

## The Dynamic Relationships of Human-Horse Cooperation in Vienna

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The focus of the article is on working relationships between humans and horses in Vienna's *Fiaker* industry. Based on ethnographic research, the author shows that these horses are not merely tools, but working partners with their own agency. Analysis reveals that interspecies working practices are both intimate and political, connecting the past with contemporary challenges, and raising questions about tradition, animal welfare, and the role of animals in the urban environment.

▪ **Keywords:** horses, fiacre, work, Vienna, interspecies relationships research, domestication, farm animals

Članek obravnava delovne odnose med ljudmi in konji na fijakarskem Dunaju. Na podlagi etnografske raziskave avtor pokaže, da dunajski fijakarski konji niso zgolj orodja, temveč delovni partnerji z lastno tvornostjo. Analiza razkriva, da so medvrstne delovne prakse hkrati intimne in politične, povezujejo preteklost s sodobnimi izzivi ter na ta način odpirajo vprašanja o tradiciji, dobrobiti živali in vlogi živali v urbanem okolju.

▪ **Ključne besede:** konji, fijakar, delo, Dunaj, raziskovanje medvrstnih odnosov, udomačitev, kmetijske živali

### Introduction

Horses used in sightseeing carriage tours and wedding ceremonies in Vienna's city centre have a multifaceted role. This became evident during my ethnographic research on the working relationships between humans and horses in Austria's capital. For some Viennese residents, horse-drawn carriages and their drivers, known as the *Fiaker*, represent a traditional and institutionalized form of urban human-animal relations. Conversely, for others, they are seen as an outdated vestige of the past, with no place in a modern and progressive Austrian society. Domestic horses (*Equus caballus*) find themselves caught between these two opposing perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

This article highlights the complexities of more-than-human work collaboration in the tourism industry, where ambivalent relationships have emerged due to social, cultural, and political factors. I examine how the work alliance between the Viennese Municipality, certified coachmen, and trained horses enables their continued engagement

<sup>1</sup> While I acknowledge the welfarist viewpoint aimed towards these horses, I hereby only consider its veterinarian and ethological aspect. A broader welfarist approach, as advocated by e.g. Human-Animal Studies (DeMello, 2012) or Critical Animal Studies (ed. Nocella II et. al., 2014), given their political and militant undertone, may obscure the complexity of "direct" (Kozorog, 2023) relationships between humans and animals.

with Austria's capital. In Vienna, low-paid grooms and stable masters from South-eastern Europe, along with *Fiaker* and trained domestic horses, work together in the tourism industry under the banner of tradition and culture. Their partnership is crucial to maintaining the presence of this once-vital working animal in the urban setting that has historically been exclusionary toward more-than-human life (see Shingne, Reese, 2021).

To gain deeper insight into the researched topic, I engaged in daily conversations and active participation with *Fiaker*, while also contacting key institutions related to horse-drawn carriages. These included the Municipality of Vienna, the University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna, the Association Against Animal Factories (*Verein Gegen Tierfabriken*), and the Austrian branch of UNESCO, which decides whether the Viennese *Fiaker* should be granted the status of intangible cultural heritage or not. During this period, I conducted twenty semi-structured interviews.

My paper has two aims. First, I aim to highlight the conceptual importance of work relations. As Ursula Münster (2014: 426) has observed in the context of human-elephant collaboration in South India, labour is not solely a human activity; rather, as this article argues, it also involves human-animal entanglements. *Fiaker* have been living and working with horses for centuries, originally for transportation purposes throughout Imperial Vienna. It may be that horses have not only observed changes in Viennese society, but have influenced them as well. By contributing to the acquisition of specific skills and tasks, they have directly collaborated with, and actively participated in, the social life of the *Fiaker*. These types of human-horse relationships are formed through an intimate and highly integrated partnership that extends back millennia (see Druml, Grilz-Seger, 2023).

Drawing on a more-than-human perspective shaped by the multispecies studies approach to ethnography (see Kirksey, Helmreich, 2010), this article examines the dynamic human-horse relationships in a professional work environment. Completing a task without the horse's engagement is difficult. In practical terms this means that, if a horse does not want to work and pull a carriage, it will not do so. By analyzing human-horse relationships through the lens of labour, I aim to show that the work performed with such animals cannot be reduced to a purely utilitarian or instrumental relationship, nor can it be framed solely as an act of domination or enslavement (cf. Lainé, 2019). Thus, this perspective challenges the traditional view of domestication as a process of human control over animals (see Digard, 1990; cf. Raušl, 2023). Moreover, reliance on fear and domination is unsustainable in a long-term partnership between a *Fiaker* and his horses. My eleven-month-long ethnographic research conducted in 2022 and 2023 in Vienna has shown that horses' subjective commitment to work, their voluntary engagement of intelligence, their affectivity, their ability to communicate with humans, and their capacity to analyze and adapt to different situations must also be taken into consideration.

