

Interview with
Charles Stépanoff

L'ANIMAL ET LA MORT

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Charles Stépanoff, L'ANIMAL ET LA MORT
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What is the book's point of departure?

It was through my research in Siberia on shamanic traditions, and the hunting and herding practices of the indigenous peoples there, that I became interested in the relationships between human communities, animals and the land that they share. I realized that the binding ties involved in this three-way relationship abided in strange forms of communication and in a rich use of the imagination, enabling the exploration of worlds alien to humans. As Lévi-Strauss puts it, the faraway illuminates the near and the near illuminates the faraway. I thus asked myself what these configurations were like here in France, a country with 1.2 million hunters. I set out to study French hunters with a Siberian perspective in mind. I studied the language they used to talk to their dogs, how they saw wild boars in dreams, how they read their tracks and indices in the land, and their rituals to honor the animals they killed. These were questions they had never been asked before because it was thought that such questions only concerned exotic peoples. The results have been rich, and the comparison with Siberia has enabled a better understanding of the specificities of the occidental relationship to the wild.

How did you go about writing the book based on this research?

I accompanied rural hunters, participated in pheasant and hare counts, drove game with beaters towards hunters. I met people who hunt badgers underground with dogs, followed fox trappers and hunters with hounds, on horseback, on foot. To complement this research, I also spoke to anti hunting activists and participated in their grassroots activism. I discovered people who were passionate, extremely knowledgeable and with very different sensibilities, and I tried to understand the roots of their opposition. As I immersed myself in these ethical conflicts, it became clear that I needed to take a step back: one cannot grasp the present tensions unless one takes into consideration the ways of life, the relationships with territory, and the historical conflicts surrounding the political appropriation of the power of the wild. This is why the writing of this book was based on observation, interviews, but also, to a large extent, on history and even prehistory.

How is this book relevant today?

Anthropology allows us to realize that the stakes in conflicts never boil down to simple questions like, "Do we have the right to hunt deer with hounds, or

thrushes with birdlime?" or "Should forests be fenced?" Instead, the question to ask is: "What is the place of humans in the living world?" It is not merely a difference of how people view animals and forests, but of how they inhabit the land. Current debates on hunting in France are the result of very slow historical dynamics that bring into confrontation local communities' land use rights, the assertion of state power in the control of wildlife, and an ethic of protective benevolence that has become widespread recently, but which can be dated back to the hermits of old who lived in the forests and tamed doe and wild boar.