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Can Red-tailed Hawks become Rats with Wings?

A DISCUSSION ON SOCIAL MEANINGS OF NONHUMAN URBAN LIFE

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Introduction

> "In the imagining of modern cities, humans have increasingly less tolerance for 'wildlife'; and while some wild animals are celebrated […] because they are beautiful, rare, or useful […] many become interpreted as pests […]". (Jerolmack, 2007, p.89).

Urban birds have increasingly become objects of environmental sociologists' interest to study the meaning-making practices behind nature-culture dichotomies in contested spaces. The red-tailed hawk, for example, a bird of prey known for its brick-colored tails and spectacular arial aerobics, has challenged common binary nature-culture distinctions since showing up, hunting, breeding, and eventually living in cities (National Geographic, 2021; Bergeron et al., 2021). Hunold (2017) describes how this transformation has inspired bird watching communities to question where belongings are drawn and how the nonhuman belongs into the city. The red-tailed hawks do not only enjoy great popularity and an eager community to come at rescue when individual birds are hurt, they also spark empathy and wonder among their watchers (Hunold, 2017). The surprising adaptability of these wildlife creatures to highly urbanized environments has caused much wonder, numerous news articles, and bird watching communities to closely follow their urban populations (Bergeron et al., 2021; Cobb, 2017; Hunold, 2017).

Feral pigeons, though urban birds and well adapted to human life, face very different treatment by humans. Historically neither completely wild, nor domesticated, feral pigeons do not enjoy the exotic awe granted to red-tailed hawks when they decide to roam among skyscrapers rather than mountains. Jerolmack (2007) claims that pigeons have served many different purposes to humans in the past, which all carried along their own meanings and expectations. These meanings prescribed to pigeons were harmonious as long as the birds met these expectations. Feral pigeons, however, stem from escaped domesticated pigeons and have acquired the status of urban pests similar to rats (Jerolmack, 2007). These surprising antitheses pose questions on why pigeons and hawks are treated so differently and how the social construction of their meanings to humans can potentially change in the future. The underlying

research question of this paper therefore is: How do the social meanings of feral pigeons relate to the potential meanings of red-tailed hawks in cities?

The paper will first draw on theoretical concepts underlying the birds' social construction, before giving a brief overview on the history and the current status of both pigeons and hawks. It will then analyze the underlying construction of potential meanings of urban birds as well as their contestation of natural and cultural space. It will be concluded that, even though the framing of pigeons and hawks relate to certain biological characteristics, the resulting frames and moralizations relate to self-referencing human discourse much more than to the biological traits themselves. Detaching and comparing these frames is an important practice against the background of unjustified categorization of problem animals, but also due to the potential harmful impacts of expanding these frames to human populations.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical concepts underlying this paper draw on the tradition of cultural geography. The latter is concerned with the study of human-nature relationships in a way that investigates how animals are placed in the variety of material and non-material spaces of humans (Philo & Wilbert, 2000). Cultural geographers are thereby rooted in constructivist and relational thinking, which considers the social construction of meaning to be essential work underlying our behavior and worldviews. The disentanglement, then, of this practice of *meaning-making* unravels this social construction of the world and can even change our understanding of it (Hannigan, 2014). Latour (2004) has argued that nature and culture exist as a modern dualism that is seemingly incompatible with the real-world associations between humans and animals that exist, nonetheless. Scholars have since suggested that therefore, animals are framed in terms of usefulness, beauty, or emotional value to tolerate close relationships (Sabloff, 2001). Wildlife that transgresses these frames is considered a nuisance (Jerolmack ,2008).

The inherent biological traits of animals play only a peripheral role in the analysis of the studies by cultural geographers. This is not to say that scholars are entirely agnostic towards them, but these traits have to be contextualized through the meanings societies construct around them and how they are then integrated into our symbolic practices (Jerolmack, 2014). This is especially important when considering domestication and breeding practices that prescribe societal values into the biological make-up of animals (Jerolmack, 2007). Hence, whatever biological features characterize birds are mediated through social practices of meaning making.

