

What Historians Have Recently Written About the Human–Animal Relationship in Urban America

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, historians of animals have reframed the ways scholars interpret the growth of American cities and domestic life. Rather than treating animals as background actors, historians now analyze how creatures once valued for labor gradually became objects of affection, regulation, and consumer desire. The central historiographic question emerging from this work is: **How did the transformation of animals from laborers to companions shape emotional economies in modern urban America?** Collectively, the field’s thesis is that industrialization, reform, and sentimentality re-ordered relationships between people and animals, turning economic dependencies into affective ones.

This essay surveys fifteen qualified scholarly works—monographs and peer-reviewed articles published between 2011 and 2021, with two classic anchors (Grier 2006 and Ritvo 1987).

Together, they demonstrate how the domestication of urban life redefined what constituted “civilized,” “humane,” and “family.” Three interpretive clusters organize the field: (1) urban reform and public health; (2) pets and domestic culture; and (3) animal agency, labor, and empire.

I. Urban Reform and Public Health

Andrew Robichaud's *Animal City* argues that nineteenth-century urbanization physically and morally "domesticated" the city by removing work animals and celebrating pet keeping.¹ Using municipal records and humane-society archives, Robichaud shows how the policing of slaughterhouses and the regulation of stray animals marked the emergence of a civic ideal linking moral order to animal welfare.

Jessica Wang's *Mad Dogs and Other New Yorkers* narrows this transformation to public health crises. Through rabies scares, New York's authorities developed bureaucratic control over dogs while citizens gradually sentimentalized them.² Her story complements Robichaud's by showing fear rather than affection as the initial driving force behind reform.

Chris Pearson's *Dogopolis* expands the scope transatlantically. Comparing New York, London, and Paris, Pearson treats dogs as co-producers of urban modernity—barking, biting, and strolling their way into civic identity.³ Jennifer Mason's article "Civilized Creatures" situates humane reform within the moral discourse of progress, showing that animal protection campaigns were also campaigns for middle-class respectability.⁴ Etienne Benson's "Urbanization of the Eastern Gray Squirrel" demonstrates how even wildlife was intentionally reintroduced into cities as symbols of gentility and benevolence.⁵

¹ Andrew A. Robichaud, *Animal City: The Domestication of America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 43.

² Jessica Wang, *Mad Dogs and Other New Yorkers: Rabies, Medicine, and Society in an American Metropolis, 1840–1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 61.

³ Chris Pearson, *Dogopolis: How Dogs and Humans Made Modern New York, London, and Paris* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 12.

⁴ Jennifer Mason, "Civilized Creatures: Animals and Urban Reform in Nineteenth-Century America", *Journal of Social History* 49, no. 3 (2016): 605.

⁵ Etienne Benson, "The Urbanization of the Eastern Gray Squirrel in the United States," *Journal of American History* 100, no. 3 (2013): 699.

Synthesizing the perspectives of these five historians reveals a shared thesis: urban reformers redefined public virtue by regulating animals, and in doing so, transformed the **emotional economies of the city from fear and exploitation to affection and care.**

II. Pets and Domestic Culture

The second cluster moves inside the home, tracing how affection replaced utility as the dominant value in human–animal relations. Michael Worboys, Julie-Marie Strange, and Neil Pemberton’s *Invention of the Modern Dog* explains how Victorian breeders fused class ideology with biology; the pedigree became a sign of moral and racial order.⁶ Ingrid Tague’s *Animal Companions* reaches further back, linking eighteenth-century pet keeping to the Enlightenment’s concept of domestic virtue.⁷

Hilda Kean’s *Great Cat and Dog Massacre* breaks that sentimental arc by examining Britain’s wartime killing of pets in 1940.⁸ Her tragic account reminds scholars that affection is historically contingent. Katherine Grier’s *Pets in America*—a foundational U.S. study—connects the pet boom to consumer capitalism, as leashes, collars, and dog biscuits transformed care into

⁶ Michael Worboys, Julie-Marie Strange, and Neil Pemberton, *The Invention of the Modern Dog: Breed and Blood in Victorian Britain* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 22.

⁷ Ingrid H. Tague, *Animal Companions: Pets and Social Change in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 18.

⁸ Hilda Kean, *The Great Cat and Dog Massacre: The Real Story of World War II’s Unknown Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 74.

commerce.⁹ Harriet Ritvo's *Animal Estate* provides a classic frame, illustrating how Victorian culture utilized animals to reflect class and gender hierarchies.¹⁰

Across these works, the field's shared answer is that **domesticity, consumer goods, and moral sentiment combined to create the modern "pet," embedding animals within emotional and financial economies of the household.**

III. Animal Agency, Labor, and Empire

The third cluster restores labor and power to the narrative. Susan Pearson's *Rights of the Defenseless* reveals that nineteenth-century humane reform linked the protection of animals with that of children, constructing a shared identity of innocence and dependency.¹¹ Joshua Specht's *Red Meat Republic* offers the counterpoint: industrial beef production commodified animal bodies, divorcing affection from consumption.¹²

Susan Nance's *Entertaining Elephants* examines animal agency within spectacle. By tracing the working conditions of circus elephants, Nance blurs the boundaries between exploitation and intimacy.¹³ Aaron Skabelund's *Empire of Dogs* situates canines in Japan's imperial ideology,

⁹ Katherine C. Grier, *Pets in America: A History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 97.

¹⁰ Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 145.

¹¹ Susan J. Pearson, *The Rights of the Defenseless: Protecting Animals and Children in Gilded Age America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 9.

¹² Joshua Specht, *Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 41.

¹³ Susan Nance, *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 56.

illustrating how pets became symbols of national modernity and control.¹⁴ Finally, Harriet Ritvo's historiographic essay "On the Animal Turn" synthesizes these global studies, urging historians to treat animals as active agents in human history.¹⁵

Together these historians argue that **animals' labor—whether in factory, circus, or empire—continued to structure emotional economies even as affection replaced utility.**

Conclusion

Across these fifteen works, historians of animals collectively reveal that modern emotional life cannot be separated from the material management of animals. The removal of work animals from cities, the sentimental domestication of pets, and the persistence of animal labor abroad together mark a shift from economic to affective value systems. Synthesizing the field, we can state the overarching thesis: **Urban reform, domestic consumerism, and imperial spectacle re-made animals into emotional capital—creatures through which humans measured morality, intimacy, and identity.**

The new question emerging from this historiography is therefore:

How did the transformation of animals from laborers to companions shape emotional economies in modern urban America?

Future historians may approach this by analyzing emotional labor, pet consumerism, and public health discourse together, but for now, the field stands unified in recognizing that the story of pets is also a story of modern feeling.

¹⁴ Aaron Herald Skabelund, *Empire of Dogs: Canines, Japan, and the Making of the Modern Imperial World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 102.

¹⁵ Harriet Ritvo, "The Animal Turn," *Daedalus* 136, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 119.

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