
Book Review: *Colonizing Animals: Interspecies Empire in Myanmar*

Colonizing Animals: Interspecies Empire in Myanmar, by Jonathan Saha. Cambridge University Press, 2022, xiv + 234 pages.

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The publication of the inaugural issue of *Animal History*, the first academic journal dedicated to the histories of animals and human-animal relationships, coming two decades after “Animals in History,” the first history conference to focus on animals (in 2005), seems like an opportune moment to take stock of the development of and suggest some new theoretical ideas for this burgeoning subfield. As if anticipating this prospect, *Colonizing Animals* provides a timely review and stimulating preview of possible approaches going forward. Author Jonathan Saha, who realized he had been overlooking the many animals who appear in archives as he re-read records from his earlier research on the Rangoon asylum (p. 13), brings a veteran historian’s able hand to the task. In clear, punchy prose, he adeptly assesses much of animal history’s historical and theoretical work over the past 20 years and makes some striking theoretical interventions that go well beyond the stories of colonizing and colonized people and other creatures in British Myanmar.

The interactions among these various actors form what Saha calls “interspecies empire.” Myanmar and the book are animated by nearly every imaginable animal—domesticated and wild and in liminal spaces in between, vertebrate and invertebrate, pets and pests, massive and microscopic—and Saha seems to consider every possible one, and their colonized and colonizing relationships with colonizing and colonized humans. In five topical chapters that roughly proceed chronologically from the East India Company’s

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imperial intrusions of the early 19th century to the Japanese invasion and British retreat in 1942, Saha examines the various material and figurative aspects of these relationships: the use of elephants and cattle for labor, the killing of animals, the affective nature of human-animal physical interactions, the metaphorical deployment of animals in anti-colonial discourse, and the material and symbolic roles of animals in the final decades of colonial rule. The textual and visual primary source evidence Saha deploys is as plentiful and diverse as the animals. In each chapter, Saha concisely and precisely evaluates the relevant literature, which allows him to survey an array of animal historiographies, and then conducts a close reading and examination of how the evidence from Myanmar sheds light on the particular issue. His analysis is informed, at nearly every turn, by his claims and related historical and theoretical insights, which are the product of archival research and engagement with post-humanist animal studies, postcolonial theory, and analyses of capitalism. Those observations are the book's most significant contribution.

Saha's main argument is that "interspecies relationships in Myanmar were transformed through the rapid and widespread commoditization of animal bodies during British rule" (p. 11). Before the topical chapters, Saha dedicates the entirety of chapter 1 to outlining two crucial concepts that he repeatedly applies in subsequent chapters. The first is the idea of "undead capital." By this notion, which he constructs in conversation with Karl Marx, Donna Haraway, and Nicole Shukin, Saha is referring primarily to working animals that are "rendered into undead capital" (à la Shukin) by the colonial state and imperial enterprises as "both living and dead: living in Haraway's sense that their capacities as sentient actors are intrinsic to their value but dead in the Marxian sense that they represent past labour spent and demand continuous labour to produce value" (p. 35). The second concept Saha cleverly crafts, which is derived from biopolitics and which he does not give a name, is a process that designates animals as subjects, as objects, and as abject. How animals (including humans) were differentiated, he stresses, was the result of the power relationships of colonial rule (p. 45).

Saha's concluding chapter is as bold—and thoughtful—as what came before. There, he turns from the past to the present and the future. As in the introduction, he invokes Erica Fudge's influential, two-decade-old essay in *Representing Animals* (2002), and calls for animal history to—in the face of ecological crisis—again become a radical practice by abandoning the "politics of negation" (p. 188). In closing, citing the current precarious state of working elephants and the persecution of Muslim Rohingya as owners of cattle slaughterhouses in Myanmar, Saha expresses hope that a more complete and nuanced understanding of the exclusionary and commoditizing forces of colonial animal history will lead to a more inclusionary and emancipatory future. ■

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