To understand cooperation in human-horse relationships, I draw on the thought of French sociologist Jocelyne Porcher and her concept of sociology of animal work (Porcher, 2007, 2011). Porcher's perspective on human-animal working relationships, rooted in Marxist theory yet shaped by her professional experience as a breeder and livestock industry worker, examines the multifaceted nature of animal work. She explores its instrumental rationale (the production of goods and services), its relational and moral dimensions (domination, cooperation, recognition, and affectivity), and its subjective qualities (pleasure and pain) (Mouret, Lainé, 2023: 3).

By analyzing these interspecies working collectives through the lens of labour, we can observe how work serves as a meeting point between the lived experiences of humans and animals. Within this framework, humans and animals not only coexist in a shared environment but actively shape and transform it through their joint efforts. Work, in essence, redefines the human-animal dynamics, integrating them into a collective reality that transcends conventional boundaries and creates a unique workplace that is new to both species (Porcher, Estebanez, 2019: 16–27).

The second aim of this paper is to emphasize the significance of both human and animal contributions to Vienna's tourism industry. Human-horse teams are a destination attraction, a phenomenon reinforced by symbolic horse-carriage marketing and material objects (e.g. souvenirs) (see Cloke, Perkins, 2005). This article argues that horse-drawn carriages have become the nexus of what Franklin (1999) calls the "zoological gaze", i.e. an integral part of Viennese leisure and tourism practices; yet this role is today evolving, at least in part, due to shifting attitudes toward the displayed activity of animals. My ethnography makes visible the subaltern work of both humans and domestic horses in shaping the symbolic image of Vienna that tourists today consume as a key component of Viennese cultural identity. I aim to show that within Vienna's urban political ecologies of tourism and tradition, ambivalent human-horse relations have emerged.

Just like *Fiaker*, horses have left their own imprint in the city's fabric. Their presence has shaped Vienna's ecological, political, and discursive social space. In examining human-horse relationships within Vienna's urban tourism industry, horses serve dual roles. As "tools" they are integral to the Municipality's tourism infrastructure, facilitating transportation and enhancing the cultural appeal of Vienna's historic streets. Simultaneously, they function as "labourers", with their physical efforts acknowledged as the Municipality and *Fiaker* ensure that these working horses receive a "good life" (see Porcher, Estebanez, 2019; cf. Haraway, 2008: 55–56; cf. Münster, 2014). A closer examination of human-horse relationships reveals that although they are politicized, they are nevertheless characterized by pleasure, affectivity, distress, and adaptation – all of which emerge from sustained proximity over time. Their personal relationship is revealed above all by working together.

## Theoretical framework: Cooperating and working with horses

Christophe Dejours's (2009; see also Dejours, 2012) concept of *ergonomics and psychodynamics of work* is especially relevant in analyzing the labour of farm animals. By focusing on the activity of work and the individual transformation it generates, we can observe that performing a task effectively is not merely about following rules, procedures, or organizational structures. Instead, effective work emerges from the interaction between established guidelines and the actions of individuals carrying out the tasks. It encompasses gestures, know-how, body involvement, the mobilization of intelligence, the capacity of reflection and interpretation, and the ability to react according to situations; it is the power to feel, think, and invent (Lainé, 2016: 185). Work is often carried out within a collective, where individuals collaborate towards a shared productive goal. As Dejours highlights, productivity – understood as the result of a common working task – does not stem from the utility of one individual to another but rather from their collective engagement in a productive activity. As Dejours (2009) reveals, cooperation is “the way in which, collectively, workers reshuffle, realign, readjust the coordination so that it becomes efficient” (Lainé, 2016: 186). Dejours thus emphasizes the distinction between coordination and cooperation.<sup>2</sup> While coordination is driven by a prescribed organization of work (following rules and orders to ensure the articulation of individual activities), cooperation is based on the intelligence of partnership that motivates an individual's actions (Mouret et al., 2019: 142). Cooperation presupposes a willingness on the part of all participants to engage jointly in the task at hand, fostering trust and mutual visibility among workers. Furthermore, when individuals contribute their distinct intelligence to create a shared dynamic, they form a labour collective – a team that has built its own rules through a *deontic activity*<sup>3</sup> and has established a space for deliberation, where these rules are openly discussed and refined (Lainé, 2016: 186). Beyond its focus on productivity, work also serves a relational purpose, fostering the creation of social bonds. In the context of human-animal labour, it engages in the sensory world, encompassing human attention and gestures towards the animal. As Donna Haraway (2008: 3) notes in relation to “becoming with”, the same applies to “working” – both human and animal are mutually transformed through the process. At work, *Fiaker* and horses share a daily routine and close physical proximity. By spending time together and sharing space, they strengthen their relational bonds.

