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1668 The year of the animal in France

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The Eternal Animal
Peter Sahlins
1668

THE YEAR OF THE ANIMAL IN FRANCE

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Peter C. Mancall

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Like every year before and afterwards, 1668 was a year of animals. In France, as in most other places, people relied on domesticated animals for food, energy and companionship. They shared their urban and rural environments with wild animals, some of whom they regarded as tasty, others as inimical. Less frequently, they admired collections of rare and exotic animals. The most notable such assemblage in late seventeenth-century France was the recently established royal menagerie at Versailles. Its inhabitants, along with their reflections in culture and politics, provide the basis for Peter Sahlins's claim that 1668 was the Year of the Animal (the phrase is frequently repeated and consistently capitalized). More precisely (but perhaps not much more precisely), he connects them with the shift from what he terms "Renaissance humanimalism" to "Classical naturalism" in the cultural realm, and from what he terms "Absolutism 1.0" to "Absolutism 2.0" in the authoritarian style of Louis XIV. Like all historians, Sahlins knows that fixing an exact date for something as nebulous as a major cultural shift is problematic. And he also makes clear that he understands the year of 1668 to have been an unusually long one. He employs it as a kind of synecdoche for an extended period, specified variously as lasting, for example, from 1661 to 1669 and from 1664 to 1674. The phrase "the Year of the Animal" similarly functions as a shorthand explanation for changes that stretched far beyond the palace of Versailles.

The menagerie at the palace of Versailles formed part of the elaborate gardens designed for Louis XIV by André Le Nôtre. The menagerie itself was not a novelty; at the time that it received its first tenants in late 1665, collections of wild animals had graced regal establishments in Europe and elsewhere for centuries, if not millennia. In addition to its design, what distinguished the Versailles menagerie was its selection of species. Birds greatly outnumbered mammals, and the ferocious carnivores that, then as now, formed the highlight of traditional menageries were excluded (at least the larger ones were). Little direct evidence about the assembly and maintenance of the animal collection has survived, but many visitors recorded their impressions of the swans, cranes, flamingos, parrots, ostriches and other avian species. Sahlins argues that, adopting the perspective of Renaissance humanimalism or theriophilia, Louis XIV selected beautiful and apparently peaceful birds to serve as models for civilized human behaviour, while the spectacular and profuse display simultaneously emphasized his own pre-eminent power and authority. (The king appears to have been in two minds about the message to be conveyed by captive wild

animals, however, since at about the same time he maintained another menagerie, at Vincennes. Like its royal predecessors, it housed iconic carnivores like lions, leopards and wolves, and it emphasized their ferocity by staging animal baits and animal combats.)

Sahlins chronicles diverse ways in which the Versailles birds and mammals exerted more general influence. The accounts of visiting writers like Mademoiselle de Scudéry and Jean de La Fontaine conveyed the menagerie's civilizing message to a broader audience, and published engravings disseminated images of the elegant, allegedly courtly birds. The animals also figured as inspiration for cultural productions with increasingly tenuous connections to their physical selves. Woven into the borders of the "Les mois" series of Gobelins tapestries, designed for Louis XIV, their images were converted into luxury objects. Sahlins interprets the transformation from living creature, via drawing, to tapestry as demonstrating a shift away from an allegory of human behaviour and towards a naturalized embodiment of royal power (although this could also be understood as the shift from one kind of allegory to another). The monarch's tastes also influenced less decorative representations. The corpses of animals from the Versailles menagerie, along with those from Vincennes and elsewhere, provided valuable specimens for dissection by the anatomists of the Royal Academy of Sciences, who created verbal and visual records of their investigations. When their results were prepared for publication, however, it turned out that the wish of the academicians for a relatively modest format, which might be accessible to less fortunately situated colleagues, were trumped by the desire of their royal patron for a more sumptuous product.

