

**GRETA OLSON (2013) *CRIMINALS AS ANIMALS
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Animal Terror

The most recent terrorist attacks in Paris were duly condemned by political leaders throughout the world as 'bestial'. The self-proclaimed jihadist perpetrators were characterised as 'barbaric', and the Muslim policeman outside the *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters according to French television was shot 'like a dog'. Some days later, after *Charlie Hebdo* in its memorial issue had again used cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed on its title page, the discussion on UK television involved a representative from a Muslim organisation who said that as a result of this openly racist retaliation by the magazine (and arguably the French public more generally) Muslims all over the world felt 'dehumanised'.

What is going on here? This review certainly doesn't wish to condone either – the brutal killings, nor the predictable Islamophobic reactions that followed it and which are being exploited for all sorts of political agendas (from a defence of 'Western values' and first and foremost 'free speech', to a sanctioning of anti-immigration right-wing nationalism and a reconfirmation of state sovereignty in the face of globalisation). With some detachment it should be clear that this is an all too familiar *engrenage*, as you'd say in French – a figurative (conceptual) 'system of cogwheels' if you wish – that is both part of what used to be called 'common sense' but which is becoming increasingly destructive (Derrida [in Borradori 2003] would probably see it as another sign of an autoimmunitarian reaction of Western metaphysics and its humanist value system). This is where Greta Olson's substantial study of the use of animal metaphors in literary and legal texts becomes very relevant for us in our present conjuncture.

To begin with, it is worth quoting what in my view has been the clearest recent statement about what needs to change in ‘our’ (human) attitude towards nonhuman animal others, not only because of animal welfare but, precisely, to get out of the inhuman, or ‘speciesist’ *engrenage* described above:

As long as [the] humanist and speciesist *structure* of subjectivization remains intact, and as long as it is institutionally taken for granted that it is all right to systematically [including metaphorically] exploit and kill nonhuman animals simply because of their species, then the humanist discourse of species will always be available for use by some humans against other humans as well, to countenance violence against the social other of *whatever* species – or gender, or race, or class, or sexual difference. (Wolfe, 2003: 8)

In a similar vein, Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (already in 1988; English translation 1991) explain the essential ambiguity that relates universal humanism to nationalist, racist, classist etc. particularism:

In all these universals we can see the persistent presence of the same ‘question’: that of the difference between humanity and animality, the problematic character of which is re-utilized to interpret the conflicts within society and history [...] an ‘animal competition between the different degrees of humanity’. (1991: 57)

In short, the *engrenage* of the humanist speciesist discourse is not good for either human or nonhuman animals. The sooner we therefore rethink this relationship from a post-anthropocentric perspective, letting go of human exceptionalism, the sooner alternative politics will be found to accommodate differences that cut across human and nonhuman animals. And this is where Olson’s study can do a lot of good because it does invaluable work in historicizing this mechanism. It reminds us again (after Balibar and Wallerstein) not to forget the importance of class, and it also explains the underlying biologism of our entire legal apparatus largely developed in the nineteenth century, and its aftermath.

The persistent image of criminals as beasts (or the ‘criminal-animal metaphor’, as Olson names it), at least from the beginning of early

