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The Pet Keeping Industry in the American City

Irus Braverman

When I run, I don’t particularly like to be interrupted. After immigrating to the United States from Israel some ten years ago I was rather abruptly made aware of what felt like the arrogant behavior of American dog owners, with whom I shared the public parks.1 Many times they blithely let their dogs off leash and allowed — encouraged even — their running after joggers like me. “Don’t worry, she’s a friendly dog,” one pet owner shouted after me as I was attempting to escape the dog’s ardent fascination with my ankles. I’ll spare the readers the details of how that encounter ended, except to mention that the police were involved, as well as a bloody ankle. Another such “friendly” dog, a huge Rottweiler, knocked my then four-year-old daughter down. Despite my daughter’s visible distress, the owner insisted that the dog loved kids and was just playing around. My daughter was traumatized for years to come.

But then two years ago, my now nine-year-old daughter decided that she, too, wants in on the American dream. A family without a dog is incomplete, so the dominant narrative around us seems to dictate — and that narrative was readily picked up by my daughter and, subsequently, by her younger sister as well. The pressure is now fully on for us to “adopt” a dog who would fill our days with laughter and fun. A dog who would make us belong.

Despite my initial urge to satisfy my daughters’ passionate desire, I cannot help but to contemplate the broader role of urban and suburban pets in the contemporary United States and, specifically, the capitalist foundations of the making and keeping of dogs in the American city. Then there is also the largely undisputed eugenic aspects of dog breeding, which is inextricably linked with America’s early sterilization programs for humans. This history, and the preoccupation with purity and genetics, arguably still hover over existing calculations of pedigree, purebred establishments, and dog show practices. For all these reasons, I found Jessica Pierce’s 2016 book Run, Spot, Run to be a timely critique of America’s contemporary pet animal industry.

Pierce draws on her wide ranging professional career as a writer and bioethicist, as well as on more familial and familiar narratives, to highlight the suffering that the current “pet wave” is causing to the real animals involved. Leveraging the benevolent assumptions underlying our relationship with pet animals, Pierce questions the morality and the language of American pet culture. “While many may view the increasing popularity of pet keeping as a sign that we love animals more and more, it should give us pause. Pet keeping is a tidal wave we are being carried upon — we, along with millions and millions of animals — and this wave has huge destructive potential.” That she herself has owned and still owns pets not only affords Pierce both compassion toward and insights into the challenges of pet

1 Acknowledgements. This article draws on a book review published in the Times Literary Supplement.

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The most sacred cow that *Run, Spot, Run* slaughters is euthanasia (from the Greek “easy death”). Pierce quotes in this context from philosophers who have documented that for some, “animal suffering matters more than death,” which, she points out, is “strikingly at odds with the way we think about suffering and death of humans.” But her analysis of euthanasia — or “shelter killing” in her preferred terminology — is not only philosophical: Pierce enters into this “Forbidden Zone” by signing up for a two-day euthanasia-by-injection course held in Denver. At the end of this course, participants were required to kill a live dog for practice. “Even though I was merely a spectator,” Pierce recounts from the killing, “my whole body was shaking and I couldn’t stop the tears from flowing. I felt responsible for taking this dog’s life — a dog whose name we never even knew.” Perhaps because of the emotional intensity of this experience, Pierce adopts a strong stance against euthanasia, which she argues “is part of the well-greased machinery of the pet industry.”

The pet industry’s profitable and visible existence in the American city is arguably facilitated, made possible even, through these animals’ institutionalized and invisible killings, even while presenting such killings as acts of compassion toward the animals. Under the cute and cuddly appearance of urban pet culture thus lies a ghastly necropolis. The assumption, Pierce highlights, is that death causes no harm to an animal. No wonder, then, that euthanasia rates in the United States are at a soaring high in comparison to other countries (“every eleven seconds, a healthy dog or cat is euthanized in U.S. shelters”). Noting that the vast majority of America’s cats and dogs are killed via euthanasia, Pierce abruptly concludes: “Would I like to see all euthanasia technicians throw down their syringes and needles and refuse to participate? Yes. . . . [B]ecause only when we break the silence and truly acknowledge what is happening will we feel compelled to roar out in rage against the killing.”

This institutionalized killing is intimately related to profit. Tucked away toward the end of her book is Pierce’s piercing analysis of pet keeping as a capitalist practice (this is my terminology; Pierce doesn’t mention the word). There, Pierce disturbingly exposes how animals in shelters — supposedly the humane heart of America’s pet keeping society — are in fact “viewed as products to consume at whim.” The animals, she documents, are the cheapest products in this package; so, for example, one would pay 12 cents per fish, compared to 90 dollars for a fish tank. Pierce goes on to identify the “shelter industry” as what effectively enables this hegemonic production of animals as pets to proceed undisturbed. In her words: “shelters keep the pet industry from crashing in on itself since they control the surplus and thus keep the market for new product healthy.”