If *The Year of the Animal* was inspired by the Versailles menagerie, it also embraced such tenuously connected endeavours as the physiognomical explorations of the painter Charles Le Brun. His juxtapositions of human and non-human faces tended to feature domesticated animals and other mammals, rather than birds, and, in contrast to the allegory embodied in the menagerie, his images strongly suggested that cross-specific resemblances reflected badly on people. Sahlins understands Le Brun's work as illustrating the trend away from theriophilia, and towards a more realistic or naturalistic view of animals. This trend was also evident in discussions of the "mechanism" of René Descartes, which, in the decades since his death in 1650, had sparked widespread interest. Sahlins uses two fascinating examples to illustrate how complex and often inconsistent were contemporary responses and understandings. Because blood was believed to possess curative properties, xenotransfusion (transfusion between individuals of different species, mostly but not exclusively non-human) was a compelling subject for research, although (unsurprisingly from our perspective) experimental attempts proved disappointing at best. (Paris was not the only location for such experiments; for example, the Royal Society in London witnessed a similar procedure in 1667.) These experiments provoked controversy and criticism, and not only because of their potentially catastrophic outcome; also at stake was the relationship between humans and other animals, and especially the question of whether, or to what extent, their possession of a soul made people

distinctive. An alternative, and politically less fraught, arena for such discussion was provided by three chameleons whose brief residences in Paris offered variously interpreted evidence of their enjoyment or lack of an emotional life. (For an interpretation of several of these episodes from the perspective of a distinguished historian of science, see Anita Guerrini's *The Courtiers' Anatomists: Animals and humans in Louis XIV's Paris*, (2015))

If the Versailles menagerie displayed and represented animals as models for human society – characterized by grace and beauty and harmony, if also by limits and confinement – the labyrinth embodied a very different view. Completed in 1674, it included numerous fountains adorned with animal sculptures. Many of the sculptures illustrate episodes taken from Aesop's *Fables*; the animals (including birds, but not such a preponderance as in the menagerie, and of more predatory species) are often in conflict, representing the bestiality that is also a part of human nature. Sahlins connects this transition from Renaissance humanimalism to Classical naturalism within the garden to a transition or intensification of absolutism in the political sphere. But he also recognizes that, although his overall argument propounds these shifts as straightforward evolutions, what he has actually demonstrated is rather different. His analysis of animal-related cultural productions is full of detail, and, as is their wont, the details illustrate recurrent ambivalence, confusion and self-contradiction. They show that not only were the transitions incomplete, but that most of the actors had feet in at least two camps.

In *Nature and Culture in the Early Modern Atlantic*, Peter Mancall provides a much larger context for the profusion of understandings that Sahlins chronicles. Focusing on the previous century and the other side of the Atlantic, he offers a brief, elegant account of the environmental understandings of both the Europeans who came to settle and exploit the resources of North America and the Caribbean, and the native groups who were already doing those things. He argues that, in the course of the century, these understandings shifted from predominantly religious to predominantly secular. He uses four examples to illustrate this transition, as well as the convergence of American and European perspectives. Thus he demonstrates that both European explorers and indigenous Americans believed that monsters might live beyond the range of their geographical experience, although Americans were more flexible in adjusting those boundaries. Seventeenth-century cartography might have been deficient in accuracy, but map illustrations vividly indicated the approximate location of valuable natural resources, as well as the progress of the "Columbian Exchange" (a term coined by Alfred Crosby to describe the exchange of flora, fauna and disease organisms across the North Atlantic). Although Europeans often described the lands they desired as pristine, and used the assertion that the previous inhabitants had not really exploited them as the basis for possession, engraved images of indigenous farming, fishing and other economic activities could reveal a very different perception. Finally, he shows that accounts of North American insects incorporated knowledge derived from American as well as European observers. The nature of the surviving sources underlines the difficulty of attempting to inte-

grate non-European perspectives into accounts of the early colonial period. But as Mancall shows, imaginative scrutiny may reveal evidence that has gone unnoticed. And difficulty notwithstanding, it is certainly an attempt worth making.

All four of Mancall's examples rely heavily and persuasively on visual evidence. Like *1668*, which similarly emphasizes the visual, *Nature and Culture in the Early Modern Atlantic* features illustrations large enough to reward examination and underlining their role as integral components of the argument.