

History 3029 Transnational History: A New Perspective on the Past

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### **Book Review**

Bulliet, W. Richard. *Hunters, Herders and Hamburgers: The Past and Future of Human-Animal Relationships*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

#### **Summary and author's background**

“Let's start with sex and blood.” Bulliet began the book by discussing the increase of fantasies of sex and blood in contemporary society. He explained that such phenomenon is quite related to the advent of postdomestic society, a society in which most people live far away from animals physically and psychologically. Most urban populations no longer witness in animal slaughter or animal copulation, resulting in an absence of blood and sex from the lives of most urban populations. As a result, fantasies of sex and blood have become prevalent during the absence of actual blood and sex. He then continued elaborating on postdomesticity's impact on various aspects of modern society, including ethics, science, philosophy and religion.

This book traces and attempts to explain the relations between human and animal as a whole throughout history. After drawing out various implications of our postdomestic society in the first chapter, Bulliet introduced the main concept of the book—the four stages of human-animal relationships. First, there was the era of separation in which humans started to regard themselves as different from animals. Second, the era of predomesticity came; people revered animals as they had a strong spiritual imagery and symbolism for humans. Then, the main period of domesticity followed; animals were tamed and used as specific products; the level of utilization of animals kept increasing while the spiritual significance of most animals kept declining. While most people lived closely with domesticated animals, they took killing and copulation of animals as granted. Finally, the contemporary era of postdomesticity has reached many industrialized and urban societies. While people continue to depend on animals for food and products, most people live far away from animals both physically and mentally. But as people think about the industrial process of raising and slaughtering animals, they will inevitably experience guilt

and disgust. This gives rise to moral vegetarianism and the animal rights movement.

These four stages of human-animal relationships form the main content of the book. As separation and predomesticity occurred in primitive times in most parts of the world, the author devoted only one chapter to each of these two eras. Since most parts of human recorded history were during the domestic era, Bulliet devoted four chapters to the beginning and subsequent transformation of domesticity. Two chapters were devoted to late domesticity and its transformation to postdomesticity. Finally, a section was written about the future of human-animal relationships.

Richard Bulliet (born 1940) is a professor at Columbia University. He specialized in the history of the Middle East, the history of technology and the history of human-animal relationships. With his wide disciplinary knowledge and research interests, he was able to draw various perspectives and a wide range of source material into this book.

### **Structure**

Except for the first chapter in which Bulliet illustrated the contemporary postdomestic society that many of us live in, he generally adopted a chronological structure in writing the past of human-animal relationships. But different from most history books, exact years, decades or centuries seldom appear in the book. Bulliet did not conceptualize the chapters based on centuries, nor were they based on conventional historical periods like the bronze age, classical antiquity, the Middle Ages, early modern history etc. Instead, the only chronological structure that dominates throughout the book is the four stages of human-animal relationships as mentioned before.

Relying on these four stages as the dominant structure has its advantages. The conventional historical periods are often not universal. Classical antiquity mainly suits the Mediterranean world only and the Middle Ages arguably only apply to Europe. Thus, these conventional political historical periods could barely illustrate the complexity of human-animal relationships which had regional differences and were often detached from political development. Some parts of the world reached domesticity much later than other parts; while some societies reached postdomesticity in the twentieth century, many others did not. A chronological structure based on centuries or conventional historical periods could barely illustrate the complex and irregular development of human-animal relationships.

There are about twenty pages in each chapter. Instead of narrating a coherent develop-

ment of human-animal relationships in each chapter, Bulliet usually offered various arguments and theories to illustrate the transformation of human-animal relationships. Such theories might not be necessarily his own views and sometimes the theories are conflicting or speculative. For instance, he offered various factors like the use of fire, sexual awareness and speech in explaining how and when humans started to regard themselves as different from and standing above animals. He also devoted two whole chapters to suggesting a wide range of possible reasons about how and why humans started to domesticate animals, e.g. milk products, the draft harness, meat eating, animal sacrifice, riding etc. Some of these examples complemented each other while some of them were conflicting. The introduction of diverse and at times contradictory factors might allow readers to develop their own informed perspectives. The details of some of his argumentations will be discussed later.