This relational view of biological traits and human interpretation is shared by what Hunold (2007) calls *nonhuman charisma* – a term that describes "properties of organisms that

generate emotional responses among people encountering them" and features the two dimensions of aesthetic and corporeal charisma (Lorimer 2015, p. 44). Aesthetic charisma is determined by the degree to which an animal conforms to or departs from a blend of anthropomorphic and behavioral norms, whilst corporeal charisma refers to moments of enchantment created through the presence of and 'connection' to these animals (Lorimer, 2015). Both charisma and the ordering of nature according to a nature-culture dualism, then, are helpful to understand the different (potential) meanings that hawks and pigeons embody, and what type of space society allows and denies them to take in our urban make-up. These meanings are never finite or inscribed in their biological features, but these deem a useful starting point to understand our social construction of their space.

Of Pigeons and Hawks

Jerolmack (2007, 2008) provides a useful account on the history of the social meaning of pigeons and doves in our society. He argues that feral pigeons are an interesting hybrid between wildlife and domestic animals since they stem from domesticated and carefully bred pigeons that escaped their originally intended human purpose and since then roam cities freely without serving their intended function. Pigeons have, over the course of centuries, served many different material and symbolic purposes such as food source, messenger, but also as a symbol for peace and reproduction (Jerolmack, 2007).

The often-hated feral pigeon is a global phenomenon precisely because of the features that humans adored: both its 'reproductive magic' and its adaptability allowed human travel, trade, and wars to bring the pigeon to wherever humans lived. The framing of pigeon as an urban nuisance, however, started during the 20th century, when the pigeons were increasingly publicly associated with hygienic issues, pollution, and were fitted into frames of other pests such as rats (Jerolmack, 2008). The pigeon nowadays lives as an *urban exploiter* thriving of urban commensals to the point that they have become dependent on urban resources (Kark et al., 2007). This paper will argue, however, that the moralizing status that comes along with the notion of urban exploiters is not easily derived from their biological traits as Kark et al. (2007) suggest, but through modernist moral and dual ideas of culture.

Urban hawks, specifically the red-tailed hawk living in the major American cities such as Philadelphia, New York, and Atlanta, enjoy a very different status. In many ways, their history of human interaction is not as old as the pigeon's status as an urban bird. However, time shall not be accepted as the only causal attribute justifying their very different treatment. Hawks display what Hunold (2017) calls nonhuman charisma, which he describes in his analysis of

bird watchers' discussion and conservation efforts on individual hawks living in Philadelphia. These hawks can be categorized as urban adapters. Not as dependent on human settlement such as pigeons, yet equally comfortable in urban as well as rural and wild settings, the hawk is (still) understood as exotic wildlife living in the city out of place.

The very existence of a social and material infrastructure around these birds implies the high degree of exoticization and romanization of hawks in urban settings: cameras allow birders to follow their lives online, people bring injured individuals to the vet, and the discourses performed on hawks display both anthropomorphism and conservation efforts (Hunold, 2017). Hence, the hawk transgresses our nature-culture dichotomy, too, but its resulting place in human discourse is almost opposite to the feral pigeon. This paper will argue, that, to understand the potential future place of hawks in our urban understanding, we must dismantle the different potentials in a way that makes visible the reasons for different framing of pigeons and hawks without giving too much weight to seemingly exclusive biological categorizations such as urban exploiters and urban adapters.

Defying Cultural Expectations

The first striking similarity and therewith the potential of merging frames between pigeons and hawks arises from their defying of cultural expectations. This paper will argue that the hawks' nonhuman charisma arises mainly through the meaning-making around it rather than any inherent traits. Contrasting its treatment with that of pigeons demonstrates how the hawk has already reached a stage of causing general confusion about our nature-culture dichotomy, showing the fragility of its current romanticized status.