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to emphasize that in the studied human–horse relationships, coordination and cooperation are not mutually exclusive but rather mark the opposite poles of the same continuum, with this interspecies relationship fluctuating along it.

<sup>3</sup> Deontic activity refers to the bonds people form to work together (Dejours, 2012: 101).

## Working for Vienna

While speaking with *Fiaker* in Vienna, it became evident that, for them, horse-drawn carriages are one of the city's main attractions. They often compared themselves to iconic landmarks like St. Stephen's Cathedral, Schönbrunn Palace, and the Vienna Boys' Choir. Many *Fiaker* emphasized their integral role in Vienna's culture and history, frequently drawing parallels to Venetian gondoliers. They highlighted the long-standing presence and importance of horse-drawn carriages in the city, often supporting their claims with references to their predecessors and Vienna's rich carriage-driving history. In most conversations, the coachmen described tradition as a fundamental element of their profession, shaping both their perception of Viennese horse-drawn carriage culture and their identification with it (see Poljak Istenič, 2012). Although Viennese *Fiaker* unsuccessfully applied for recognition of their profession as an intangible cultural heritage to the Austrian Commission for UNESCO in 2017, they nevertheless insist that, over time, they have organically become a living heritage of the city.<sup>4</sup>

It is reasonable to assume that this perspective is shaped by a positive evaluation of a long-standing practice, which has, in turn, transformed horse-drawn carriages into integral symbols of Viennese cultural identity. During this transformation, horse-drawn carriages underwent a process of heritagization and commodification for tourism purposes (for ethnographic examples see Helgadóttir, 2006; White, 2011; Talley, 2017; Sturød et. al., 2019; Adelman, 2021). It goes without saying that economic factors were the main reason for their transition into a leisure activity. French geographer Sylvine Pickel-Chevalier (2020: 3) accordingly notes that although certain long-established equestrian practices have been challenged by the modern world, they have also catalyzed a new awareness of identities and sparked concerns about their potential disappearance, concerns that are often intertwined with a particular relationship to time and history. Tourism has encouraged the reinvention and adaptation of Viennese urban equestrianism, thus ensuring the continuation of this practice within contemporary society (cf. Pickel-Chevalier, 2019). While increased regulation of the *Fiaker* and the assurance of adequate animal welfare have been the chief consequences of their integration into Vienna's tourism industry, other reinventions have also emerged, such as the inclusion of women in this traditionally male-dominated profession.<sup>5</sup>

The practice of horse-carriage driving is not merely a remnant of the past but an evolving equestrian culture (Adelman, Thompson, 2017). Since *Fiaker* are embedded

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<sup>4</sup> When I spoke with the representative of Austria's UNESCO Commission for Intangible Cultural Heritage, she cited two main reasons for the rejection of the *Fiaker*'s application. Firstly, the Commission had received numerous public complaints concerning the practice. Secondly, the application failed to demonstrate the existence of a clearly defined and cohesive community of carriage drivers supporting the tradition. According to several *Fiaker* I spoke with, they intend to submit a revised application in the near future.

