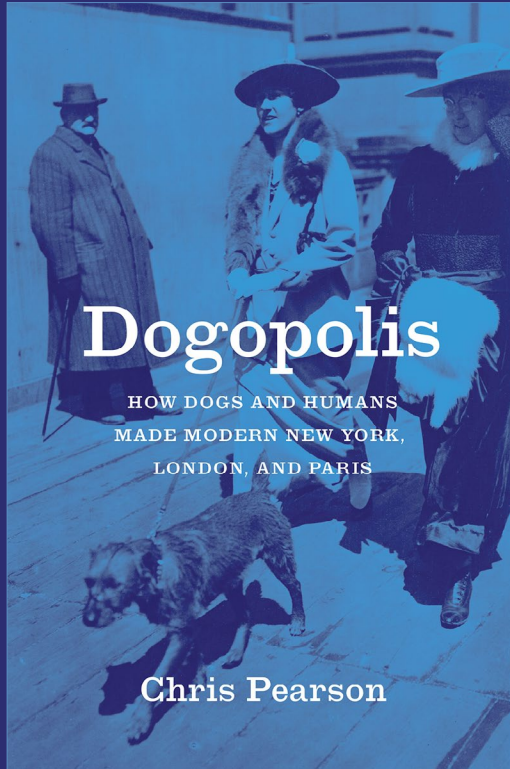


BOOK REVIEW

Caring and Coping in the City of Dogs

Philip Howell



Review of:

Chris Pearson, *Dogopolis: How Dogs and Humans Made Modern New York, London, and Paris*. Animal Lives. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2021. 259 pp.; 21 illus. \$24.00 (pb), \$95.00 (hb).

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Chris Pearson's *Dogopolis* is both an excellent introduction to the history of dogs in the modern Western city and a substantial contribution to that history in its own right. *Dogopolis* covers some topics that are relatively well known to historians of animal–human relations in modern times, such as the controversy over vivisection in Britain and the battle against rabies in Britain, France, and the US, but he also introduces much less familiar themes, such as the abortive introduction of police dogs and the beginning of the war against dog mess. There is no better guide than Pearson to the ways in which dogs were caught up in the civic dialogue of modern western societies.

Most notably, Pearson offers a transnational urban history of dogs rather than sticking to the national frames that are still far more common in animal history. Paris, London, and New York stand in for the modern West — a period ranging from the early nineteenth century to the beginning of the Second World War — and Pearson makes a compelling case for a municipal confrontation with common canine problems. He argues that the result of these scientific, administrative, and popular deliberations was “dogopolis”, an entirely new model of human–canine relations that includes dogs in urban life, under specific conditions and at a certain cost. The great utility of Pearson’s history is to show how things that we think of as familiar and largely uncontentious, such as the presence of dogs in our cities, are the result of a long history of debates and practices. Some of these interventions are obvious, such as sanitation and public health, but others are more obscure, taking in philosophical, cultural, and eminently political questions about the place of the dog in competing visions of urban and social improvement. There is nothing natural or inevitable about this; this was the product of “choice, contingency, and conflict” (2).

Pearson brings to the task a talent for clear and entertaining exposition, honed from his long-running blog on canine history (<https://sniffingthepast.wordpress.com/>). Familiar theoretical touchstones such as animal agency are glossed over as a result — dogs are prominent actors in “dogopolis”, but the focus is largely on how they are

imagined and represented in popular and political debates, particularly in the print media that Pearson relies upon. Where Pearson does venture into conceptual and theoretical discussion, it is via the history of emotion. In the substantive chapters, Pearson looks at the proliferation of emotions in societal reactions to the street dog and the dangerous and potentially rabid dog, these fears and anxieties being complemented by pity for the suffering animal, an appreciation of the dog's intelligence and how it might be harnessed in the pursuit of urban order, and the disgust at dog faeces in the city streets. I will consider these more carefully below, but it is worth stressing at the start that Pearson is reserved on how much further animal historians might go with the business of emotion. In an appendix (it is significant that Pearson chooses not to burden the main text with these methodological questions), Pearson notes that "I treat canine emotional experiences as elusive and beyond my grasp. Instead, I have examined how human actors understood canine emotions, how dogs affect humans emotionally, and how human emotions have transformed the lives of urban dogs in the West" (189). His argument, aligned with the mainstream history of emotions, is for the historical contingency of such emotions. That said, it is odd for Pearson to claim that animal historians "have tended to overlook this history of emotions" (190), and it is easy enough to point to the work on rabies (for instance) as at least a partial reproof. But the overall argument is clear enough: we will not understand the emergence of "dogopolis" without placing front and centre the importance of conflicted emotional reactions to the urban dog. It has become too familiar a refrain that animals are good to think with, but Pearson shows that feelings have played a more prominent role than ideas or theories in deciding the fate of dogs in our societies.