Jerolmack (2007) argues swiftly against the existence of a naturally beautiful bird. The feral pigeon that we can find in urban dwellings today, resembles its predecessor, the original rock dove, to a degree of near indistinguishability. He stresses that there is indeed nothing inherently aesthetic to the pigeon today that would justify its reputation as a 'rat with wings' or the common aversion of humans to approach it. On the contrary, our long history of close interaction with pigeons and their many uses as food source, racing birds, and messengers (even heroes of war), would justify a much more intimate relationship (Bodio, 2014; Jerolmack, 2007). Jerolmack (2007) argues that the feral pigeon nowadays escapes these frames of utility and domestication because it stems from those specimens that once were accidentally released to nature. Contrary to their predecessors, feral pigeons have no use in our society. Hence, they defy the cultural expectation of having a place that is either in a form of wilderness outside our cultural understanding, or in various interactions with humans that are ordered in narrow

cultural arrays of utility. The feral pigeon, an accidental leftover of these domesticated versions, has no advocacy group to rally their cause.

The hawk, on the other hand, is often, as Hunold (2017) analyses, not just romanticized for its 'natural' beauty, but also causes paternalistic attachments by birders when spotted in urban environments. Though the red-tailed hawk living and breeding in the city center of one of Americas biggest metropolitan areas does not display the idea of wilderness as such, it surely displays one of wildness. Hunold (2017) describes how birders were engaged in the survival of hatchling both through emotional conversation and through active intervention to save them. These ways of engagement display how the hawk in an urban environment defies our cultural expectation of this wild creature: the urban environment is both chosen by the hawk as a habitat, yet the dangers through cars and glass facades are not perceived as natural dangers by the birder community. The very existence of urban infrastructure is perceived as a threat. What is important to note here, is how easily this could be perceived differently: many pigeons are killed by cars every day, yet pigeons, rather than cars are perceived as a threat. Furthermore, neither the red-tailed hawk nor the pigeons are listed as endangered species at this point.

It follows that the underlying cause of this different treatment lies outside arguments of nonhuman charisma and natural beauty. Rather, the material and non-material practices of the birding community, lead to the exoticizing and romanization of the hawk. These practices then uphold the hawk's charisma rather than the hawk itself. To underline this argument, consider the debate caused by relieving a young hawk back to wild, rather than to the city: this event caused a huge debate among the birding community raising questions on our idea of what is best for nature and where natural habitats end and begin (Hunold, 2017). Surely, some had already accepted the hawk as an urban rather than a wild phenomenon. Whether it is only a matter of time until the 'magic' of urban hawks wears off or whether this arbitrary boundary will be upheld, is not to say. The fragility of this boundary, however, is evident.

Social Frames Hiving Off

Looking at the history of framing of pigeons, one could argue that the meanings associated with them, do in fact relate to their physical and biological traits. Jerolmack (2008) discusses this argument when investigating the pigeons' association with public health frames in the media. Pigeons are, indeed, carriers of disease. Furthermore, in 1963, two deaths of New York residents were linked to disease carried by pigeons, which then associated pigeons immediately with the threat of spreading the disease (Jerolmack, 2008). Though the connection was never causally established, and the only fact verified was that both men were in contact with pigeons,

the news spread like fire. Jerolmack (2008) carefully tracks how the metaphor 'rats with wings' became a dominant frame associated with pigeons in the news. The perceived public health threat changed the image of the birds to the extent that "the pigeon was now merely a container of diseases" (Jerolmack, 2008, p. 9).

Notably, Jerolmack demonstrates how the argument based on biological traits leads to absurdity nonetheless: to see the relative weight of dominant framing in the case of the pigeon, one should note that according to medical experts cited in different news sources, the threat of catching a transmittable disease from a pet is roughly equal to that of catching it through contacts with pigeons (Jerolmack, 2008). Hence, the instance itself, along with the existence of a useless, if not annoying animal out of space, was enough to create a long-term association between pigeons and disease. What follows is another seemingly arbitrary framing of one species as a problem animal.