modernity, deliberately fuses animality, race and class to 'teriomorphise' certain humans. It thus helps to reify species divisions: 'normative humans do not partake in "beastly" crimes; animals and animalistic humans, by contrast, do' (1). This has of course political as well as legal implications, since calling a criminal an animal stresses the deviancy on the basis of which the full power of the law can be applied. Olson therefore tracks the 'ideological' use of the criminal-animal metaphor both through literary as well as legal texts to show its political impact in a Marxist sense, namely as an attempt to hide class issues, and in particular in relation to the criminalization of the poor during the conditions of emerging capitalism in late sixteenth-century Britain. As Olson states, the outcome of her detailed and extremely well documented analysis lies in the fact that '[t]he collocation of animality with crime thus worked to alleviate social anxieties about the perceived increase in crime and the vulnerability of law-abiding individuals. Signs of animality suggested that crime was integral in certain types of people and that their deviance was innate, for animals are born as such. To describe offenders in animal terms was to suggest that their criminal tendencies were without remedy' (3). The troublesome history of the real and metaphorical struggle between animality and humanity, the attempt to uphold and to police an impossible binary opposition between the two has been a constituent part of modernity. The criminal-animal trope is thus not just any metaphor, and it continues to serve to subjugate both animals, and through metaphorical animalisation, certain humans (very often, but not exclusively, the ones belonging to marginalized groups). Within the nascent humanist, universalist tendencies towards an understanding of essential and universally shared human values are therefore also structural possibilities for differentiation between humans through animalisation, criminalisation and stereotyping.

Olson's historical survey is situated at the same time within literary and cultural criticism as well as 'crime studies'. She begins with an in-depth analysis of early modern 'rogue literature' and pamphlets as a primary source for the representation of 'the criminal' and the modern 'fascination with criminal transgression' (40). In all major early modern pamphleteers – Harman, Greene and Dekker – she finds the use of negatively connoted animals, as for example, 'predatory caterpillars, vermin-like birds, parasitical lice, vipers, wandering dogs, and licentious pigs' (40), to characterise rogues. Moreover, she demonstrates the 'discursive and figurative overlap that occurs between aesthetic texts and legal phenomena' (41) and the general influence they had on early modern 'mentalities' to

anchor 'proto-biological prejudices about the essential quality of deviance' (44). Olson's approach is thus a solid intervention along the lines of an *Annales*-School history-of-mentality-informed literary criticism with a strong added Foucauldian counter-historical political thrust.

In her close readings she also stresses the multiplicity within the important genre of the rogue pamphlet by pointing out its conservative as well as subversive aspects in terms of an ambiguity and a critique towards nascent capitalism (80ff.). The rest of Part I of the book provides readings of 'criminal beasts' in early modern drama (*Richard III*, *The Duchess of Malfi* and Ben Jonson's comedies) – while Part II deals with the long eighteenth century and Part III is dedicated to the nineteenth century. Olson shows how the dominant functions of the criminal-animal trope are 'reified' in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Shakespeare's *Richard III* is an important and well documented case to show the association between physical abnormality, criminal behaviour and animalisation. Shakespeare thus 'uniquely blends images of exaggerated physicality with specific animals and crimes to create a character whose criminality is scripted onto his body' (86) and a 'proto-Lombrosian, animalistic "born criminal"' (105). Early modern drama and rogue literature can, that is Olson's original claim, be seen as 'prefigurations of late-nineteenth-century biological theories of crime' (105), which themselves followed a gradual acceptance of the Darwinian theory of evolution and arguably still form part of contemporary popular understandings of genetic 'tendencies' towards criminality. The other inevitable texts in early modern English drama are Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and Jonson's *Volpone*. While the *Duchess* introduces aspects of infection, degeneracy, madness, melancholy and the animalisation of female sexuality into the equation, Jonson's comedies 'function to illustrate specific criminal acts and to portray the absurdity of human greed' (132). In doing so they introduce a critique of an 'increasingly capitalist society in which the desire for material goods and money and the temptation to employ dishonest means to get them are evident' (144). There is thus considerable difference in the use of animal imagery within early modern texts – from 'sensationalist' to 'critical', so to speak: 'while the criminalization of poverty and placelessness represented the dominant function of criminal-animal tropes during this period, they and their ideological effects were never universally or unquestioningly adopted' (153).