<sup>5</sup> Gender dynamics are described in more detail in the Master's thesis (Raušl, 2024).

in socio-cultural processes such as industrialization, modernization, and globalization, certain ambiguities have emerged. While horse-drawn carriages continue to embody Vienna's historical charm, they have also faced increasing pressure to align with animal welfare movements, leading to debates over their place in an urban setting. External actors, primarily the Municipality of Vienna, ensured the continuation of this practice on a political level (cf. Bindi, 2020). It is therefore not surprising that, when I asked a municipal employee about the importance of horse-drawn carriages for the city, she stated: *"Horse-drawn carriages are part of the appearance of our city and contribute to the incomparable flair of Vienna, which inspires millions of tourists every year."*

Historically, being a *Fiaker* was a well-regarded and respected occupation in Viennese urban society during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>6</sup> During this time, *Fiaker* and their horses – primarily light thoroughbred Arabians and Lipizzaners, valued for their vitality and brisk trot – were an indispensable feature of Viennese daily life, essential for covering long urban distances (Druml, Grilz-Seger, 2023: 479–486). In a famous 1885 song titled *Fiakerlied*, Jewish composer Gustav Pick describes how *"A personal Fiaker was responsible for delicate matters. As such, he had to hear, bless, be silent, and be clever."*<sup>7</sup> During this period, numerous stage plays featuring coachmen were produced, such as the opera *The Fiaker as Marquis* (1821) and the folk theatre play *Glück in Wien* (1826) by Adolf Bäuerle. However, things began to change after the Second World War. Arno,<sup>8</sup> recollecting the many stories he was told, revealed that up until thirty years ago, this profession was often taken up by those who could not find other employment.

*The Fiaker were usually criminals. They spoke Rotwelsch, the argot of these social groups, so that others did not understand them and they could be doing some business [...]. They waited in front of the Stein prison for people to come out and offered them a job. "Come with me, you can learn to drive a carriage and you'll have work." One simply affirmed they wanted to be a coachman, was taken to a farm, participated for five days and on the sixth day was told: now do it on your own. And this is partly probably where this bad reputation comes from, because of this connection. [Arno 2022]*

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<sup>6</sup> The term *Fiaker* derives from Saint Fiaccus, an Irish hermit who emigrated to France in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Several towns and streets in France were named after him, including the Rue de Saint Fiacre in Paris, where horse-drawn carriages were first introduced for passenger transport in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. With the rise of French fashion and lifestyle in Vienna in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, French-style carriages appeared, and the term *Fiaker* entered the Austrian vocabulary around 1720 (Druml, Grilz-Seger, 2023: 479).

<sup>7</sup> Such as Prince Rudolf's personal *Fiaker*, Josef Bratfisch, commonly known as Nockerl, the only witness to the Mayerling tragedy.

<sup>8</sup> All personal names used in this article are pseudonyms.

What further reinforced the image of the *Fiaker* as “bad guys” in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was excessive alcohol consumption, which, as one older carriage driver named Albert lamented, became regarded “*as an image of Fiaker culture*”. Even though coachmen told me that some horses consume alcoholic beverages, mostly beer, most accidents in the city occurred when their human counterparts were intoxicated.<sup>9</sup> Rudy fondly reminisced during one such break:

*I mean [...] it was a big problem back then [alcohol]. The others, we called them the Warme Partie, they preferred cocoa. While the Tschecheranten [drinkers] ordered Fiaker goulash and a stein of beer, those guys asked for cookies and cocoa. But a proper coachman back then ate beef and drank wine! Honestly, how does it look if someone has a stiff hat on, drinks cocoa and munches on a brioche croissant? That's not a Fiaker!*  
[Rudy 2023]

With the reinvention and adaptation of this traditional equestrian culture, one that maintains a utilitarian and, when necessary, rough style of interaction with the animals, significant changes began to take shape. Austria's accession to the European Union in 1995 further accelerated this transformation, reshaping the working relationships between coachmen and horses through new regulations and evolving societal expectations. Due to the liberalization of markets, aimed at protecting individual trades, and the implementation of new economic and political regulations for the Viennese horse carriages, horses were now required to be managed within certain guidelines, and coachmen had to comply with newly established rules. In my conversations, particularly with older *Fiaker* who had experienced these changes firsthand, they often lamented the government's growing involvement in preserving horse-drawn carriages in the city. On one such occasion, Rudy remarked:

*You know, we were always here [in the city]. No one ever complained, but nowadays everybody oversees us. The municipality, the media, activists, the public. We're constantly being watched and judged and they tell us how we should handle our horses. Sometimes people don't understand that these are animals, not humans. We need to be in control of them, otherwise they'd kill themselves in the city. But if I do something that people don't agree with, I will be in the newspapers tomorrow. It can get annoying, [...] they don't work with horses every day like we do, and they think they know everything.* [Rudy 2023]

<sup>9</sup> Although alcohol consumption during working hours is now almost non-existent, I did occasionally observe it, particularly during the mandatory 30-minute rest periods the horses have to take after every two hours of work. During these breaks the drivers and horses would eat and drink together.