This insight has important implications for the potential future social framing of red-tailed hawks: their biological traits make for all kinds of problem animal potentials, some of which have already materialized. Whilst the hawks used to be praised for their help in tackling the spread of rodents like mice and rats, these animals are not their only prey: in 2016, "a Red-tail nesting on the Upper West Side attacked a chihuahua who was outside on its owner's balcony" (Evans, 2016, §15). While it is not clear that hawks particularly enjoy small dogs or cats, they certainly do not refrain from attacking them. Furthermore, well-intended humans who might want to dodge a hawk nosediving into a busy street, could create accidents all the while overly engaged birders could create conflicts in an attempt to alter urban structures for hawks (Hunold, 2017). Whatever potential or materialized examples you may look for: excessive framing could change the hawks' image drastically. At last, even core biological traits are subject to change: if urban hawks do already show differences to their rural counterparts in breeding behavior, who says they do not develop an exclusive taste for Upper West Side boulevard Pomeranians (Evans, 2016)?

Discussion: A Matter (Out) Of Space

Pigeons represent perhaps the most prominent example of challenging a dominant nature-culture dichotomy. They do so in two ways: Firstly, they transgress human space by populating it without any prescribed role, as explained above. Secondly, they are commonly perceived as dirt and nuisance, and constitute along with rats, a problem animal par excellence (Giunchi et al., 2012). Jerolmack (2008) argues that by transgressing and challenging 'human space', they are perceived as a matter out of place. He applies the metaphor of muddy shoes: the shoes in

themselves do not hold any value, but dirty shoes on a kitchen table disturb our idea of the space of the kitchen.

This challenge then, turns the city into a contested space, and at the same time creates an interesting parallel narrative to hawks: they, too, occupy space in the city that is not prescribed to our understanding of a nature-culture division. But interestingly, the discourse takes an almost opposite direction: rather than challenging the intrusion of hawks into our space, they are framed as refugees of human invasion in natural space. Note that despite the opposite outcome, the underlying ordering of space remains the same: both species are perceived as out of their *natural* place. This is important to keep in mind when describing the potential framing of hawks in the city: though nuisance or disutility has not occurred yet, the underlying perceptive frame is already existent and at work of ordering our perception of hawks. So far, hawks have not interrupted human life yet. Rather the opposite is the case: hawks are frequently hit by cars, fly against windows, and younglings do not survive hard crashes on concrete streets. However, the example pigeon example tells us that they don't even have to be biologically problematic: a small outcry (maybe a rabbit mistaken for a rat) could potentially be enough to frame refugees as invaders.

To advance this discussion, let us consider an argument by Fine and Christoforides (1991): They argue that animal and human frames can easily be conflated. The framing of sparrows as an urban nuisance, for example, worked exceptionally well as long as metaphors were used that evoke similarities to mass human immigration which took place at the same time. Similarly, humans, like pigeons have suffered under unjustified public health frames. Exclusionary zoning in the US in the beginning of the 20th century, for example, was often justified by hygienic concerns whilst being racially motivated (Shertzer et al., 2021). Certain human populations, just like animals can therefore become associated with nuisance, disease, and marginalization. Unravelling and discussing these frames therefore has important emancipating potential for both human and nonhuman life.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the social framing of pigeons as problem animals and public health nuisance to explore potential futures for human interpretation of red-tailed hawks living in cities. This question was justified through the similar contestation of seemingly purely human space through urban exploiters such as rats, and urban adapters such as hawks. It was argued that firstly, both pigeons and hawks defy cultural expectations through their presence in the city, yet the directionality of the interpretation is opposite to one another: whilst hawks are being framed

as fragile wildlife threatened by the city, pigeons are perceived as a threat to us. Secondly, though the framing of pigeons as a public health threat relates to biological traits, the frame has developed autonomously from this trait, showing how similar developments of problem framing can include hawks, too.

Most importantly, both arguments demonstrate how little the frames have to do with the birds as such and rather their meaning to us, which further underlines relative fragility of social frames. Lastly, these frames show the challenges arising with the contestation of human space in the city. We frame birds arbitrarily, and yet this framing determines measures such as pest control on the one hand, and altering city structures for birds on the other. The future of the hawk, therefore, could very well yield a similar development as pigeons, but we should be careful to critically analyze the reasoning and spread of future frames. This is not at least due to the potential de-humanizing effect of these frames once they expand to human populations, too. To conclude, though we cannot escape social constructs and societal framing, making them visible gives us agency to change the unraveled rationales.

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