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# A History of Canicide

*by Jean-Luc Laffont*

**The mass slaughters of dogs carried out in Mexico and Europe in the 19th century seem to have been a rehearsal for the human holocausts of the 20th century.**

About: Arnaud Exbalin, *La grande tuerie des chiens. Mexico en Occident, XVIIIe-XXIe siècle*. Ceyzérieu, Champ Vallon, coll. La chose publique, 2023, 320 p., 25 €.

Over the past fifteen years, animal issues have received increasing attention in the humanities and social sciences. In France, this trend has been particularly pronounced in the field of history, making this discipline one of the avant-garde sectors in animal studies. Examples of this include the pioneering works of Éric Baratay, Damien Baldin, and Jean-Marc Moriceau (on wolves), which have prompted later historians but also sociologists (for instance Dominique Guillo) to write history with animals. Dogs in particular have become a primary focus of research, not so much because they are the oldest (domesticated) animal or man's best friend, but because they have been the subject of a relatively large body of documentation, largely due to the health problems they have posed and continue to pose (especially in cities). As Donna Haraway has shown, the study of dogs offers a privileged lens through which to understand the relationship between humans and animals.

Arnaud Exbalin's *La grande tuerie des chiens. Mexico en Occident, XVIIIe-XXIe siècle* (The great slaughter of dogs: Mexico City in the West, 18th to 21st centuries) is at the cutting edge of this fertile field of research. As the title suggests, the book deals with the project of dog eradication carried out on a large scale by the authorities of Mexico City over several centuries. In addition to breaking new ground (in terms of

the diachronic approach and transcontinental spatial framework used, the themes addressed, the analytical methods applied), Exbalin's work provides a case study that is at once sharp and thorough.

In Mexico City Exbalin found a large and diverse body of unpublished documents produced by authorities that were regularly confronted with an explosion of the canine population—there were up to tens of thousands of dogs in the streets of the city at the end of the 18th century! In view of this situation, the public authorities decided to resort to slaughter (or killing). The book's introduction unpacks the notion of slaughter, anchoring the investigation in a multi-scalar (political, social, cultural, material) and multi-disciplinary (historical, anthropological, zoological, sanitary) approach made possible by complete mastery of the subject matter. This mastery is demonstrated in the following eight chapters, which are enhanced by some twenty often little-known illustrations that aptly illuminate a dense but always very clear argument. In the appendix, a dozen or so testimonies produced over several decades provide relevant support for the analyses.

## The Clash of Two Worlds

Broadly speaking, the study is organized into two main parts. The first part on Mexico City (Chapters 1 to 5) begins with an original presentation of the place of dogs in the colonization of the Aztec empire (1519-1521). This event is presented as a "clash of two canine worlds" between, on the one hand, the Spaniards' Indian-killing guard dog and, on the other, the indigenous and truly endemic dog of Mexico, the soft-skinned, naked dog known as Xoloitzcuintle (a breed that is said to date back at least 3,000 years).

The thaumaturgical and religious powers attributed to the Xoloitzcuintle—whose name appropriately translates to "god dog"—gave it a prominent place in the Aztec world. This explains why, on August 12, 2016, the authorities of Mexico City elevated this canine breed to the status of Mexican cultural heritage and symbol.

In the 18th century, the hybridization of these two dog species resulted in the stray dog, which municipal laws stigmatized as a nuisance and accused of posing a serious threat to humans. To curb the growth of the stray dog population, the authorities of Mexico City opted for radical measures of mass eradication. Chapter 2

focuses on the two great dog slaughters of the late 18th century: The 1790-1792 and 1797-1800 canicides, during which 20,000 and 14,301 dogs, respectively, were poisoned to death. Exbalin notes that the hygienist explanation according to which the authorities had a fear of rabies—a disease whose resurgence caused widespread panic in Europe in the second half of the 18th century—does not stand up to reality, as there was no rabies in Mexico at the time of the killings. He therefore delves deeper by exploring the place given to dogs in Mesoamerican culture—including in Amerindian cosmogonies—and by putting it into perspective with the European Conquest. His original analysis of the accounts of this conquest shows that Europeans instrumentalized dogs, which were common to the Old and New Worlds, by turning their own canines (killers, hunters of humans and game, guardians) both into tools and into symbols of their victory and superiority.

After examining the speeches delivered on the occasion of eradication campaigns (Chapter 3), Exbalin shifts from theory to practice with a nuanced presentation of the municipal staff in charge of killing dogs (Chapter 4). Finally, he broadens the scope of the analysis by comparing the case of dogs with that of other animals found in ancient cities (Chapter 5). This leads him to observe that canines are "an extreme case of the evolution of domestication systems," one that concerned both dogs and their owners who were enjoined to control them. As Exbalin explains, "by having thousands of stray dogs killed, the authorities imposed new modes of domination on owners, thus reconfiguring human-dog relations over the long term." Owners could no longer let their dogs roam freely, which meant that they had to exert stronger and better control over them by means of leashes, collars, and even muzzles (tattoos and microchips were systematized years later). The imposition of constraints on owners to control their dogs required them to fully assimilate prevailing norms regarding animals as a whole. The "decanization" of public space can thus be seen as a particular instance of a more general eradication project targeting all the animals that had been roaming freely in towns and villages since ancient times.

## The Industrialization of Canicide

The last three chapters of the second part broaden the discussion by shifting the focus from Mexico City to Western Europe. The relationship between humans and dogs is examined through the lens of canicide, which was not unique to colonialism. During the second half of the 19th century, dog killing began to spread and was

perfected in the context of triumphant hygienism (Chapter 8). The period saw the development of pounds and gas chambers: After being tested for the first time in England in 1873 and in France in 1880, these techniques were rapidly diffused throughout industrialized countries and were later complemented by crematoria. One can therefore speak of a veritable system of canicide that was deployed slightly differently across countries but was essentially the same everywhere. The author suggests exploring the possible link between these techniques and the extermination procedures implemented by the Nazis (pp. 248-249): namely, killing in gas chambers and the burning of corpses in crematoria. The similarities are certainly not accidental.

It is striking how much the mass slaughters of dogs perpetrated from the 18th century to the present day can serve as a relevant and stimulating lens through which to revisit the history of colonization by and with dogs and to better understand human-dog relations in both the Old and New Worlds. We come to realize that our companion dogs are the recent product of a long history of violence that was part of a broader process of suppression of animal roaming. The book thus adds to the critique of the civilization of manners—an analytical framework that seeks to understand how humans became "civilized" over time through exerting stronger and more effective self-control—initiated long ago by Norbert Elias. Here I agree with Damien Baldin who, in his *Histoire des animaux domestiques, XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris, Seuil, 2014), proposed a first interpretation of this process launched in urban centers by showing that the familiarization of animals was part of a domestication project aimed at controlling them.

All in all, Exbalin's book is a remarkable achievement destined to become a reference work.

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First published on laviedesidees.fr, on 13 September 2023.
Translated by Arianne Dorval, with the support of Cairn.info.
Published in *booksandideas*, on 8 July 2025.