

European Journal of Sociology

<http://journals.cambridge.org/EUR>

Additional services for ***European Journal of Sociology***:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)

EUROPEAN
Archives Européennes de Sociologie
JOURNAL
Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie
OF SOCIOLOGY

TOME LIV 2013 NUMÉRO 3

Critical Studies

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Taming the Wild in the City. Colin Jerolmack, *The Global Pigeon* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2012)

Michal Murawski

European Journal of Sociology / Volume 54 / Issue 03 / December 2013, pp 562 - 566
DOI: 10.1017/S0003975613000416, Published online: 22 January 2014

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0003975613000416

How to cite this article:

Michal Murawski (2013). European Journal of Sociology, 54, pp 562-566 doi:10.1017/S0003975613000416

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

Colin JEROLMACK, *The Global Pigeon*
 (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2012)

TYPE THE NAME OF ANY well-known city into an internet search engine, followed by the word “pigeon,” and a plethora of public interest news stories—most of them sensationalising the unsavoury aspects of feral pigeons’ urban existence—will flood into your web browser. A Moscow-related pigeon Google, for example, reaps dozens of reports about the airborne undead said to have been tumbling from the skies of the Russian capital during the summer of 2013 (“Zombie Pigeons Invade Moscow Sparking Fears of Bird Apocalypse,” screamed the Huffington Post). A small expansion in the scope of inquiry reveals the extent, however, to which members of the family *Columbidae* have enjoyed prominence as well as infamy across historical epochs, political regimes (“airborne threat of Nazi pigeons”), economic phenomena (“China cracks down on speculative carrier pigeon bubble”), war machines (“Genghis Khan created a pigeon network that spanned one sixth of the world”) and peace movements since the rock dove (*Columbia livia*) was first tamed and domesticated several thousand years ago. Making the point about the prominence of pigeons to human civilisation, Colin Jerolmack invokes a remark by Charles Darwin’s editor, whose *Origin of the Species* opened with a long section on pigeon breeds: “Everyone loves pigeons.” In the more accurate words of a recent bestselling primer on the species (Blechman 2007), the pigeon is at once “the world’s most revered and reviled bird.”

Jerolmack’s *Global Pigeon* does not aim to produce a total theory of the natural law of human-pigeon interactions (although, like Darwin’s book, it is written with a non-specialist audience in mind). Nor is it a journalistic crowd-pleaser, filled with intriguing and astonishing pigeon anecdotes. This is a scholarly but highly accessible account of some of the ways in which human beings interact with pigeons. Jerolmack draws on an impressive breadth of ethnographic research conducted across several years and three continents, and constructs a sustained theoretical argument calling for the integration of studies of human-animal interaction into the sociological canon, and

polemicising convincingly with anthropocentric as well as nature-romanticising accounts of the relationship between human beings and the natural world: those which pine after a pure, asocial “lost” nature; and those which suggest that 21st century urban modernity—in its “organic” guise—is undergoing some sort of “re-naturing.”

Jerolmack’s research clearly started out as an inquiry into urban sociology, and this is the dominant lens through which it is presented to the reader. Thus, he opens his narrative with an account of kerbside interactions between people and pigeons in the West Village’s Father Demo Square, which usefully divides acts of pigeon-feeding into “focused” and “unfocused” categories, the former sort facilitating “human associations *with pigeons*,” the latter deploying pigeons as a background device “to facilitate associations *among people*.” The broader point Jerolmack seeks to make about the social life of the city is that the urban is co-constituted by humans and animals together, that ‘nonhumans color pedestrians’ experience of urban space.’ His West Village public space observations are scaled-up and ‘globalised’ in a chapter dealing with the 21st century reaction against “flying rats” in two public spaces whose *genii loci* have famously long been co-constituted by pigeons: Venice’s Piazza San Marco and London’s Trafalgar Square. Jerolmack’s implied point here is that in both cases, local authorities’ construction of pigeons as what social anthropologist Mary Douglas calls “matter out of place” (conflating them with other perceived threats to “quality of life” like homeless people and disease) was at odds with but also inseparable from their functioning as key components of the “spirit of the place” (Jerolmack rather too-briefly rubbishes pigeon-related public health concerns in his concluding comments as a “red herring”.) But these reflections on space, place and the city are not, to use Jerolmack’s own demarcation, “focused.” Instead, the urban ends up functioning in this book as a background device to facilitate a much broader point the author wants to make about how nature and society are inextricably intertwined and co-dependent on one another: the city is merely the stage on which relations between humans and nature are most “manifested with exaggerated clarity” (44).

Indeed, these early chapters, which purport to be about “public space” are a little flat and thin in comparison to the book’s middle chapters about pigeon fanciers and flyers in New York’s Bushwick and the Bronx, which do a great job of vividly accounting for the relationship between *man* (for it appears that pigeon-keeping is an overwhelmingly male pursuit, the world over) and his beasts. Jerolmack clearly spent a lot of time, and developed close bonds, with

his several dozen informants, solidly working class men (white, Hispanic and black, middle-aged and old) who are convincingly represented as living their lives for the long hours they spend tending to the ramshackle pigeon coops on their tenement rooftops. Descriptions are provided not only of the manner in which the men handle their pigeons, tirelessly scrubbing away their excrement from the coop floor, cajoling them to take off on flights, awaiting their return and coaxing them back into their cages. The latter two activities are especially highlighted for the Bronx men, who send their pigeons on competitive homing flights (the Brooklyn fanciers seem to have a more leisurely approach to their hobby). The passages in which Jerolmack describes how intensely the men conceive of and experience the pigeons' several-hundred mile-long journeys home, braving mountains, stormy skies and airborne predators, powerfully illustrate the extent to which pigeons are more than the inhabitants of the humdrum pedestrian world of the Father Demo Square bread-chuckers; they are also conduits of the sublime (though Jerolmack does not use this word), intermediaries which allow human beings to both tremble before the fearful vastness of uncharted nature, as well as to apprehend their victory over it: "Akin to the experience of standing before a rugged mountain peak or a towering redwood tree, fanciers felt a sense of awe, wonder, and humility as they waited for their pigeons to come." But, qualifies the author, "the charisma of pigeon racing" is not about "communion or kinship with nature;" in fact, it is located in the attempt to "tame the wild."