Chapter one, "Straying", considers the street dog. It is well appreciated that pet dogs were increasingly welcomed in the nineteenth-century West. They were sincerely mourned, as Pearson shows in his discussion of the pet cemeteries of Paris, New York, and London. But if pet keeping was "the acceptable furry face of human-canine relations" (42), the "mobile, diseased and disruptive" (17) stray became a problem on a par with streetwalkers, beggars,

and vagrants of all kinds. Pearson argues that street dogs were policed accordingly. True to its authoritarian reputation, Paris had the longest history of impounding (and subsequently slaughtering) stray dogs. New York was not far behind, with an auxiliary cadre of dog-catchers that lengthened the arm of the law. Pearson is excellent on the ways in which emotions were amplified by the efforts to take dogs off the streets in these three cities. Practices of impounding created their own problems, particularly in the unsatisfactory public spectacle of cruelty and suffering, making the pound a crucial site of conflict between lovers and loathers of dogs. Pearson accepts that London is somewhat different, given the central role of the Temporary Home for Lost and Starving Dogs (subsequently the Battersea Dogs' and Cats' Home). Here, there was at least the promise of a gentler solution to the problem of the stray, with dogs taking the more "innocent" role of homeless children. But as Pearson notes, the Dogs' Home also killed strays, salving the consciences of the tender-minded but ultimately serving the purposes of those who simply wanted dogs cleared off the streets. In this chapter, Pearson clearly emphasizes the seemingly paradoxical combination of love for lost dogs and antipathy towards street dogs.

Chapter two, "Biting", moves to society's greatest fear when it came to the presence of animals in the metropolis. Pearson notes that the lack of scientific consensus on rabies allowed some to attribute rabies' horrors to the supposed unstable temperament of dogs, their unsuitable treatment, including their sexual privation as pets, while dog lovers rallied to defend their favourites, playing down the dangers and exploring alternatives to the muzzle or, worse, summary destruction. There was also plenty of room for ambiguity over the identification of rabid dogs, and the proper treatment of those that were vulnerable. All the same, muzzling was a common policy in these three cities, if less harsh in New York and London than in Paris, and supplemented by quarantine policies. But Pearson argues that by the end of the nineteenth century more hostile and aggressive policies were in the offing everywhere, with more decisive support from the medical and veterinary and scientific establishment. In Pearson's account, Pasteur's treatment for rabies

offered hope, but the promise of “transnational Pasteurism” (66) was quickly met by dissent from those who opposed his methods or his science, falling back sometimes on the notion that emotional disturbance was at the root of the problem — this time in the unfortunate humans who contracted hydrophobia. But if Pasteurism whipped up the emotions in a potentially self-defeating manner, Pearson shows that it was an essential part of the civic inclusion of dogs: “Pasteur’s vaccine, greater surveillance of dogs, and muzzling had sufficiently blunted the effect of canine biting to allow dogs to be integrated into dogopolis” (82).