Policymakers from Vienna's Municipal Council dictate how horses are integrated into the urban fabric. In 1999, additional regulations were implemented to reduce the number of horse-drawn carriages in the city centre. This was done to lessen their impact on the First District and to regulate their operation more systematically.<sup>10</sup> Still under this system today, carriages with even-numbered registrations, marked with green concession cards, can operate on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, while those with odd-numbered registrations, marked with red cards, can work on the remaining days.<sup>11</sup> Legally, *Fiaker* are managed by Municipal Department 65 – Legal Affairs: Traffic and Transport (MA 65). To work as a coachman, individuals must obtain the Austrian Bronze Driving Badge (ÖFAB), which certifies their ability to handle horses in the city, maintain a clean criminal record, and possess the necessary equipment, stables, carriages, and a sufficient number of trained horses. The 324 horses officially approved for work are monitored by the Municipal Department 60 – Veterinary Services and Animal Protection (MA 60).

In 2015, the Municipality implemented a regulation requiring horses to stop working and return to the stables when the temperature in the city surpasses 35 degrees Celsius.<sup>12</sup> During one of my conversations with a veterinarian, she explained that horses can endure the city's scorching summer heats due to their adaptability. Horses are among the few animals that regulate their body temperature through sweating. To ensure their wellbeing, the Municipality has installed water stations at all five designated *Fiaker* stands in the city, where carriages are parked daily from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. During this time, veterinarians routinely conduct random checks to assess the horses' health and ensure drivers comply with the Austrian Animal Welfare Act. Additionally, to further enhance animal welfare, Vienna's Municipal Council implemented a regulation limiting each individual horse to a maximum of four working days per week or eighteen days per month. However, when I spoke to one of the veterinarians, she believed that this is at odds with their work rhythm:

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<sup>10</sup> In Vienna, traditional metal horseshoes damage historic city roads, causing an estimated €300,000–700,000 in annual repairs. To address this, the Municipality and the Veterinary Faculty developed synthetic horseshoes, which may also benefit horses. A veterinarian noted during my fieldwork that from an ethological and biomechanical perspective, horses wearing synthetic horseshoes took longer strides and appeared more comfortable walking on hard surfaces.

<sup>11</sup> The bigger the company is, the more horses and carriages it has, the more available concessions it gets per day. A private entrepreneur with only one carriage and four horses can therefore work only once per week because of the number of bigger companies in Vienna. Horse-carriages that are allowed to operate on a given day can drive anywhere on the roads in Vienna. Concessions do not include designated routes/areas where they can operate.

<sup>12</sup> In 2008, the Veterinary University of Vienna did a study on the influence of heat on horses while working. It is still the reference point for *Fiaker* when discussing heat-related topics, especially when heat reaches 35 degrees Celsius, as it asserted that the horses were not negatively affected by it. However, a close inspection of the study shows that on the days when heat influence on horses was examined, temperatures did not reach over 35 degrees Celsius. In 2025, the Veterinary University of Vienna launched a new study on the effects of temperature on horses in the city, which has concluded that heat does not negatively affect these working horses.

*These horses need quite a long time to get in the condition to do what they are doing, and they are very tired in the beginning, but you need to start slowly with two or three hours of work per day, and with training they are able to do this job for ten hours. By law horses have to stop working for three days, which is not good for these horses. Eighteen days working and thirteen days off is not good. This was the last new law, and to be honest, it's detrimental. [Veterinarian 1 2023]*

The city of Vienna strives to ensure that horses receive proper care by implementing various regulations for their management. The use of animals in tourism highlights the importance of animal welfare in shaping service quality, as people value the positive treatment of horses. Every detail regarding the horses' care affects how both the *Fiaker* and the city wish to present themselves. *Fiaker* see themselves as representatives of Vienna and of all communities whose lives are intertwined with working animals. They make efforts to educate guests about horse care and management, offering weekly stable tours for those interested in learning about the work behind the scenes. These initiatives aim to maintain transparency and foster a greater understanding of their profession. Since the horses are constantly in the public eye in the city centre, coachmen ensure they are well-groomed to meet public expectations. As a result, a veterinarian noted that most horses in Vienna today are intentionally overweight:

