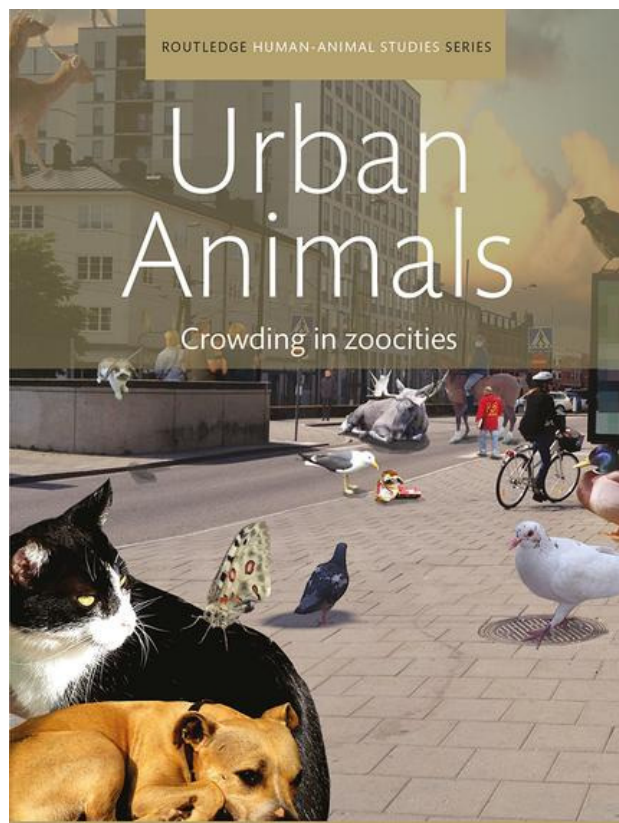


Reviews

Christi**a**n Hunold

Multispecies Politics in the City

Tora Holmberg, *Urban Animals: Crowding in Zoocities*. London and New York: Routledge, 2015. 164 pp. \$128.00 hc; \$47.96 pb; \$53.96 e-book.



Tora Holmberg



What are the multispecies experiences and politics of living in a city? In engaging this question, Tora Holmberg does not reduce politics to mere discourse or equate politics with rational deliberation aimed at reaching consensus on controversies involving urban animals. Rather, Holmberg embraces a resolutely agonistic conception of multispecies politics as “the more-than-discursive acts involved in the struggles over

priority of access, interpretation and resources" (2). Who gets to live in the polis, and on what terms? In Holmberg's understanding, politics is not only agonistic, but also spatial: "In sociological micro-studies of spatial conflicts, including those involving human/animal relations, meaning-making processes and discursive struggles are highlighted in great detail. Paradoxically, however, what I often find missing is the spatial dimension — as understood by urban classics — the physicality of places" (29-30). Writing as a sociologist, Holmberg does not approach these entanglements of the political and the physical via, say, the new materialism in political theory or the spatial lexicon of cultural geography, but through fine-grained engagement with analyses of the production of social space in the works of Georg Simmel and Henry Lefebvre. This grounding in classical sociological theory may not speak equally effectively to all readers of the book, though many will appreciate that Holmberg's interdisciplinary study of urban human/animal relations rests on firm disciplinary foundations. Methodologically, Holmberg draws in equal measure on Harold Garfinkel's interpretive ethnomethodology, wherein social spaces are produced through the participants' shared practices of sense-making, and on Donna Haraway's unpacking of posthumanist entanglements via the analytic deployment of material-semiotic figures (e.g. cyborg, companion animal.) Holmberg's sensitivity to Foucaultian power/knowledge dynamics in human/animal relations rounds out the book's epistemology.

At the core of Holmberg's contribution to the study of urban animals lies what she terms the material-symbiotic figure of urban *humanimal* crowding, defined as the spatial formation of a trans-species collective in a specific social setting. Such collectives emerge, for example, from encounters between dogs and people on a city beach or between animal welfare inspectors, cat ladies (a term Holmberg uses), and their cats inside an urban home. How, Holmberg asks, does the humanimal crowding that occurs in such social settings inform the understanding and management of urban human/animal relations? In her conceptualization, crowd/crowding is always both object and process, both noun and verb. Guided by sociological theory's sensitivity to the production of social relations by participants acting together in specific physical spaces, what a place means and who is included or excluded from it is never given, but always formed through the stories told and the actions performed by the participants.

The figure of humanimal crowding, moreover, seeks to decenter human experiences in favor of species relationality, and thus to shift attention to the participation of nonhuman animals in urban place-making. For the most part, the book leaves wild animals to one side and focuses squarely on controversies involving companion

animals: unleashed dogs, homeless and feral cats, animal hoarding, crazy cat ladies. These controversies play out in what Holmberg terms zoocities. This prefix intends to capture the uneasy yet generative tension between disorder and order, between chaos and its (often unexpected) capacity to upend hegemonic norms. As for the general vibe of urban human/animal relations, Holmberg positions zoocities at some distance from Jennifer Wolch's zoöpolis, bursting with manifold hopeful opportunities for peaceful coexistence between humans and animals, and somewhat closer to Steve Hinchliffe and Sarah Whatmore's living cities, wherein sources of difference, dissension, and confusion between species have a more tenacious footing.