Canine suffering remained a divisive issue and, after a brief discussion of the post-Darwinian assessment of dogs’ emotional states, Pearson’s third chapter on “Suffering” explores the general theme of animal welfare and its politics. Violence against animals became increasingly unacceptable, or at least not acceptable in a public and unregulated sense. Where dogs were concerned, this sentiment was prominent in the heated debates over vivisection, and the possibilities for “humane” slaughter of street dogs and their like. The most obvious issue here, identified by many historians, is the unsavoury and demoralizing spectacle of animal killing. In the early days of “dogopolis”, Pearson tells us, dogs were administered their quietus as privately as possible: in the pounds in Paris (initially by hanging) and New York (drowning). But in London the Dogs’ Home eventually settled on euthanasia by poison gas, and asphyxiation became the favoured method transnationally. Pearson does not linger on the irony, but he demonstrates that by the turn of the century animal protection societies in all three cities had moved from protesting cruelty against dogs and their owners to effectively sanctioning large-scale “humane” killing. Debates about euthanasia continued into the twentieth century, but we could say that lethal chambers became the accepted price of “dogopolis”.

The title of the fourth chapter, “Thinking”, feels further off from the theme of emotion. Moreover, the focus is not on animals’ actual abilities or capacities, but on the representation of canine intelligence. Pearson’s arguments lead to a consideration of the history

of police dogs. This is, however, one of Pearson's most novel arguments: here, the longstanding antipathy between street dog and policeman transformed into a partnership, at least for a time. Pearson shows that police dogs were first introduced in Paris, while the bloodhound was given a long leash in London, closely followed by New York. Pearson's argument about transnational influence and urban emulation is particularly effective in this section, bolstered by the growing contemporary emphasis on dogs' innate intelligence and capacity to learn. That dogs were intelligent was accepted: but what kind of intelligence did dogs possess, and how reliable was this intelligence when dogs were made agents of the law? Pearson's history draws out the ambiguity of dogs' performance as animal adjuncts to policemen. On the one hand, dogs could be set to track and take down the worst urban criminals, the atavistic criminals whose animality and brutishness found an effective contrast to the now authorized dogs. On the other hand, police dogs' mistakes and unreliability were seized on by news media, and scepticism towards their abilities and intelligence led to Paris discontinuing their use after the First World War. Pearson concludes that it was only after the Second World War that police dogs became enduring features of dogopolis. It is salutary to learn that the all-purpose police dog of our own day had such a shaky start.

Finally, in the chapter on "Defecating", we turn to the business of dog mess. This chapter shifts to the twentieth century, which saw inaction in interwar Paris and more effective responses in New York and London, with private and municipal campaigns against the "dog nuisance". Disgust, of course, is central, but this is not just the immediate revulsion towards dog faeces. Rather, dog poo became noticeable, and thus more disgusting, as cities became more sanitary. For Pearson, earlier laissez-faire attitudes to canine defecation gave way to a pronounced concern for urban hygiene, and as horses disappeared and automobiles took their place, the problem of dog mess only became more visible and sensible generally. Dog mess was discovered, and "for a growing band of concerned observers, [it] was too disgusting for dogopolis" (165). The issue is of course still with us, and the emphasis on the responsibility of dog owners lies outside

the scope of Pearson's study, but he shows how acceptance of dogs was matched by disgust as well as fear.

What is most striking and valuable in *Dogopolis* is Pearson's focus on the connections and exchanges between London, Paris, and New York: a "canine transnationalism" or "canine cosmopolitanism" (8) that united middle-class dog lovers and urban reformers. Similarities between New York, London, and Paris outweighed the differences, and while more attention to these differences in policy and culture would have been welcome, this is a persuasive argument. Pearson is careful to specify that "dogopolis" is peculiar to the West, "a provincial rather than a universal manifestation of human-canine relatedness" (5). There are hints at the world beyond the West, nevertheless: the influence of the treatment of dogs in Constantinople on French SPA officials, for instance, which suggested that canine liberty was not as dangerous or unhygienic as others supposed, and that pet dogs were by contrast distinctly unhealthy. Importantly, Pearson also rightly recognizes that the provincial nature of "dogopolis" is bound up with racial histories, apparent in the notions of "breed", for instance, but also more heavily underscored by the use of dogs against people of colour. Pearson notes that bloodhounds were used to track enslaved men and women in the West Indies, and this colonial violence was transposed to American cities, police dogs being instruments of racialized brutality. Pearson's history thus stresses "the creation of dogopolis within Eurocentric notions of white superiority and progress" (37). These are striking and salutary sidelights in Pearson's instructive history of how caring for and coping with dogs transformed the modern city.