The eighteenth century is usually seen as a shift towards a more rational and also more empathic treatment of both animals and criminals. Especially Bentham's insistence on the 'compassionate' character of the animal-human relationship (cf. his famous question regarding animals: 'can they suffer?') is taken as one of the turning points in animal welfare, at least as far as philosophy is concerned. Olson shows however that this comfortable narrative needs some serious qualifications. What she stresses instead is the continuity with the early modern period as far as usage of the criminal-animal metaphor is concerned. She does so by looking at the use of animal metaphors in colonialist discourse, and in key literary works like *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Caleb Williams*. What does occur in the eighteenth century is in fact a shift as far as the 'type of persons these tropes were used to figure derogatorily' is concerned. 'In critiques of violent public punishments and of blood sports, the new "brute" or "criminal animal" was conceived as a person who inflicted pain or took voyeuristic enjoyment in seeing it administered' (158). The result was that 'sympathizing with some individuals – the abused animal, the suffering prisoner, or the victim of a public execution – went hand in hand with the hardening or discriminatory attitudes towards others' (158). These 'others' were indeed often the poor and the ethnically different. As far as the human-animal binary is concerned, radical difference is increasingly replaced, through the influence of rationalism and emerging positivist science, by more sophisticated taxonomies and classifications. These also allowed the introduction of racial differences within the category of the human and facilitated 'cross-overs' between race and species that were motivated by colonialism, which needed a legitimation for 'the subjection of "inferior" human beings' (165).

Looking at *Robinson Crusoe*, Olson shows how the 'negative animal characters and disparaging animal topoi worked to further colonial discourse in the early eighteenth century' and how this 'reiterates the overwhelmingly disparaging attitudes towards animals that characterized the earlier period but projects them onto supposedly sub-standard, non-Christian humans' (166). Even if it is true that *Gulliver's Travels* can be seen as a 'testing of the animal-human boundaries', Olson warns of attempts to see the novel as a prefiguration of contemporary posthumanist critiques of speciesism, because this testing 'is not performed in the interest of upgrading the status of non-human animals' but to 'perform a general critique of efforts to define man in terms of reason', and in order to 'represent the worst aspects of animalistic humanity at large' (187). This

'meliorism' on the one hand is clearly connected to Swift's very conservative and 'brutal' attitude as a magistrate towards the 'undeserving poor' on the other hand – an aspect that Olson further explores in a reading of William Hogarth's *The Four Stages of Cruelty* under the heading 'Sympathizing with Animals and Denigrating the Lower Orders as Beasts' (189-215). The ambiguity that exists in anti-cruelty texts of the time is that they coincide with a strong 'disciplinary' character and use a language that 'had racialist undertones' and served 'colonialist ideology' (208).

Olson concludes her historical study of the changes of the 'criminal-animal metaphor' with the nineteenth century. What is characteristic of the development of the criminal-animal metaphor during this period is its further psychological, criminological and biological 'scientification'. 'Savagery' is increasingly seen as a hidden 'inner' trait only accessible to 'the professional observer – scientist, detective, or, later, criminologist' (245). Olson shows how Dickens's fictions, for example, despite their reformatory efforts, contributed, in the case of crime, to a 'proto-biological deterministic explanation of criminal actions and the solidification of prejudices about innate class differences' (250). What is striking is Dickens's fundamental ambiguity towards the poor: 'Dickens's efforts to decriminalize poverty and uncover the rhetoric that stigmatizes the poor as animalistic frequently goes hand in hand with assertions that actual criminal offenders are treated too leniently by comparison' (251). What complicates matters even more is the fact that Dickens adds metaphors of filth and disease into the picture, in line with a general Victorian displacement of social towards health-issues. The atavism of the Dickensian (and also Zola's) killers also anticipates later biologicistic portrayals of criminals both in fiction and, in Lombroso's case, in the nascent discipline of criminology.

