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Peter Sahlins, *1668: The Year of the Animal in France*. New York: Zone Books, 2017. 491 pp. Plates, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$34.95 (hb). ISBN 978-1935408994.

Review essay by Oded Rabinovitch, Tel Aviv University.

This is a fascinating, learned, and bold book. Peter Sahlins has set out to explore the presence of animals in French elite culture during the second half of the seventeenth century as a way to establish the claim that these years—with 1668 serving as the fulcrum of a much broader, sweeping story—witnessed a transformation in the perception of animals and of their relations to humans. During the Renaissance and up to 1668 or so, animals were conceived within the framework of what Sahlins dubs “Renaissance humanimalism,” a view that saw animals as important participants in a human-centric cosmos. That is to say, although humans were held to be the crowning achievement of God’s creation, they still shared with animals a related, if unequal, place in the cosmos. For Renaissance authors such as Montaigne, animals could offer important moral lessons to humans. Around the year 1668, this view was initially adopted by the French monarchy as part of the construction of Versailles, and the creation of the culture of absolutism more broadly, only to be replaced by a view more hostile to animals. This new “classical naturalism” stressed the differences between animals and human beings, now conceived as having a deeply incommensurate nature. Representations of animals became, therefore, more naturalist and less allegorical. In parallel, this shift also led to a view of humans as having a “bestly” side, attributed most of all to peasants and the lower classes more generally.

The book addresses some very broad claims, of which two stand out in particular. First, Sahlins forcefully attacks Jacques Derrida’s view regarding the “animality” of the sovereign, that is, the claim that sovereigns share with animals an existence beyond the law.[1] For Sahlins, this is a deep misreading, since the sovereignty of Louis XIV was premised on the emergent distinction between humans and animals, in spite of the brief adoption of “humanimalism” by the monarchy. Second, Sahlins seeks to restore a historical dimension to discussions of human-animal relations, which can take on an anthropological perspective that flattens out historical changes. In this sense, an “animal moment” such as 1668 is crucial for showing that human-animal relations can undergo significant transformations, and hence should not be studied in an a-historical manner.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part discusses the creation of the royal menagerie at Versailles, built and populated between 1664 and 1668. Sahlins contrasts this menagerie to the one at Vincennes (built in 1658) because of the different animal denizens both housed, and the different types of spectacle they offered. At Versailles, the animals were mostly birds, with the crane taking particular pride of place. These animals symbolized civilized behavior, and Sahlins perceives them as the model for courtly behavior, set up even before the court finally moved to Versailles in 1682. By contrast, Vincennes held ferocious and violent animals, such as tigers. An arena designed for close combat between animals constituted the central feature of the menagerie there. By preferring Versailles to Vincennes, Louis XIV chose a first model of absolutism built on “love of animals,” in continuity with Renaissance “humanimalism.” Literary depictions of Versailles from those

years, penned by authors such as Madeleine de Scudéry and Jean de La Fontaine (the subject of chapter two), also harped on the Renaissance tradition of the love of animals and highlighted the grace of the birds held at Versailles.

This tradition underwent a profound transformation around 1668, as Sahlins argues in the second part of the book. In three chapters, Sahlins shows how animals were used in three different artistic and intellectual projects, which relied on the assumptions he associates with “classical naturalism.” Chapter three follows the work of animal painter Pieter Boel, especially in two tapestry projects manufactured at the Gobelins. Sahlins contrasts the preparatory work done by Boel with the animals ultimately represented in the tapestries. He interprets the changes in terms of a shift from an anthropomorphic approach, characteristic of the sketches, to an objectification of the animals, “naturalizing” and stripping them of their affinities to human beings. Chapter four traces the uses of animals in the anatomy project of the Royal Academy of Sciences and the publications based on this project. These lavishly illustrated publications, culminating in the *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire naturelle des animaux* (1671/1676), provide Sahlins with ample material for tackling the tension between the scientific goals of this project and its role as a tool of royal propaganda.

Chapter five continues the focus on the visual afterlives of animals by discussing a lost lecture on physiognomy by Charles Le Brun, the most powerful painter working under Louis XIV. While the text of the lecture has not survived and we have only contradictory secondhand accounts, Sahlins uses the trove of Le Brun illustrations held at the Louvre to reconstruct the assumptions regarding animals and humans that underwrite the artist’s work. He regards them as fitting with the new form of “classical naturalism,” in which animals are clearly inferior to humans, and in which they can illustrate the base, and in this context, quite literally bestial passions.

