Horses were the quintessential animals of nineteenth-century Western cities. In this essay, I discuss why that was no longer true in the twentieth century. Although city dwellers always live with animals—parasites like pigeons, companions like cats—nineteenth-century Parisians distinguished the horse as ‘the most beautiful and the best cared for of our domestic animals’,¹ ‘the one that renders the most services to man’,² or ‘the first, without contradiction, of all our servants’.³ Horses were also the most ubiquitous, everyday and useful of urban animals. As the main motors for industrialising cities, horses saturated the streetscape, helping cities to operate and helping to define the urban.

Social and economic historians have long recognised horses as urban infrastructure in nineteenth-century Europe—powering machines; transporting people, goods and information; completing supply chains; and driving the urban economy—making the horse market a major economic sector.⁴ More recently, historians of technology have connected detailed analysis of horse power with urbanisation and industrialisation, showing that nineteenth-century

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industrialisation did not replace animal power with mechanical power, instead increasing the use of horses as ‘prime movers’ or ‘living machines’.5 Meanwhile, scholars in literary and cultural studies have analysed the cultural meanings produced in human-horse interactions, demonstrating that frequent human-horse contact in Western cities compelled on-going reflection on the categories ‘human’ and ‘animal’, as well as other categories like race and gender.6

My essay builds on these literatures by connecting analysis of how horses were used as a technology with analysis of the experience and meaning of horses in nineteenth-century Paris. As most existing literature analyses British and American cities, Paris can help put horse history in comparative perspective. I show that horse use saturated nineteenth-century Paris, becoming a primary site for negotiating human-animal relationships and the place of ‘nature’ in the city. As the horse population grew from about 10,000 to 15,000 in 1800 to 98,000 in 1900, horse use paradoxically became more foreign in Paris, contrary to changing concepts of humanity, urbanity, modernity, hygiene and civilisation. Beginning in the 1870s, as the dominant metaphors of city life shifted from organic to mechanical, horses seemed increasingly out of place amidst more aggressive campaigns for animal welfare, urban hygiene, and mechanical power. By 1913, Paris’ horse population shrunk to 55,000. In the twentieth century, horses were no longer the main motors of urban life, replaced by electricity and combustion engines.

My study of horse use must answer a deeper question: how were horses constructed as a technology? Horse use was supported by what I call ‘instrumentalisation’, the transformation of horses into tools. To ‘instrumentalise’ means to objectify and evaluate, to assign value and a normal or standard social use. Instrumentalisation constructs subjects and objects, calibrates means to ends, and scripts relationships between humans, technology and nature. Across the nineteenth century, instrumentalisation and use of horses inspired a

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