Yet it is Jerolmack's descriptions of the manner in which pigeons are able to co-constitute the Brooklyn men's social interactions even in their absence—especially in the chapter about Joey Scott's Brooklyn pet shop, in which the men socialise—which are probably the most engaging and satisfying in the book. Jerolmack successfully demonstrates how the diverse clientele of Joey's store simultaneously enact and transcend the age and ethnic cleavages which divide them from one another. Their brash everyday encounters in Joey's crowded, unglamorous store constitute a "unique social world with its own folk knowledge, social hierarchy, aesthetics and morality"; a social world (vividly rendered in Jerolmack's unpretentious prose) built around the pigeon as "allegorical totem," which "by standing *outside* of any particular ethnic category, united everyone with an interest in and commitment to pigeons on neutral turf" (135). Also of note in this chapter is Jerolmack's fascinating description of how the men affirmed their masculinity and status by conveying to each other a sense of

being accomplished masters of their pigeon flocks, while at the same time brashly “not giving a fuck’ about one’s pigeons” (in particular, about losing their birds to other fanciers). The Brooklyn pet store description is preceded by a complementary chapter describing how—in contrast to the everyday cosmopolitanism forged by Joey and his customers—home-sick Turkish pigeon fanciers in Berlin built a particularistic, primordial cultural-ethnic identification around their relationship with their birds. A rewarding twist in the book’s narrative, meanwhile, is provided by the penultimate chapter, which relays goings-on at the annual Million Dollar Pigeon Race in South Africa. Here, fanciers outsource care over their birds to hired crews and gape at webcam-streamed footage of the pigeons’ return from an opulent banquet hall in a Vegasque hotel complex called Sun City. The men’s “alienated” relationship to their birds in the “globalized” or “neoliberal” (the latter term is used rather loosely here) Sun City context stands in stark contrast to the manner in which the Bronx and Brooklyn flyers took pride in their “shit-shovelling” labour, deploying their mastery over their pigeons to cultivate a sense of self which was not only gendered-male, but also class-conscious.

It is useful at this point to think about the adjective which accompanies the word “pigeon” in the book’s title. In the author’s explanation, the term “global” pertains to three things: to his research’s extensive geographic scope (“pigeons [...] are everywhere”); to his claim that his “field sites uncover social processes that help illuminate other settings”; and to the book’s attempt to “uncover how extralocal processes—social, political and economic—impinged on these particular sites and people.” Although Jerolmack formulates the ordinary caveats about findings from ethnographic research being non-generalisable, his presentation of the “social process” he claims his research to have ‘uncovered’ amounts to something like an ontological claim, “that all sorts of human-animal relations, from pets to livestock, can shape people’s ‘social self.’” In other words, while Jerolmack does not explicitly seek to build an overarching theory—like Darwin’s—from his observation of pigeons, he uses the term “global” to refer not only to topological breadth but also to “uncovered” (by implication, universal) “social processes” and to an “extralocal” macro-order impacting on “micro” local, or particular ones. These usages are reinforced by the author’s pointedly repeated deployments of the word *social*, frequently italicised and compounded with another foundational social theory term like “context,” “relation,” “force” or “interaction.”

I draw attention to this, because such a reliance on sociological macro-notions (coupled with frequent references to grand-narrativist authorities like Durkheim, Goffman and Levi-Strauss) sits oddly with the social-theoretical attitude which lies behind Jerolmack's "hybrid" approach to the relationship between humans, animals and things, between nature and culture—most clearly represented by authors like Bruno Latour (cited by Jerolmack) and Donna Haraway (not referred to in this book, which goes easy on the theory, but cited in some of Jerolmack's more specialised article publications). Latour in particular has made a career out of attacking the "Durkheimian" legacy in sociology, which he claims endows higher-order organising abstractions—like "context," "relation," "force" or "structure"—with bloated causal power, while affording agentic capacity only to conscious, intentional human actors.

Jerolmack does not make it clear how he positions himself with regard to the contradictions bursting out of his own bibliography, and this book keeps esoteric theoretical excursions to a minimum on purpose. But I think Jerolmack's narrative brushes against some important bones of contention in the epistemology of the social sciences. The readability of his book would not have been undermined had its author reflected a little more explicitly on the contents of his intellectual toolkit. As it stands, Jerolmack's book is an extremely well-rendered, ethnographically vivid and convincing account of the manner in which pigeon-nonhumans exert an extremely powerful—mundane as well as extraordinary—impact on the lives of human beings, their material creations (such as cities and buildings) and the social connections which glue the above together. But I think that significant added value lies in something that Jerolmack's book demonstrates unwittingly, or at least without making it explicit: that, indeed, theories of actor-networks, assemblages and hybridity can prod the "traditional" social sciences into paying attention to a more comprehensive, or heterogeneous field of social capacity than they have so far tended to do; but that once this prodding has been done, there is no need to disassemble the old Durkheimian "sociology of the social" (to use Latour's derogatory phrase) and to expunge it from the canon.