The final chapter, consequently, is dedicated to Cesare Lombroso, founder of 'criminal anthropology' and an important figure of European positivist criminology. Olson's intricate argument regarding Lombroso is that his turn towards the 'atavistic born criminal' was indeed a return to 'ideological functions that were performed by criminal-animal metaphors in early modern rogue pamphlets and were refracted in contemporaneous plays and legal texts' (275). At the same time, she also shows how Lombroso influenced the notion of innate criminality in late nineteenth-century English and US American fiction (e.g. R.L. Stevenson, Conrad, Wells, Wilde, Conan Doyle and Frank Norris) and beyond. The effect of Lombroso's atavistic theory of criminality is

characterized by Olson as a ‘watershed in the history of the figurations of the “criminal animal”’ (276), because it firmly reinscribed the criminal-beast trope by mixing sensationalist style and scientific methods, and contributed to the wider shift towards the ‘pathologization’ of crime. Most importantly, Lombroso’s work ‘sought to turn professional interest away from determining an appropriate punishment for a given offense to the criminal individual her- or himself’ (280). This was tainted with barely disguised undertones of racist, speciesist and ethnic prejudice that helped underpin Western imperialism ideologically.

The effects of this shift are still with us today, which can be seen in many popular representations of criminals in the media for example. What makes Olson’s careful and persuasive work so important in my view is that it provides a solid methodological and conceptual base from which to analyse our contemporary (posthumanist) landscape (and criminal ‘imaginary’), populated by cyborgs, vampires, zombies, chimeras and other posthumans, including the way these figures are discursively created through a ‘circularity of tropes within science, literature, and law’ (299), and, as I would add, medicine. Olson’s conclusions about the implications of her findings for our present and future starts with the observation that ‘we are living in a period of increased punitive sentiment towards those who are identified as criminals’ (307). Since the 1970s there has been a shift away from rehabilitative towards retributive, emotional and highly mediated justice, combined with rising incarceration rates. The criminal-animal trope continues to be ‘available’ within popular media discourse and, as seen at the outset of this review, in the context of terrorism, can be revived at any moment, for the purposes of stigmatization and of the legitimation of political action (let me in this context also recommend Olson’s very perceptive recent article (Olson, 2014) where she uses Coetzee’s *Disgrace* as an ‘intertext’ for a reading of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs).

This means that there is in fact continuity within the modern period as far as the putting-into-discourse of animality and criminality and its associated disciplinary practices are concerned (I’m thinking here of an analogy between Alice Jardine’s notion of ‘gynesis’ as the putting-into-discourse of ‘woman’ in modernity). The implications are that as long as the ‘bestialisation’ of humans remains available (which always reflects back onto animals and thus helps to reinscribe the radical difference between human and nonhuman animals and police its boundary) a fundamentally ‘humanist’ (anthropocentric, human exceptionalist) world picture is firmly in

place. As Olson rightly says: ‘Only on the basis of the assumption that human species members have a right to torture and subject non-human animals can the practices of abusing humans by treating them as akin to animals occur’ (311). As Cary Wolfe reminds us, you therefore don’t even have to be an animal lover to become an advocate for a different treatment for nonhuman animals or to engage in ‘(critical) animal studies’. Animalization is a fundamental strategy for social differentiation, racism, sexism, classism and criminalisation open to multiple possibilities of ideological use.

In one final point, however, I beg to differ with Olson. As understandable and necessary as a focus on the ‘human side’ of the criminal-animal figuration process might be (‘my concern in this book has been to understand how humans brutalize each other using negative tropes of animality’ [313]), the important theoretical move that a postanthropocentric posthumanism of a Cary Wolfe for example makes, is that the human and the animal side of this equation are in fact inseparable. More ‘compassionate’ relations with nonhuman animals aren’t just a secondary effect of humans becoming more ‘humane’ and careful with regard to their metaphorical usage as far as animals are concerned. If there is a firstness here it certainly concerns dealing with the availability of animal figuration and human exceptionalism in the first place. The terror that stops us from seeing animals eye-to-eye is the same terror that some humans use to justify the killing of other humans in the name of prophets, or profits of any other kind. Within a humanist value system, terror is *always animal terror*.

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