The third part traces the influence of Descartes’s beast-machine, a notion which assumes a sharp divide between humans, possessing a veritable capacity to think and feel, and animals, existing as unreflective, reactive machines. Chapter six studies the “xenotransfusion affair,” or the controversy that exploded around the attempts to transfuse humans with blood drawn from animals. While some patients died, ultimately leading to a ban on such procedures, others seemed to have recovered magnificently, rejuvenated by the process that made their blood more “bestial.” Chapter seven follows the fortunes of three chameleons who arrived in Paris in 1668 and in 1672, the first delivered to the Academy of Sciences and the others to the renowned literary figure, Madeleine de Scudéry. Sahlins shows how both Claude Perrault, an academician, and Scudéry, an author and *salonnière*, resisted the Cartesian assumptions in different ways. The final chapter returns to Versailles, in particular to the labyrinth built in the gardens between 1672 and 1674, decorated with sculptures illustrating animal fables drawn from Aesop. For Sahlins, the labyrinth represents the end of the shift taking place around 1668: the peaceful and graceful animals of the menagerie, presenting a vision of civilized behavior, were replaced by stories in which predation and combat abound, a veritable “state of nature” devalorizing animals while presenting the risks they pose to human nature. The conclusion serves as a coda, using the debate on the inclusion or exclusion of camels in paintings of the biblical story of Eliezer and Rebecca and an animal trial included in the sole comedy authored by Jean Racine to illustrate the shift Sahlins identifies around the “Year of the Animal.”

This is a study written in a particular idiom of cultural history: Sahlins is interested in delineating the morphology of specific cultural forms and in showing how one form, “humanimalism,” was replaced by another, “classical naturalism.” These organizing concepts are quite useful. They allow Sahlins to connect meanings present in a range of contexts, from representations of power around the figure of Louis XIV to natural science by way of aristocratic literary life, and demonstrate that they share a certain logic, which is much harder to see when each case is examined in isolation.

Every case study in this book is a gem, and Sahlins has clearly thought long and hard about each one. His meticulous research and exhaustive reading of the sources pair harmoniously with fresh analyses of both substance and nuance with regards to the scholarly literature. Even an extensive review such as the present one cannot do justice to the quality of the ideas raised in every chapter of this book. Although many of the sources will be familiar to specialists of the period, and have been previously debated, Sahlins offers a host of intriguing and innovative interpretations. To take just a few examples among many, there is much to admire in the analyses of Louis XIV as a collector of birds (pp. 88-90), of the xenotransfusion affair, and of the political philosophy embedded in the Versailles labyrinth.

Sahlins reconstructs cultural patterns by drawing on a wide range of literary, scientific, and most impressively, visual sources. Indeed, the care he invests in interpreting paintings, drawings, and sketches is noteworthy, considering how ambiguous they might be for the kinds of questions he asks. After all, knowing whether a crane is sketched in an anthropomorphic or more naturalized style is hardly a trivial issue, and such readings can at times seem like over-interpretations of particularly tough source material. Readers can rely on the reproduction of dozens of these images, some of them even in full color, and literally see with their own eyes the evidence for the argument. The result is a truly beautiful book that is a pleasure to hold and read.

The focus on the interpretation of cultural patterns within a close milieu and in a relatively brief time span also raises several questions. Sahlins argues for a complex way to conceive of cultural change. He is not interested in claiming that one worldview was suddenly replaced by another, and indeed, devotes considerable attention to the “anti-Cartesian” opposition. Of course, there is a price to pay for this. Thus, we find him arguing for change in rather ambivalent terms: “The Year of the Animal transformed this [“French animalism”] worldview, although the results were ambiguous.... Classical naturalism was not to triumph entirely, and the apotheosis of Descartes in France during the 1690s was tempered by continued resistance to the beast-machine” (p. 359). Just a little further, Sahlins notes that regarding the question of animals’ souls, after 1668 “most of France was anti-Cartesian” (p. 360). In this sense, it is perhaps more useful to think of the mechanical philosophy, and not just Descartes, as producing divergent ways to conceptualize animals. But this would put a strain, I believe, on thinking of the changes in terms of a shift in a “worldview,” even among a limited intellectual and cultural elite, as Sahlins sometimes does.

In fact, when trying to fit other cases into the patterns, it is not always easy to see the shift Sahlins discusses at work. To take one example: Charles-Georges Le Roy (1723-1789), who came from a family of functionaries in charge of the hunt at Versailles, and himself became *commandant des gardes-chasses* in 1753 and *lieutenant des chasses* in 1760. Le Roy was also an aspiring *philosophe* and published books on animal behavior. In disagreement with authors such as Buffon and Helvétius, Le Roy argued for animal intelligence based on his experience with animals at

Versailles. He even developed a vision of society that denied a radical break between humans and animals, while highlighting a social line of demarcation between enlightened farmers and simple peasants.[2] For someone like Le Roy, who lived after this shift supposedly became entrenched and who made his career at the center of gravity for the elite attitudes that Sahlins describes, the relations between animals and humans certainly looked like a case of “humanimalism” modulated in an Enlightenment-style political economy key.