*If you look at the healthy horse, how does it look? It looks very skinny, athletic. And it's not suffering, their anatomy is simply like this. But if you have such a horse in the city, you'll get a fine, because their ribs are visible and the activists and public will cry. One should be able to see the ribs on a healthy horse! If not, the horse is too heavy. So, the tendency here is too fat, most of them are too fat. [...] Everyone will tell you that *Fiaker* horses are overweight ... but they want them that way, because of the people who have no idea about horses, to say that they look good. [Veterinarian 1 2023]*

The way horses are visually perceived by the public thus plays a significant role in shaping their presentation in the city. Their appearance must align with public expectations, thereby also enhancing their appeal to visitors.<sup>13</sup> When I asked *Fiaker* what primarily attracts people to their service, they consistently identified the horses as their main appeal. Johannes remarked on the importance of horses' agency in tourism: “We all know that this whole thing works just because of the horses, nobody takes a

<sup>13</sup> A *Fiaker* told me that tourists are more likely to book a ride if the horses are white, as they are deemed more attractive.

*carriage just to ride with me, nobody wants to ride just because of the carriage. They want to ride because of horses and pet the horses and it's good for tourism because of the horses.*" This strong emphasis on the horse as the central figure in tourism highlights their complex role within the city (see Notzke, 2017). While some view horses as part of the city's heritage and an essential aspect of the tourism industry, others raise ethical concerns about their use in an urban environment. The topic is a point of contention in Vienna, with some supporting the presence of working horses in the city and others opposing it. An activist I spoke with noted that the core issue lies in how people perceive the status of horses:

*From the scientific point of view, this is the controversy. For us they are like cats and dogs, and we want them to be treated like that. But if I talk to a Fiaker, they'll say horses are a working animal, that they need to work and they are there to work. I spoke to some Fiaker for two or three hours; we finally realized that this animal is a different kind of thing for them and for us. To them it's a working animal that must work, to me they are pets. And this is where we will never see eye to eye. We could even agree on treating them right, but this basic thing, this is just a completely different worldview. [Activist 2023]*

Opinions about horses in the city reflect a divide between their illustrative representation as symbols of leisure and their practical function as working animals. Likewise, these opinions are closely tied to social classes (see Kozorog, 2023).<sup>14</sup> During fieldwork, it became clear that coachmen and horses form strong emotional and affective bonds regardless of the distinction. *Fiaker* Tobias highlighted the fluidity of a horse's status, noting: "*They are a kind of pet, but also a kind of working animal. The relation is the same, we have a very close relationship, but we see horses as they are and not as people want them to be, there is no romanticizing of horses.*" Importantly, the working relationship does not diminish the depth of connection between humans and horses; rather, it strengthens it. This bond is best understood as a dynamic balance between two forms of interaction: working together and providing companionship. These roles shift and complement each other across different contexts and over time (see Mouret, 2019). Through work, a horse's role becomes more significant, reinforcing its individuality and value in the human-animal relationship – an idea we will explore further in the following discussion.

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<sup>14</sup> For farmers and rural communities, as well as the military and police, horses are primarily valued as indispensable working animals, while for the middle and upper classes, horses symbolize status and privilege, often reserved for sports, hunting, and leisure (see Digard, 2004, 2007).



Figure 1: Fiaker manoeuvring his horses. Photo: Gašper Raušl, Vienna, 2023.

### Collaborative labour

Coachmanship, which requires a deep understanding of animals' habits and behaviours, is built on trust and intelligence. Working with horses is also an embodied experience that aligns with Tim Ingold's concept of *sentient ecology*, which prioritizes knowledge derived from careful observation of animals' actions, vocalizations, and bodily expressions (Ingold, 2000: 25; see Smerdel, 2023). At the same time, it should be stressed that animal work relies not on instinct but on knowledge acquired during the process of professionalization (Porcher, Estebanez, 2019: 26; for ethnographic example see Porcher, Lécrivain, 2012). This process consists of education and training indispensable for carriage horses. The carefully selected animals must acquire specific skills that are crucial for effective performance in an urban setting.<sup>15</sup> During conversations with *Fiaker*, they often referred to *school* as a synonym for *training* and described trust as an essential part of their relationship with the horses.<sup>16</sup> Arno highlighted this point when he shared his perspective on working with horses:

<sup>15</sup> Viennese *Fiaker* believe the skills and knowledge possessed by working horses are acquired through training, but are also conditioned by genetics shaped by selective breeding.

