

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Colin Jerolmack, *The Global Pigeon*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, 274 pp., \$27.50 paperback (978002088)

A number of years ago I had a colleague who proposed and taught a course entitled “Pets and Society.” Reactions in the department were varied. Many were amused. Some saw this as little more than an extension of this colleague’s deep regard for her own cats and dogs as well as an extension of her specific interest in intimacy among humans. Then there those colleagues whose reaction bordered on hostile as they thought there were more pressing issues for examination by an enlightened practitioner of the sociological imagination. Since then, much has changed and her interest in human/nonhuman animal interaction has seemingly taken off. Off the top of my head the following come to mind starting with Clinton Sanders on human/canine interaction, *Understanding Dogs* to the recently published, *Buzz*, on urban beekeeping by Lisa Jean Moore and Mary Kosut. It is in this context that I cannot say enough good about Colin Jerolmack’s, *The Global Pigeon*.

But pigeons? For the most part, we hardly give them a second thought, especially those of us who live in, near, or around, urban areas; even then, only when they defecate on us directly or on a valued item of clothing. This is where Jerolmack’s work begins. As he states in the book’s first sentence, “I never paid much attention to pigeons until one defecated on me” (p. 1). From that moment he is off on a world-wide excursion in which pigeon/human interactions become a site for a wide-ranging problematic as he develops his broader theme of the place of animals in urban life. It is truly, not metaphorically, a world tour, not just a tour of social worlds. But it is that, too.

This book takes flight in New York City, but then it is off to London, Venice, Berlin, Brooklyn, and South Africa all the while paying close ethnographic attention to the particular ways and activities of engaging pigeons in each locale. What begins as what could have been a stand alone study in interaction in public places blossoms into a wildly interesting foray across multiple sites and situations. Jerolmack has cast his net wide as he travels the domains of interaction from the sociability that emerges among strangers when feeding pigeons in Father Demo Park in Brooklyn, the pigeon shops where enthusiasts gather, of course, paying

close attention to their banter, the expressions of ethnic and class solidarity in the Bronx and Berlin, the contest over feeding the pigeons in the tourist centres of London and Venice, the politics of excluding pigeons based on nuisance and health considerations, while other species, mostly chickens and bees, become cherished as urban places take up the banners of “greening” and “sustainability” of a gentrifying middle-class in these formerly working class ethnic neighbourhoods. Of course, there are issues of race and class that are very present here as well, and they are not ignored. This is particularly palpable in the interaction between older Italians, Puerto Ricans, and blacks in New York as ethnic and racial slurs often enter into the conversation, yet collaboration in the fancying of pigeons continues.

This is all put together under a theoretical discussion of human/non-human interaction, the meanings of nature and urban life and the place of nonhuman animal life in this frame and, of course, the “imagined geography” of nonhuman animals banished from this domain versus what Jerolmack would see as the actuality of species hybridity in urban settings. In his final empirical chapter Jerolmack brings all this together with an analysis right out of Clifford Geertz’s “Balinese Cockfight,” that is particularly powerful in the case of the South African Million Dollar Pigeon Race, a postapartheid event meant to convey notions of equality and meritocracy in the new South Africa. However, being the commercial event that it is and the scale of its staging, reproducing standing patterns of inequality and rationalization have become the order of the day.

Through out the exposition of his data the writing is superb. It is not a hyperbolic stretch for me to write that there were times when reading this book I thought I was reading one of those well-crafted and engaging nonfiction pieces in any number of one of those periodicals geared toward a culturally informed audience. The real test for this, as far as I am concerned, is the way an author handles describing the more mundane, or what might be described as “the dirty work” associated with the activity under investigation. Jerolmack describes the tedium of maintaining a flock of pigeons with chore after chore including the cleaning of fecal matter from the coops. As one of his pigeon enthusiasts, Joey puts it, “I love the birds. I don’t like the cleanup but that’s part of anything” (p. 99).

Just a quick comment on the photographs included. I wish that there had been more of them, and that more had been made of them as they seem to have the potential to be more than illustrative. This is just a wish in the manner that book reviewing always involves, whether acknowledged or not by reviewers, some manner of projection of how they might have done the book differently.

In a manner echoing the experience with my former colleague mentioned above, some of my present colleagues have condescendingly chuckled at the presence of this book on my desk. “Go ahead and chuckle. Read it,” I reply. This response on my part is provoked by three things. First, it seems as though some never learned the fundamental message of introductory/general sociology, that there can be a sociology of anything, you just need the right angle on it. Jerolmack is certainly on the mark here as he employs a well conceptualized variety of interpretive schemes to unpack his case. Second, we seem to be living in an era when the phrase “the sociological imagination” is bandied about in some of the most insipid and bland ways from introductory textbooks to conference titles. This book captures a real sense of that imagination, and while not all sociologists or students will be interested in either pigeons or more generally human/nonhuman animal interaction and the social worlds that surround them, it should be given a close read by all who have an interest in promulgating said imagination. This book embodies the themes of the intersection of history and biography, structure and milieu, and troubles and issues. Third, we also hear so much talk about placing our work in a global context. Fair enough. However, more often than not this context is invoked rather than examined; and furthermore, no matter how globally extensive a process or structure may be, it also lands in specific locales, and Jerolmack has been there to record the events. It should go without saying that *The Global Pigeon* is well perched on all counts.

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