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## Book Review: Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity

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the first by Olivier Razac, then by me, and, most recently, by Reviel Netz. *Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity* builds on Netz's sagacious essay written for the *London Review of Books* (July 20, 2000).

All three books begin with the development of barbed wire on the Great Plains of America in the 1870s. An ingenious way to control livestock when there was a paucity of materials to construct effective and economical barriers, barbed wire had become "big business" by 1880. Reviled by cowboys and Native Americans but embraced by farmers for fencing in the open prairies, barbed wire tamed the West in ways that sat comfortably with a colonizing power.

From this rural economy where barbed wire is *able* to inflict injury on livestock, it's no great jump to that of the mechanized landscape of modern warfare where the wire *intends* to maim and to kill humans. Modernity embraced barbed wire; and this is nowhere more evident than in the Nazi concentration and death camps. In these terrible places electrically charged barbed-wire fences formed part of the official architecture. Netz negotiates this (now) familiar material in ways that establish a singular voice. His section on the Russian Gulag is one of the more convincing sections of the book; here his primary research into unpublished memoirs of the Stalinist period pays dividends.

Focussing on the victims of barbed wire, Netz maps a history that moves effortlessly from "the animal to the human"; a history, he suggests, that "took place precisely at the level of *flesh*, cutting across geographic as well as biological boundaries." At pains to connect barbed wire with a broader reading of modernity's desire to thwart "motion," he collapses a history of human control and violation with that of animals.

Yet when he moves without difficulty into the murder of Jews in the concentration camps, placing the "Final Solution" alongside that of cows on the Great Plains, I have very real problems. Netz raises a hugely provocative question, but the case he presents is not entirely convinc-

*Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity.* By Reviel Netz. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004. xiv + 267 pp. Maps, figures, notes, references, index. \$24.95.

The first years of this century were "barbed" in more ways than one. Three books were published in quick succession on barbed wire:

ing. Where, for example, are the references to the burgeoning literature on animal sensitivities and animal rights to sustain such a claim? This is one among other instances where Netz's provocative thesis is compromised by a polemic that is passionate and compassionate, to be sure, but which would benefit from a more rounded treatment of the material.

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