<sup>16</sup> Each horse must successfully complete one level of training before advancing to another.



*They [the horses] have to trust us, and we should trust them. If you're nervous when driving, a horse becomes nervous. If you're relaxed, the horse becomes relaxed, but it also works the opposite way. Because if you spend a lot of time with horses, you start to take on a little bit of their mentality, or how they think. You don't care ahead; you're also in the moment. If you're not in the moment and present with the horse, you can't build up connection. [Arno 2022]*

However, the trust that horses place in humans is an ambivalent form of intimacy. What Arno interprets as the horses' trust in humans is, in reality, an acquired trait, obtained through extensive training to which these working horses are subjected. The main goal of this process is to desensitize the animals to various stimuli they might encounter in the urban setting.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the training is designed to prepare the horses for specific and demanding work objectives (see Mulier, Müller, 2019: 169). One of the most specialized tasks these horses need to master is turning a carriage on a two-way road in the city. To accomplish this, they must learn a manoeuvre called the *Kurzkehrt*, a precise turn performed while hitched to a carriage. In this movement, the horse crosses one leg over the other in a controlled manner, allowing the carriage to pivot smoothly on its rear wheels. To execute *Kurzkehrt* correctly, the horse must lighten its front legs and take deliberate, measured steps with its hind legs, which act as the carriage's pivot point. This technique ensures a seamless and efficient rotation, demonstrating the complexity and skill involved in carriage driving.<sup>18</sup>

Education and training therefore prepare the animal to actively participate in the working process. At the same time, this distinction sets professional horses apart from non-professional animals of the same species, which are unable to perform the same tasks. Training allows horses to be fully integrated into the world of *Fiaker*, where their lives and careers are interconnected, and their skills mutually dependent (for ethnographic examples see Mouret, 2019; Mouret et al., 2019). Importantly, other horses also play a role in this year-and-a-half-long training process. A key strategy in equine training is pairing an inexperienced horse with an experienced one. The seasoned horse acts as a mentor, guiding the younger one through observation and imitation while hitched to a carriage as a pair. Elena notes that a similar dynamic emerges when a new coachman joins her working collective:

*I always put new Fiaker with a trained horse. Young drivers, old horses, always. Horses teach them. [...] Young rider, old horse, young horses,*

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<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the goal of training army and police dogs (see Mouret, Porcher and Mainix, 2019), as well as assistance dogs (see Mouret, 2019), is to repress their instincts to a certain degree in order to handle unexpected situations.

<sup>18</sup> This manoeuvre is part of the exam for the driving licence for a horse-carriage driver in Vienna.

*old drivers. During this phase, they have to go with other drivers minimum three months. They have to train a lot, and in the beginning there is a lot of risk present, for all my horses and drivers. Normally they have one or two little accidents. It's usually because they don't turn fast enough and their carriages hit other cars, it's just a small fine. [Elena 2023]*

While this structured system of education and training helps prepare both horses and humans for the demands of working in the city, it also reveals the limits of adaptability and underscores the individuality of each horse. The accounts of my interlocutors made it clear that not every horse is suited for this kind of work. Horses that do not adapt are assigned different roles. On one of the farms I visited, there were therapy horses for children with special needs. Coachmen that work there explained that they underwent the same training as other *Fiaker* horses, but their temperament and personality made them better suited for a human-animal relationship centred on emotional care and interaction, rather than practical tasks like pulling a carriage (Porcher, 2017: 310).<sup>19</sup>

Because of that, *Fiaker* must carefully observe each horse's behaviour to assess whether the work is suitable for the animal or if modifications to the approach, or even removal from the activity, are required. Therefore, an important part of working with horses is understanding their facial expressions. As Arno explained, "*A horse's face tells you stories, but you have to learn it.*" Many studies have been carried out on equine facial expressions.<sup>20</sup> When interpreting them, *Fiaker* must pay attention to several key factors: the tension in the nostrils, the prominence of the masseter muscles, the tension above the eyes, the width of the eyelid opening, and whether the ears are persistently held stiffly backward. Furthermore, ethological knowledge is especially critical when a new horse joins the working collective. When a new horse begins work, *Fiaker* anxiously wait for it to urinate in the city, as this is a sign that the horse is relaxed. A veterinarian explained:

*New horses also don't like to pee, that can be a problem. When they come back to their box, they release twenty litres of water [...] because if they hold it in for a long time, they can also get sick. The first days you are really worried if they don't pee. Once a horse pees in the city, they will always pee. This means that they accepted this job. [Veterinarian 2 2022]*

<sup>19</sup> Moreover, a horse's character can change over the course of their career. For example, Arno recounted that one of their horses "*simply decided it won't work anymore after five years of pulling a carriage. I can't force it.*"

<sup>20</sup> The Horse Grimace Scale (HGS) is a standardized method in veterinary science for assessing pain in horses by systematically evaluating changes in their facial expressions.

