

Amir Zelinger

Burghers and Pets: A Beastly History of Imperial Germany

In my dissertation project I attempt to contribute to the nascent field of animal history that has been experiencing a rapid upswing in recent years. Envisioned as part of the more general socio-cultural field of human-animal studies (HAS), its purpose is to craft an inquiry into the role of a distinct category of animals, viz. pets, in a specific modern society, namely that of Imperial Germany. By virtue of the social-historical treatment of pets, there lies at the focus of the exploration a kind of cohabitation of human and non-human beings in a quintessentially modern world, wherein such cohabitation was seemingly dissolving.

Concentrating on a setting bounded in time and space—large German cities in the years between 1871 and 1914—my dissertation seeks to understand how pets were integrated into the new social constellations that the radical transformations of mass urbanization and industrialization had brought about. This general question is meant to be answered by investigating day-to-day relations and other practical modes of communication between people and their “companion animals” as well as between different people, groups and organizations that were engaged in the activity of pet-keeping; special attention is accorded hereby to elements such as emotions, family contacts and cultural distinctions.

On a different level, my dissertation research looks at the various measures state and municipal authorities took in their efforts to regulate the practice of keeping pets and to control the “bestial” presence of these animals in modern, “highly civilized” urban spaces—an environment where such a presence was not wholeheartedly tolerated and a kind of “pet order” was sought. The role of civil society in the installation of this kind of order, namely the undertakings of breeding clubs, will be equally considered, in as much as these organizations pursued similar goals of control, regimentation and systematization of the pet universe. Combining these two perspectives—that of the private hobby-like activity and that of the disciplinizing administration of pet animals within the public sphere—I hope to illuminate in, an innovative manner, some of the political and social meanings of pet keeping, extending beyond its status as a mere leisure-time pursuit.