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Frühe Neuzeit – Revolution – Empire (1500–1815)

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Peter Sahlins, 1668. The Year of the Animal in France, New York (The MIT Press) 2017, 491 p., 56 b/w and col. ill., ISBN 978-1-93540899-4, USD 34,95.

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This book has been announced and expected for quite a long time, but in the end it seems to have gone to the presses just in the right moment: on the eve of the celebration of the 250th anniversary of the Year of the Animal. Between 2012 and 2015, the book's author, Peter Sahlins, had already published four articles on such varied topics as the royal menageries of Louis XIV, the representations of the lives and deaths of three chameleons in Paris, the labyrinth in the gardens of the château de Versailles, and the first xenotransfusion experiments in France. One was left to wonder how these disparate topics would fit into a comprehensive narrative. Granted, there were visible connections between the different stories such as the focus on animals, on France, and on some protagonists – Claude Perrault, Madelaine de Scudéry, and Louis XIV, among others. But as it turns out, for the author, the principle connection lies in the chronology, or rather synchrony, of the stories: all four articles are now part of a book that is devoted to what Peter Sahlins calls the *annus mirabilis animalium* in French history.

What happened in 1668 or more broadly in the period from around 1661 until 1674? According to Sahlins, France saw the sudden entrance of animals onto the central stages of royal representation and elite conversation in these years. Two main factors led to this early modern 'animal turn', a political and a discursive one. On the one hand, it was the young king's choice to build a new menagerie in the gardens of his château at Versailles and to populate it with a heterogeneous crowd of more or less exotic animals – animals that soon became models for different genres of art production and objects of scientific research. Most of these activities were sponsored by the crown too, and their fruits, such as the Royal Academy of Science's richly illustrated »Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire naturelle des animaux« (first edition in 1671), unsurprisingly tended to shed a positive light on the sun king. According to Sahlins, the living, painted, printed, or woven animals all played an eminent role in the »symbolic construction of absolutism« in the first decade of Louis XIV's personal rule. Gracile demoiselle cranes and other peaceful birds in the menagerie thus became models for civilized behaviour in a well-ordered, polite society under the rule of a godlike king who was sometimes, but not too often, also represented as a lion or a Gallic rooster – »Absolutism 1.0« in Sahlins' words.

On the other hand, the 1660s saw a surge in the reception of René Descartes' mechanistic philosophy. In particular Descartes' analogy between animals and automats – the notorious figure of the beast-machine – was the subject of lively discussions at court and in the Parisian salons. Descriptions of the behaviour of living animals in the menagerie and elsewhere, as well as the observations resulting from vivisections, dissections, or the exchange of blood between members of different species (including humans), became pros and cons in these debates. Avowed Cartesians remained a minority, and the crown kept its distance

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from the French philosopher whose work had been put on the index by the Pope; but the »shadow of Descartes« nevertheless favoured a more detached view of animals – even more so when two men died after xenotransfusions in 1667–1668. According to Sahlins, from 1668 onwards, animals were also increasingly objectified, naturalized, and devalued in royal propaganda. Leaving behind the theriophilic traditions of the Renaissance, the emerging »Classical naturalism« found its political analogy in a Hobbesian »Absolutism 2.0« that insisted on the sovereign's role in bridling the brute passions of animal and human subjects.

Not everything is entirely new in this story. Many of the chapters' topics have already been studied in detail by French and Anglophone scholars from various disciplines in recent years, as the author freely concedes when discussing their arguments[1]. Thus, it is the integrative perspective rather than the single empirical results that make this work original. While the personal and thematic connections between the different simultaneous phenomena are striking, Sahlins' insistence on the deep transformations in the attitudes towards animals in a single year – or a couple of years – seems less convincing to me. Is it only »ironic« (p. 360) that the same king who should have orchestrated the sudden turn from »Renaissance humanimalism« towards Classical naturalism still commissioned a highly anthropomorphising portrait series of his beloved companion dogs in the early 1700s? Moreover, if one really aims at re-constructing French royal absolutism through the lens of animals, one should tell the reader much more about the king's horses and about all the animals and people that were involved in and affected by royal hunts and hunting legislation than Sahlins does[2].

These criticisms notwithstanding, it is a true pleasure to read this book – and not only because of its rich illustrations beginning with a portrait series of important »human« and »non-human animals« of 1668 and ending with a selection of some beautiful colour-plates. Taking into account a variety of sources that have too often been studied in isolation from each other, the study offers a complex, multi-perspective, and extremely vivid picture of the debates about the animal theme in and around Paris in the 1660s. It would be highly desirable to have more studies like this on other places and periods in order to gain a more nuanced view of what Thomas Keith – in his »Man and the Natural World« published in 1983 – famously called the »changing attitudes« of humans towards animals during the early modern period. Whether or not one accepts Sahlins' argument about the nexus between 1668, animals,

1 However, some important studies have escaped the author's attention: for the animals at Versailles and their connection to royal rule in theory and practice, see also Grégory Quenet, Versailles, une histoire naturelle Paris 2015; and Joan Pieragnoli, La cour de France et ses animaux, Paris 2016.

2 While the author states that a modern study of the royal hunt in France is »much needed« (p. 49), he seems to ignore the standard work written by Philippe Salvadori, La chasse sous l'Ancien Regime, Paris 1996. The various studies of Daniel Roche, Daniel Reytier, and others on early modern French horse culture also do not appear in the bibliography, even though some of their findings might have supported Sahlins' argument: for instance, 1668 was also an important year in the creation of the Royal Studs (see Jacques Mulliez, Les chevaux du royaume, Paris 2004, p. 102–104; not to confuse with the Royal Stables as in the present book on p. 399).

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and the rise of a new concept of royal absolutism – this book really is thought-provoking in the best sense of the word.

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