It seems to me that there is wider issue here, relating to the way Sahlins writes cultural history. Since Sahlins is concerned with recognizing complex patterns of meaning, he chooses labels that seem to capture the main traits of the patterns and uses them as frameworks for empirical materials. This is how we get “absolutism” and “Cartesianism” as organizing principles for a book that traces the shadows cast by Louis XIV and Descartes (Sahlins’s choice of an image) in the cultural sphere. However, I think that this procedure, which is perhaps unavoidable with the set of assumptions that Sahlins postulates, can sometimes be limiting. Let me say outright that this is perhaps a result of the fact that I have done research on these same topics—I have even published an article on the three chameleons, generously quoted by Sahlins—from a different perspective.[3]

If meaning is actively produced by authors, painters, spectators, readers, and numerous types of mediators active in the cultural sphere, a morphological approach that classifies artifacts can only partially account for the way a cultural shift happens. It has little to say, for example, about how consumers changed their views, what made new cultural forms resonate, and even what should count as part of a cultural pattern and what should be considered exceptional, as the brief example of Charles-Georges Le Roy shows. It seems to me that relying on a more socially inflected approach to the production of meaning would be helpful here, but such a perspective would need to address a range of other subjects: close study of authorial practices, forms of sociability, publishing strategies, and changing patterns of the consumption of meaning. Under such a different set of assumptions, labels such as “Cartesian” or “anti-Cartesian” do not do justice to the way early modern authors, readers, and spectators produced meaning. Such labels are therefore useful up to a point for explaining the cultural shift addressed in this book. Claude Perrault, for example, certainly reacted to Cartesian ideas regarding the soul of animals, but it appears to me that discussions that try to classify him as a Cartesian or anti-Cartesian rather miss the mark. Personally, I looked for a different way to examine his work and the institutional context in which he produced it: the skills he accumulated, the networks he wove, and the types of intellectual work enabled by the new Academy of Sciences created under Colbert.[4] There is something paradoxical in the fact that the attempt to classify authors as a way to chart the long shadow cast by Descartes ends up by uncovering numerous non-Cartesians. This strikes me as evidence that we should look elsewhere to understand how cultural and intellectual production worked in the period and that focusing on actual links is a good way to deal with the problems associated with classificatory schemes.[5]

The problem seems to me embedded in the very assumptions that lie at the basis of this type of cultural history. For a book that seeks to follow the shadow cast by Louis XIV and Descartes on the way human-animal relations were conceived, we are given but meager admission to their influence as it was transmitted in practice. Descartes was of course dead by this time, but beyond the xenotransfusion affair and the near-simultaneous reburial of Descartes’s bones in Paris, we hear little about the people who became committed Cartesians and created a public for his ideas. I

believe we need to bring Descartes's influence into much sharper focus if we are to assess it correctly. There could be sharp divergences between people who held views that could be associated with Descartes and men and women who self-identified as "Cartesians." [6] As a matter of fact, even in the xenotransfusion affair, the main protagonist who followed Descartes, Jean Denis, held to moralizing views regarding the blood of animals, which "must have less impurity than that of men, for debauchery and derangement in drinking and eating are not as common as among us" (quoted on p. 258). Should he be considered a real "Cartesian" or not? Something similar could be noted for Louis XIV. His presence in the book and his contribution to the argument are mostly symbolic, centered on the choice between Versailles and Vincennes and the different types of animal spectatorship they imply. Sahlins is mostly silent about actual decisions or actions taken by the king as a person, as opposed to his persona. He even scrupulously notes facts regarding the king that can seem to militate against his thesis, such as Louis XIV's growing affection for his hunting dogs (p. 239), in contrast to their symbolic roles under the regime of "classical naturalism."

I have dwelt on the distance between the symbolic elements that Sahlins highlights and the way they were produced in practice because I think there is an issue here that warrants further discussion. The "Animal Moment" of the 1660s neatly conforms to a re-organization of the French monarchy's cultural apparatus under the responsibility of the minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert, who took control of patronage of the arts and letters and created several new academies, among them the Academy of Sciences so present in this book. Many of the authors studied in this work took part in this re-organization, whether as new recruits by Colbert, such as the Perrault brothers, or as former protégés of the deposed minister Nicolas Fouquet, such as La Fontaine. This raises the question of the relations between the new representation of animals and the new context of their production. Does the "animal moment" reflect a shift in worldview or simply a change in the way such representations were produced and circulated? I'm not sure that there is a simple answer to this question, but it seems to me that this is an example of how focusing on the cultural patterns themselves limits our way of understanding this moment in terms that could amplify rather than qualify Sahlins's argument.