This willingness to countenance the agonistic dimension of urban human/animal entanglements points Holmberg toward a sober assessment of the promises of crowding in zoocities. These lie, she contends, "not so much in peaceful reconciliation, but in the potential ruptures and leakages that the agonistic heterogeneity poses to the ideals of hegemonic purity" (127). Human/animal crowding in zoocities, in Holmberg's analysis, figures both as a threat to be policed and as a potentially subversive element. Four empirical chapters investigate how norm violations involving everyday encounters with unruly cats and dogs foreground and destabilize "ordinary and normal" understandings of urban spaces. The first of these, "Bodies on the beach: Allowability and the politics of place," examines human-dog interactions on Its Beach, a dog beach in the California city of Santa Cruz. One of the methodological challenges facing studies human-animal relations is to account for nonhuman agency in the coproduction of multispecies places. In many ways, as Holmberg is the first to note, the book adheres to a standard methodology of interpreting human study participants' meanings (e.g., animal welfare officers, police, cat owners) and analyzing government documents through a theoretical lens; that is, the researcher endeavors to understand, more or less systematically, how humans make sense of their relationships with animals, while the animals themselves are consigned to agentic cameos. However, not least because this chapter draws on time Holmberg spent on the beach observing interactions among dogs, their owners, and non-dog-owning beachgoers, she manages to capture something of how the dogs' corporeality — their "dogginess" — shapes people's affective responses to the ways that dogs inhabit this beach. The capacity of the animals' dogginess — their sheer joy and rambunctious movements — to trigger fear or inspire admiration in different human observers offers up a plausible corporeal explanation for the peculiar intensity of debates regarding dogs in public settings.

Such nuanced attention to nonhuman embodiment, to animals as biological beings, is largely absent from the remaining chapters, all of which are focused primarily on cat-keeping. Holmberg's decision against including ethological perspectives on animal

behavior in her study, ostensibly to avoid essentializing animals and to focus on the social construction of human-animal relationalities, dampens the liveliness of the cats (and some dogs) we encounter in the remaining chapters. In “Verminizing: Making Sense of Animal Hoarding,” Holmberg observes, rightly, that media accounts and reality TV treatments of this phenomenon overlook the agency of hoarded animals, but offers few suggestions for tackling this omission. In hoarding situations, cats and dogs are simultaneously loved and (according to animal welfare regulations) abused, and learning how the animals themselves might feel about their lives is admittedly far from straightforward. Holmberg’s suggestion that documentary photographs and videos of animals recorded by animal welfare officials during investigations of allegations of animal hoarding might serve to communicate the animals’ agency is intriguing but not developed in much depth. That said, the chapter’s elaboration of what Holmberg terms “sensuous governance” — the ways that officials use and record visual, olfactory, and auditory impressions to arrive at a finding of animal hoarding in urban homes — is both original and compelling. Though Holmberg is critical of the (occasionally severe) lack of care animals suffer in hoarding situations, her Foucaultian analysis of the use of this phenomenon by the state to reaffirm middle-class ideas about healthy home hygiene and a healthy human-to-human social life is insightful. The ways in which thusly “verminized” cat ladies found by mainstream society to keep too many cats in the home resist dominant gender norms are analyzed in a chapter titled “Feline femininity: Emplacing cat ladies.” Whereas such women are judged by animal welfare officials (and the media) to lack the most basic forms of control over their lives, Holmberg insists on the resistance potential of this form of human/animal crowding: “I am nevertheless inclined to interpret the cat lady as a transspecies figure who challenges and subverts, a feline femininity that does not make herself available primarily for other humans in accordance with heteronormative ideals. Instead, she prioritizes the cat, preferably many” (116).

The book’s reliance on Swedish case studies does not greatly diminish the book’s relevance for non-Swedish audiences. If nothing else, the observation, in “Stranger cats: Homelessness and ferality in the city,” that “according to Swedish authorities and most shelter workers, the street is not a place for cats” opens a fascinating window to another world for readers hailing from less well-ordered cities. The chapter provides a fine-grained account of Swedish animal welfare officials’ efforts to determine whether a given cat was born wild or is just lost — energies that public health officials in some US cities, for example, would be hard pressed to be able to expend on *humans*. The book’s strengths, at any rate, derive primarily from Holmberg’s theory-driven interest in rendering the figure of human/animal crowding as capable of disrupting hegemonic

norms regarding urban human-animal (and human-to-human) relationalities, a project that resonates regardless of national context. However, since the book presupposes some willingness to digest advanced sociological theory and related bodies of work in human-animal studies, it is probably unsuitable for most undergraduate animal studies courses.

Works Cited

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