### **Perspectives, materials and examples**

Bulliet demonstrated his broad knowledge in writing this book. With such broad knowledge and extensive examples, Bulliet could effectively discuss human-animal relationships in primitive times even though no written records from the prehistoric times exist. He was creative in utilizing legends, folklores and primitive art as evidence for theories and arguments. For instance, he brought out the ancient Mesopotamian legend of *Enkidu* in illustrating that the awareness of sexuality might have been the point at which humans started to distinguish themselves from animals. While Bulliet handled the lack of written sources in early times well, he was also not distracted by the abundance of written sources in the late domestic and postdomestic eras since he clearly identified and focused on major trends happening at those times.

The depiction of animals by humans was a consistent theme upon which Bulliet drew as evidence throughout the book. Such depictions were relevant from predomestic times to the postdomestic era. For example, Bulliet made speculations based on a Neanderthal cave painting from the Paleolithic era. He suggested that very few images explicitly depict hunting and animals as food.<sup>1</sup> This may hint that human-animal relations in the predomestic era might not center on food and hunting even though people at that time are conventionally categorized as hunters and gatherers. Instead, predomestic people might have focused on the power and spiritual significance of wild beasts. Animal depictions are still very relevant in the contemporary postdomestic era. Bulliet discussed the changing style of illustrations of animals in children's books, Disney car-

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Bulliet, *Hunters, Herders and Hamburgers: The Past and Future of Human-Animal Relationships* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 75.

toons' humanization of animals, George Orwell using animal stereotypes in his novel etc., in illustrating various trends of late domestic and postdomestic societies. I find Bulliet's focus on depiction of animals very useful in understanding human-animal relationships. How humans portrayed animals directly reflects humans' attitude and perception of various species.

Such emphasis also demonstrated Bulliet's multi-perspectival thinking. When people address human-animal relations, humans' material use of animals will be the primary concern for many people. As a result, most people will focus on the material perspective when looking into human-animal relationships. However, Bulliet offered a great deal of other non-material perspectives, namely philosophical and cultural perspectives. He demonstrated that people's cultural practices and philosophical beliefs were also crucial driving forces of transformation of human-animal relations. For instance, he argued that material uses like meat-consumption, milk products, or the draft harness might not be the primary factor for human starting to domesticate animals. Instead, it might be animal sacrifice, which was a result of religious and cultural traditions, the primary factor that caused humans to domesticate animals in the very first place. To illustrate such theory, Bulliet added even more perspectives in analyzing the mindsets and social formations of people in late premodernicity, proving the significance of animal sacrifice to people at that time.

Given the book's comprehensive perspectives, it still had certain minor drawbacks in its approach. Bulliet sometimes only relied on the example of a single animal to draw out theories. He devoted an entire chapter to the history of donkey symbolism to illustrate his theory since he is most familiar with the animal. "I am devoting this chapter to the history of the donkey as symbol as a case study in how early human affective attitudes toward one domestic animal persisted through the centuries, though with steady diminishing salience..."<sup>2</sup> Thomas Dunk also criticized in his review that "a chapter on the symbolism of the mule and donkey in Western culture contains a great deal of information but does not seem to have a point."<sup>3</sup> Though the chapter was well written in terms of giving a comprehensive history of human attitudes towards donkeys, a single animal is barely significant enough to illustrate the persistence and later steady diminishing of animal symbolism to humans throughout domesticity.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Dunk, Review of *Hunters, Herders and Hamburgers: The past and future of Human-Animal Relationships* by Richard Bulliet, *Anthropologica* 49, no. 1 (2007): 184.

## Argumentation

In general, Bulliet is careful in his argumentation process throughout the book. In the first chapter, his theories about the postdomestic society's implication on fantasies of sex and blood might sound far-fetched. His illustration of a historical trend during the domestic era by using the single example of the donkey might sound unconvincing. But other than that, I find most of the content in the book carefully illustrated and well supported.