A final point should be made about the relation between this book and the civilizing process, as outlined by Norbert Elias. Sahlins draws on Elias explicitly, particularly in his analysis of the Versailles menagerie. The peaceful animals housed there, in contrast to Vincennes, purportedly symbolized the civilized behavior required of courtiers at Versailles. This means that the civilizing process has an animal dimension that has been unduly neglected. If we are to draw on Elias's work to understand court society and its relation to broader social and psychological change, however—and there are certainly powerful dissenting voices—the complexity of Elias's model probably needs to be addressed more fully. [7] At its core, the court functions for Elias as a site of tight face-to-face society, whose daily routines revolved around high-intensity conflict for status and privilege and in which the ambitious always had to carefully calculate their behavior and be on watch against those of the lower ranks. The code for "civilized behavior" served as an organizing principle for conflict, even as its elements were internalized by the protagonists. [8] Even if the king had wanted to inculcate "civilized" behavior in his entourage, most courtiers depicted by Elias would have hardly recognized themselves in the graceful, peace-loving cranes, and perhaps Vincennes, with its combats to the death, would have served them better as a model. Yet beyond the literary description analyzed in chapter two, *1668: The Year of the Animal* provides scant

substantive discussion of the actual use of the menagerie as a model for courtiers, or even visitors. This is especially curious, because for most of the actual visitors to Versailles, the menagerie and the labyrinth—taken in the book as displaying contrasting models for the meanings attributed to animals—were probably viewed consecutively. In this sense, even the design of the palace and gardens did not try to harmonize such conflicting meanings attributed to animals.

I have dwelt on these tensions, some of which are admittedly partly extraneous to Sahlins's framing of the argument, not because I am trying to claim he should have written a different book but rather because I seek to suggest that Sahlins has taken on a high-risk task. Identifying the shift for which he argues requires overcoming several hurdles: convincing readers that the patterns are meaningful (in the sense that they have a certain internal rhyme and reason); showing that they resonate, at least within a specific milieu, and that the exceptions to the rule—all those anti-Cartesians or those who hold to “older” attitudes towards animals—do not actually represent the more prevalent worldview; and placing these patterns against the backdrop of longer-term cultural change. Indeed, Sahlins notes in passing that the twelfth century might have seen a similarly “strong” animal moment, without offering much comment on the implications of this idea for his study (p. 46). But if the longer-term meanings attributed to human-animal relations are to go beyond a-historical perspectives, which after all, can tolerate occasional changes, if they can be seen as “noise” or shifts around an “average mean,” we need to be able to anchor significant shifts in their concrete historical contexts as well as to place them against the backdrop of long-term processes. Sahlins has treated these problems with keen insight and rich empirical detail, but I suspect that for these reasons, some readers will be left unconvinced by the broad argument of the book.

Ultimately, this is a book that ought to be cherished. It is a brilliant interpretation of a cultural moment and a virtuoso performance. As such, its value is not altogether dependent on the degree to which the reader is convinced of its main argument. In keeping with the best traditions of writing early modern history, it does not hesitate to ask really big questions, and it tackles these questions with erudition, acuity, and verve. It deserves to be read by a wide audience, where it is sure to generate invaluable discussion.

NOTES

[1] See especially Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington, 2 vols. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2009-2011).

[2] Grégory Quenet, *Versailles, une histoire naturelle* (Paris: La Découverte, 2015), 140-155.

[3] Oded Rabinovitch, “Chameleons between Science and Literature: Observation, Writing, and the Early Parisian Academy of Sciences in the Literary Field,” *History of Science* 51 (2013): 33-62.

[4] Oded Rabinovitch, *The Perraults: A Family of Letters in Early Modern France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), chapter six and see p. 122 for further references. Perhaps needless to say, this book was published after Sahlins had finished writing his own.

[5] In spite of the different subject matter it treats, I have been especially influenced here by Maurizio Gribaudo and Alain Blum, “Des catégories aux liens individuels: l’analyse statistique de l’espace social,” *Annales E.S.C.* 45 (1990): 1365-1402.

[6] Sahlins touches on this issue on pp. 30-31. See for example, Erica Harth, *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); Stéphane Van Damme, *Descartes. Essai d’histoire culturelle d’une grandeur philosophique* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2002); Christopher Braider, *The Matter of Mind: Reason and Experience in the Age of Descartes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

[7] Jeroen Duindam, *Myths of Power: Norbert Elias and the Early Modern European Court* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994) offers a model for a powerful and cogent critique.

[8] For example: “For given the tensions by which this social system was both riddled and maintained, every link within it was incessantly exposed to attack by lower or almost equal-ranking competitors who ... sought to bring about shifts in etiquette and so in the order of rank,” Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 88.

Oded Rabinovitch
Tel Aviv University
odedra@post.tau.ac.il

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