In addition to making profit over the pets themselves, the more serious money to be made — and, indeed, the pet industry in the United States makes 50.8 billion dollars annually — is from pet food, supplies, and medicine. For the pet industry to stay profitable, and to grow by the year, “the industry spins the narrative of pets as a happy and necessary part of every healthy family.” The narrative that so many Americans buy into is not only that “happy pets make their families happier and healthier,” but also that “owning pets is part of our American heritage of independence and freedom.” As a random cashier in a café told me, without wincing, “my dog is my best purchase ever, I love her so much.”

Understanding the role that capitalism plays in urban dwellers’ contemporary relationship with pet animals may also help to answer a big question that Pierce largely avoids: why is pet keeping so prominent in the United States? What is it in this particular society, at this particular time, and in the
increasingly urbanized spaces that it inhabits that makes America’s urban residents so prone to this particular industrial production? And no less importantly: how does the American pet industry relate to, and depend on, other animal related industries that thrive at the margins of the metropolis, such as the slaughterhouse, the zoo, and the exotic animal trade?

I shared *Run, Spot, Run* with my older daughter. I guess I was hoping to use the book as objective evidence from the trenches about why having a dog is not only hard work but also an ethically complicated practice, and one that we are destined to fail at. Owning a dog in Buffalo, New York, is not like buying any other animal, say a guinea pig or a fish. Rather, owning a dog is buying a one-way-no-return ticket to an all-consuming social life, complete with gadgets, medical bills, licensing responsibilities, and outings with other dog owners; it is about restructuring one’s daily (and nightly) routines, rethinking travel plans, recalculating monthly payments and bills. And all that why? How to explain that so many American city dwellers are willing to take on such tasks and responsibilities?

I would offer that the main reason is that urban folks in the United States have been legally, culturally, and emotionally cut off from any significant relationship with animals: farm animals (horses, goats, pigs, in some cases chickens) have largely been banned from American cities and wild animals are, for the most part, not allowed into one’s home. In New York State, for example, wild animals are state property even when they reside on one’s private property and, as such, are subject to various requirements. New York General Municipal Laws state that: “With the exception of pet dealers, every person owning, possessing, or harboring a wild animal or a dangerous dog within this state shall report the presence thereof to the clerk of the city, town, or village in which such wild animal or dangerous dog is owned, possessed, or harbored” (N.Y. Gen. Mun. Law §209-cc).

Add to this spay and neuter controls, and you get a situation whereby if someone who lives in the city wants to experience a longtime and meaningful relationship with an animal, they must typically purchase her. Spay and neuter is performed by many municipalities and breeders in the United States and is considered best pet keeping practice. Yet alongside its usefulness for reducing the amount of “surplus” animals, controlled breeding through spay and neuter assures that commercial breeders generate continual profits by exercising a monopoly over the new animal commodities. This monopoly over human–animal relationships in the city is exploited to the extreme by the pet industry.

Indeed, the central, most direct, way for animals to lawfully become pets within the American home is under their designation as companion species. The city, for its part, enforces this relationship to the letter. Through the application of licensing and identification requirements, the city ensures that each and every dog has an owner. As I have documented in my 2013 chapter “Legal Tails: Policing American Cities through Animals,” at least three agencies enforce the federal, state, and municipal legal norms that apply to companion animals in the City of Buffalo, New York. New York State law provides that: “The owner of any dog reaching the age of four months shall immediately make application for a dog license” (Article 7, Section 109 of the New York’s Agriculture and Markets Law).

The same section also provides that the application for an annual license must be submitted to the city clerk and that, “The application shall state the sex, actual or approximate age, breed, color, and municipal identification number of the dog, and other identification marks, if any, and the name, address, telephone number, county and town, city or village of residence of the owner. . . . The application shall be accompanied by the license fee . . . and a certificate of rabies vaccination” (N.Y. Agric. & Mkts. Law §109). Section 111 adds that each licensed dog “shall be assigned, at the time the dog is first licensed, a municipal identification number. Such identification number shall be carried by the dog on an identification tag which shall be affixed to a collar on the dog at all times, provided that a municipality may exempt dogs participating in a dog show during such participation” (N.Y. Agric. & Mkts. Law §111).
In other words, animal laws instruct us which animals are allowed into the city and under what conditions. More than regulating the everyday of urban life as it pertains to animals, humans, and the interrelations thereof — all heavily reigned by the capitalist paradigm — such laws and their enforcement determine the very essence of the city. Through its distinct matrix of animal-human relationships, the city is distinguished from its significant other, “the country,” where a different set of animal-human relations takes place.

My critique of the capitalist pet industry aside, I may still need to get my daughters a dog and once and for all accept my destiny as an American city dweller.