In each stage of transformation of human-animal relations, Bulliet usually suggested a wide range of possible factors. He then considered each of those factors individually to assess whether or not they are sufficient in explaining the transformation. For example, in explaining how and when humans started to distinguish themselves from animals, Bulliet discussed awareness of sexuality, meat eating, speech, the use of fire, etc. He did not think that any factor alone was sufficient to explain the transformation.

Bulliet also avoided the generalization of theories as much as possible. He challenged some generalized notions that are commonly believed by people. For example, he argued that domesticity might not necessarily go with agriculture, challenging the common notion that people started to rear animals since they had settled down in an agrarian society. The author also defined the key terms and concepts carefully. He differentiated between the terms 'tamed' and 'domesticated' since there are animals that are naturally tame in the wilderness and there are other animals that slowly lost their wildness and became tame through the long process of domestication. Some key concepts like Darwinism, to which he repeatedly referred, were also clearly defined and explained in the book.

Nevertheless, Bulliet's careful argumentation process might give us an impression of a lack of concrete conclusion at the end of each chapter. For instance, after a long process of offering various factors in discussing human-animal separation, Bulliet still would not come up with a clear answer of when and how human-animal separation took place. In the last paragraph of that chapter, he wrote that “we do not know and probably never will know how and when our ancestors developed a consciousness of being human, and our lack of certainty will continue to leave room for tendentious theorizing ... two million years ago seems too early; forty thousand years ago seems too late.”<sup>4</sup> Such conclusion may seem vague to many readers. However, such uncertain and open-ended remark at the end of each chapter may be intentional by the author. Rather

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<sup>4</sup> Bulliet, *Hunters, Herders and Hamburgers*, 70.

than delivering a certain answer, Bulliet acknowledged the complexity and uncertainty of the history, as it took place very long time ago on a global scale. Based on this uncertain picture, he sometimes even raised further issues for the readers. For the example of human-animal separation, he suggested that such discussion on finding when and how human-animal separation took place has more to do with “our contemporary postdomestic anxieties and puzzlements than [with] pre-history.”<sup>5</sup> Our contemporary postdomestic anxieties have blurred the line between humans and animals and motivated us to ponder such questions. So he suggested that our current postdomestic attitudes may influence the analysis and make it more complex; our understanding of the history of human-animal relationships is inevitably heavily influenced by the present.

Similarly, in another chapter about the beginning of domesticity, Bulliet acknowledged the diversified situation of domestication of different animals instead of just offering one single answer to what caused domestication. “Such scenarios suggest that each domestic species has a separate history and that no systematic domestication process devised by humans has ever existed.”<sup>6</sup> Once again, he illustrated the complexity of the transformation instead of promoting one answer. Interestingly, his attempt of using the single example of the donkey in illustrating a whole trend of development during domesticity goes against his usual careful argumentation process. And as mentioned before, that chapter as a result sounds less convincing to the readers.

Finally, the author tried to predict the future of human-animal relations. The section on his prediction of the future is relatively short. His prediction is reasonable as it is largely based on previous trends of human-animal relations, especially the trends in late domesticity and postdomesticity. “The future of human-animal relations in real-world terms will be determined by the worldwide expansion of exploitation in a late domestic mode and the reaction to that expansion by increasingly angry postdomestic activists.”<sup>7</sup> He made such prediction based on the increasing level of exploitation of animals in late domesticity and the rise of animal rights due to the postdomestic mindset. He acknowledged that at present neither camp has reason for optimism as there is no middle ground between the two camps; postdomestic animal rights and large scale industrialized uses of animals are inherently incompatible.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

## World history

In this final part, I will put the book into the context of world history. World history transcends national boundaries and identities; it often deals with particular themes on a global scale. Historians doing world history often look into the connections between different parts of the world, or at differences across the world. It is a bit tricky to categorize the earlier part of the book as world history as human-animal separation and predomesticity both took place in primitive time. Nation states or even well structured societies did not exist at such early times; global ties and influences from different parts of the world barely existed. Even if global ties existed, they were very slow in process and thus are hard to be acknowledged.

