put it a bit too generally, in the 1980s environmental history tended to focus on environmental regulation, environmental thought, and large-scale perspectives on landscapes as implied by words like frontier, wilderness, and nature; subsequently there has been more and more work on the components of such landscapes, include plants, soil, rocks, and atmosphere, as well as an increasing recognition that cities are equally promising sites for environmental history as forests and fields.

The dawn of green was an indirect result of this expanded understanding. Over 20 years ago, the head of my department at MIT asked me to develop an undergraduate survey of environmental history, and teaching that class made me realize that my work was part of that field. Putting the class syllabus together each year, I realized that there weren't many readable accounts of pre-20th-century non-US environmental conflicts, and so I decided to write one myself. The episode I chose leapt out at me once I started looking. Thirlmere was the first of the Lake District lakes to be dammed and converted into a reservoir. By the second half of the 19th century the Lake District was well established as a site of pilgrimage for Romantic lovers of nature and so its proposed transformation (which was radical – the water level was raised so high that its dramatic surrounding cliffs were completely submerged) sparked national and international outrage. The shape of the subsequent debate as well as its outcome has turned out to predict the shape of similar debates in many places and times, up to the present.

There are common interests and concerns in research in the history of human-animal relations, the history of science and the history of technology. Could you say something about the importance of and challenges related to this dialogue? How have scientific and technological transformations changed the relationship between humans and other animals?

As is the case with the relationship between animal history and environmental history, there is a lot of overlap between animal history and the history of science. Most obviously, animals have constituted a major part of the science of biology (and of its precursor, natural history). Zoologists and ethologists have studied them as whole organisms, whether alive in their natural habitat or in captivity, or dead on the dissecting table or in museum drawers. Animals have also functioned as experimental tools for biologists and cognitive scientists, and this function has become more prominent as science has become increasingly molecular. In acknowledgment of this tendency, many universities now have two biology departments; at Harvard, one is called the Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology and the other is called the Department of Organismic and Evolutionary Biology. Of course, the experimenters also need living animals. Although the earliest experimental subjects were not specially designed for that purpose, increasingly the rodents, zebrafish, and other experimental subjects who populate laboratories have been bioengineered using cutting edge technologies. And although they were not used as tools in the same sense, the breeds of livestock, pets, and working animals that people have selected and "improved"

over past centuries are also the products of technology. Animals have also been greatly affected by technological developments in which they are not directly involved, such as the introduction of the internal combustion engine, which eliminated the need for most draft animals. Despite this significant topical overlap, the approaches of environmental historians can diverge from those of historians of science and technology. It's hard to generalize about this divergence (and many environmental historians, myself included, are also historians of science or technology), but often it relates to the intensity of attention devoted to the science or technology itself.

In the last few decades, there has been significant growth in the number of animal studies programs and animal studies groups. How do you evaluate this? Do you believe initiatives like these have contributed substantially to the advancement of research in the history of human-animal relations?

The growth and increasing institutionalization of animal studies follows the pattern set by other emerging fields. In addition to the classes and degree programs offered by many universities and colleges, there are now societies, journals, book series, workshops and conferences (virtual at present, of course). The field of animal studies encompasses work in a range of disciplines, which theoretically includes animal history, but its center of disciplinary gravity is closer to literary and cultural studies and philosophy. For example, the very useful recent compendium *Critical terms for animal studies* (edited by Lori Gruen, 2018), includes contributions from over thirty authors. Philosophers constitute the largest group, followed by scholars in literary and cultural studies, scientists, anthropologists, political scientists, law professors, and only one historian (me). Historians are similarly thinly represented on the programs of the triennial Minding Animals conferences, which attract scholars, practitioners, and activists from around the globe. In addition, animal studies have more clearly defined politics than does animal history. But the overlap is very significant, even if not complete, and many historians of human-animal relations have benefited from the range and variety of work in animal studies.

How do you evaluate the history of human-animal relations area today? In your analysis, which regions of the world are most lacking research on this topic? Would you have any comments regarding Latin America?

The history of human-animal relations (or animal history – I have been using these terms interchangeably for the sake of euphony although they are not quite the same) is an extremely vigorous field. It includes work from almost every historical subdiscipline, from economic history to military history to cultural history. Its geographical range is also wide, extending to every populated continent. My sense is that there has been proportionately less scholarship that focuses on Latin America than on the other continents, but that sense may also reflect the fact that I don't read Spanish or Portuguese.

In your opinion, how can studies in the history of human-animal relations contribute to the discussion of current problems, such as the extinction of species, pandemics, the destruction of forests and climate change?

For each of the major current problems that you mention, animal history provides troubling earlier examples that could serve as both warnings and guides to alternative responses. But history also unfortunately suggests that such warnings are seldom heeded. After all, the causes of the 17th-century extinction of the dodo were well understood at the time, but that understanding did not save the many creatures that have disappeared in its wake. Of course, this also applies to lessons that could be learned from other historical disciplines; for example, the work of historians of medicine on previous outbreaks, including flu, cholera, and bubonic plague, does not seem to have had much influence on official responses to the current pandemic.

Could you comment on your current research and projects in the history of human-animal relations?

I'm currently working on a book about wildness and domestication, to put it very generally. Tentatively titled *The edges of wild*, it focuses on animals who don't fit easily into either of those categories, and of the stakes, for humans as well as for other animals, of their location in one category or the other. Although the understanding of both wildness and domestication has shifted over time, the sense that they are parallel has persisted through these changes. The parallel between, for example, wild species and domesticated breeds is far from complete, however, as an examination of Darwin's (1859) use of artificial selection as an analogue of natural selection in *On the origin of species* demonstrates. In addition, as human impact on the environment has become increasingly pervasive, the reciprocal resonance of these categories has intensified: the wild animal becomes more appealing as it becomes less available. And as the valence of wildness has altered, the stakes around its definition have increased, with implications for such varied enterprises as livestock breeding and environmental conservation.

NOTES

¹ Jonathan Arac is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of English, University of Pittsburgh and Founding Director of the Humanities Center at the University of Pittsburgh.

² Class materials can be viewed and downloaded from the MIT OpenCourseWare site. Available at: <https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/history/21h-380j-people-and-other-animals-fall-2013/>. Access on: 10 Sep. 2021.

³ Class materials can be viewed and downloaded from the MIT OpenCourseWare site. Available at: <https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/history/21h-968j-nature-environment-and-empire-spring-2010/>. Access on: 10 Sep. 2021.

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