

# *The Wolves Entered Paris*

*By Mathieu Calame*

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**Hundreds of species have adapted to modern conurbations. What drives animals to go and live in the city? Beyond the accelerated degradation of nature, we need to rethink the very notion of wildness, and invent an “ethics of asymmetrical relations”.**

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*About: Joëlle Zask, [Zoocities. Des animaux sauvages dans les villes \(Wild Animals in the Cities\)](#), Paris, Premier Parallèle, 2020, 228 p.*

Leopards chasing stray dogs in the streets of New Delhi at night, sloths invading parks and private gardens in Manaus, large fruit bats settling in Tel Aviv and enjoying the fruits of ficus trees: the list of animals considered “wild” that visit our cities is long.

Several hundred species have adjusted to the new ecosystem of modern conurbations. If the sight of an isolated animal delights us—especially if it is cute—, as it brings back a feeling of wonder in a too predictable urban fabric, their proliferation can cause serious disturbances. The friendly squirrel can arouse the wrath of local residents if it breeds.

## **Causes of the animal exodus**

Most endeavors are pointless, ranging from the mildest (relocation) to the most violent (extermination), including attempts to enforce zoning with electric fences or repellents, whether synthetic or natural (such as lynx urine for deer). As long as they get shelter and food, the animals bypass the obstacles, get used to the noises and

smells, compensate for the losses, and even leave the place to another more seasoned, more cunning, more aggressive and more prolific species. Coexistence seems inevitable, and Joëlle Zask invites us to change our perspective.

But what drives animals to leave “nature” to live in cities? Well, quite simply the accelerated degradation of “nature”. Deforestation and re-parcelling, intensive hunting, agricultural pollution make non-urban spaces less and less hospitable. Just think of the plains of Beauce or Picardy in winter. On the other hand, the spaces inhabited by man, from large villages to big cities, bring together water and food, see a large increase in the number of greening projects, and with their derelict spaces their urban wastelands, their modern buildings, offer housing opportunities reinforced by the absence of hunting, and even the presence of people distributing food.

The air quality is sometimes even better there. In sewers, garbage dumps, on roofs and façades, in gardens and parks, animals find shelter and food. Those who venture in and adjust to this new kind of biotope carve a place for themselves—and never mind what the neighbors think. Besides, are they the first ones? Rat, crows, cockroaches came before them. In a world where the human species and its livestock are draining an increasing fraction of natural resources, the best thing to do is to live with it.

## **Animality in question**

This phenomenon does not only disturb the lawns of public gardens; it firstly disrupts our mental patterns. What is nature? What is wildness? Thus, besides the apparently simple categories of *wild* animals, which live in a space that is not or hardly influenced by human activity, *domesticated*, production animals (cows, pigs, chickens), and *pets*, whom we sometimes love more than our neighbor, we must make room for new categories.

*Liminal* or *opportunistic* animals (and the author prefers these terms over *commensal*) live in anthropized ecosystems without being invited. There are also *feral* animals, once domesticated, but who have returned to a semi-wild state, like the Corsican cows. These terms do not allow to qualify a given species, since an animal such as the fox can be wild or commensal according to its needs, displaying a

remarkable ability to adapt, and since feral animals prove that there is a life after domestication. The very notion of “wildness” becomes questionable.

Thus: no fixed categories, but a continuum of situations that invites us to rethink our relationship to animality and, more broadly, our relationship to “nature”. The categories stemming from European modernity, in its North American developments namely, which consider the *wilderness* and the *wild* as the antitheses of “civilization”, either hellish and chaotic, or sublime and regenerative, no longer reflect reality.

In this respect, the author’s reflections follow the footsteps of William Cronon<sup>1</sup>. The idea of *wilderness* is a myth that obscures the perception of the constant interactions between human dynamics and those of other species, plants, animals, fungi, bacteria, viruses, etc.

To deal with our relationship to animals—and more broadly to living beings—is to run the risk of anthropocentrism. This happens when, out of a laudable concern for cohabitation, we assign animals to “natural” protected areas that they rush to leave in order to scavenge waste bins or raid our gardens. The opposite risk, however, would be to give up thinking animals and animality. As Joëlle Zask writes,

“A certain amount of anthropocentrism is unavoidable: our point of view necessarily depends on the representations we form of the world in which we live. The problem therefore is not to access an unbiased point of view, which is by definition inaccessible, but to transform the way we understand the world.” (p. 185)

To do this, Joëlle Zask, rather than using the term cohabitation (which may imply that we are about to open our fridge to raccoons), speaks of neighborliness. The latter evokes the search for a *modus vivendi* in semi-shared spaces, where each person keeps his or her own home. This means not a total and fusional mutual understanding, but a partial understanding of each other’s dynamics. A middle ground between a total anthropomorphism and an inaccessible otherness, which makes it possible to define an “ethics of asymmetrical relations” (p. 167).

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<sup>1</sup> Read the review in <https://booksandideas.net/Going-Wild-3707>.

## The *polis* versus the city

More fundamentally, the failures of the attempts to assign animals to specific areas echo the social and anthropological critiques of the city and its inadequacy for the animals for whom and by whom it was designed: humans. In sum, the other animals that collide with urban logics also speak to us about ourselves. The Cape penguins that nest in the manholes evoke the “hi-jacking” of urban furniture.

“The presence of wild animals in cities is thus a lever for rethinking our ways of life and the design of the spaces of our lives, using the concepts that have been used to describe the general functioning of nature.” (p. 205)

While the *city* is a planning project too often conceived from the top-down, the *polis* according to Aristotle is “a community in happy life, for the sake of a perfect and self-sufficing life.” By thwarting urban planning, by forcing us to be neighbors, animals in the city invite us to rediscover the meaning of the *polis*. Aristotle knew very well, contrary to Descartes, that animals are not machines and that the human being is a *zôon politikon*, a civic animal.

In this quest for neighborliness, we can rely on the already old criticisms of the industrial and functionalist city, such as the work of the Scottish architect Patrick Geddes, who refused to oppose the city and its surroundings and who in 1920 posed the principles of Tel-Aviv aiming to reconcile social and ecological dynamics.

The intrusion of wild animals in the city was perhaps a pretext to question industrial anthropology and its urbanistic translation. Why not? The essay is pleasant to read, illustrated by fascinating anecdotes. I was less convinced by the two central chapters, based on an exegesis of Noah’s myth. Perhaps the author wanted to respond to the detractors of the Judeo-Christian traditions, which, for them, contains the “germ that, as it grew, led straight to the destruction of nature” (p. 149), a thesis that goes back to G. P. Marsh<sup>2</sup>.

The problem is that the Bible is a collection of very heterogeneous, even contradictory, books reflecting internal polemics, probably assembled in Egypt in the second century BCE at the request of the Greco-Macedonian dynasty. By choosing this or that extract, good exegetes can make it say anything, and they have not refrained

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<sup>2</sup> See Dominique Bourg et Augustin Fragnière, *La Pensée écologique. Une anthologie* (Ecological Thought: an Anthology), Paris, PUF, 2014, p. 159.

from doing so. Consequently, the graft of these two chapters does not take and to me they did not serve the general economy of the work. But let this not, in any case, prevent you from reading the book!

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