In the later part of the book in which Bulliet wrote on late domesticity and post domesticity, the approach of world history became increasingly obvious. In illustrating the trend of late domesticity, Bulliet drew global connections on animal production and consumption. Such global connections gave rise to the large scale rearing and processing of animals. He suggested that “European colonists imported European domestic animals to lands suitable for stock raising.”<sup>8</sup> For instance, they brought cattle, horses, sheep and goats into the grasslands and deserts of Argentina, Mexico, the United States, Australia etc. Such vast lands in these newly settled colonies enabled large-scale ranching. As a result, large-scale export and consumption of meat and animals products were possible for these large colonies. At the same time, Bulliet also acknowledged the role of global transport lines. With more advanced global transport lines, a centralized processing of livestock was possible while a large urban population who lived far away from the livestock could still receive animal and meat products conveniently. This eventually gave rise to post domestic society.

Apart from drawing these global connections as a driving force of late domesticity and post domesticity, Bulliet also illustrated the global diversity of human-animal relations by using a world history approach. For example, he compared the social and economic structures in different regions to illustrate why postdomestic mentality emerged much faster in some regions than in others. He illustrated that postdomestic mentality was much more common in Anglophone countries like the United States and the UK than in countries like Argentina, where massive animal and meat industries existed. Bulliet speculated that in countries like Argentina, small neighbor butcher shops still exist and people still have direct connections with animals and their products while animal processing is very centralized and far away from people in countries like the United

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

States. Besides, postdomestic mentality is related to Darwinist and postmodernist thoughts which “dissolved the former certainty of anthropocentrism in relations to animals.”<sup>9</sup> Such Darwinist and postmodernist thoughts often have been most prominent in Anglophone countries. Thus, Bulliet could well map out these global patterns in illustrating the diversity.

To further illustrate the diversity of human-animal relations across the globe, Bulliet investigated the cultural background of different regions. For instance, he devoted a section to discussing the cultural origins of the Japanese in shaping a unique mentality that was different from domesticity. From various animal imagery and depiction throughout Japanese history, he argued that spiritual significance of animals mattered a lot to Japanese in the past and still matters a lot to them nowadays. This results in a mentality that is closer to predomesticity than domesticity. However, such uniqueness was more due to ethnographic factors rather than national political factors. In the example of Japan, Bulliet explained that even when the Japanese government attempted to westernize their country during the Meiji Restoration, the traditional mindset towards animals was not influenced by westernization at all. Thus, cultural and ethnographic factors were more dominant than national political factors in shaping human-animal relations in various parts of the world.

There are still many significant regional variations of human-animal relations that are not covered in this book. The commonness of vegetarianism in Indian culture within a domestic society throughout Indian history deserves study. The exploration of late domesticity and postdomesticity generally focuses on the Anglophone world. Bulliet might not have enough knowledge to cover many regional variations of human-animal relations as a lot of understanding towards one ethnic group's cultural background is always needed to illustrate such regional variations. If Bulliet is going to expand his research on human-animal relations, the development in late domesticity and postdomesticity across various cultures and ethnicities could be compared and further analyzed.

To conclude, this is an informative and structured book for someone who is relatively new to the topic of human-animal relations. The book has a strong and clear thesis about the four stages of human-animal relationships serving as the backbone of the content. Through drawing from diverse source materials, the author discussed a wide range of factors and theories to illustrate the transformation of these four stages. The author might not give out answers in many of the discussions and questions raised in the book; he often left open-ended remarks for readers to

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

have their own insights instead.

The development of human-animal relationships, especially the more contemporary development in these past two or three centuries, was often placed in a world history context. The author was able to discover global connections to illustrate the later development of human-animal relationships; he also acknowledged the regional diversity and complexity of human-animal relationships across the globe.

### **Bibliography**

Bulliet, Richard W. *Hunters, Herders and Hamburgers: The Past and Future of Human-Animal Relationships*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

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