*Fiaker* often emphasized that flexibility and adaptability are important in managing these human-animal entanglements. Both species must continuously respond to shifting circumstances in their shared work. Their interspecies working relationship relies on teamwork, not only among humans and horses but also between horses themselves. Nevertheless, this dynamic interspecies interplay unfolds within a structured work environment.

On the farm where I conducted most of my fieldwork, both humans and horses adhere to established work procedures. A division of labour, dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, has produced a hierarchical structure among farm workers. At the top of this hierarchy is the experienced *Fiaker*. Grooms prepare everything for him in the morning before he arrives at the stables, allowing him to spend the entire day working with the horses. This arrangement is partly driven by the coachmen's aim of leaving the stables as quickly as possible to secure the best spots at the carriage stands. The first *Fiaker* in line claims the most favourable position – a situation they refer to as “*auf dem Guck stehen*”. Historically, this phrase was used in prisons, where inmates could only peer out from their cells through a small window (*Guck*), a usage that harks back to their past associations with criminal activity. The groom's role in preparing the horses for the workday is crucial, as he ensures that the animals are ready for their tasks. However, not all *Fiaker* adhere to this division of labour. As Lukas explained: “*For me it's unthinkable that I let someone else do my stuff. Firstly, it's my pride to have my equipment and horse prepared together, and secondly, the relationship with the horse is stronger when you clean it yourself and talk to it in the morning.*”

Experienced coachmen enforce internal rules on the farm and ensure that grooms treat the horses properly. Younger coachmen face pressure from the veterans to prove they possess the qualities of a true Viennese *Fiaker* and to master the unique challenges of handling horses in the city centre. During their first year, young coachmen are given a nickname and are subjected to a series of tests. As Johannes described it: “*We, the veterans, closely observe how they behave around horses and handle themselves in tricky situations. We watch how they respond to the observations of others and whether they assist us when asked.*” At the bottom of the hierarchical order are the *Wasserman* and grooms, responsible for watering the horses and cleaning manure from their dirt bags. Grooms are mostly seasonal workers from Eastern Europe and the Balkans, who came to Vienna to earn money. They have the most physical contact with the horses – sleeping beside them in a custom-built extension of the stable, washing, grooming, and harnessing them daily. Through these routines they develop intimate, personalized working relationships with the animals. However, despite their close bonds with the horses, grooms hold the lowest status in the stable hierarchy (see Fox, 2005). Yet these hierarchical boundaries are porous, as all the men involved share a genuine interest in working with horses. *Fiaker* nevertheless often reminisce about their career progression from once performing the “dirty” work to now guiding horses through the city.



Figure 2: Groom harnessing horses. Photo: Gašper Raušl, Vienna, 2023.

When applying the rules of this interspecies work in the city centre, they primarily focus on ensuring the safety of both humans and horses. Horses must follow specific guidelines, including: remaining calm on command (even a simple leg movement can be dangerous) for as long as required; tolerating contact from passersby (some horses do not accept it); staying attentive to the rider's instructions; avoiding independent actions (especially crucial when clients are boarding or exiting the carriage); cooperating with their working partner without conflict; respecting their partner when moving (adjusting stride and speed); offering reassurance in moments of fear to help restore balance as a pair. It is important to note that not every horse is compatible with every partner. *Fiaker* must carefully observe their horses' behaviour to form well-matched pairs, both physically and temperamentally. Tobias emphasized this, stressing that the coachman must be in harmony with the horses: *“Just as coachmen cannot work with every pair of horses, so a horse cannot work with every horse.”* When harnessing horses, grooms must follow strict workplace protocols, including placing the horses in their designated positions. Each horse is accustomed to being either on the left (L) or the right (R) side of the carriage, and these positions are generally fixed. However, every so often their places are switched to provide the animals with a new physical and mental challenge.

In our conversations, *Fiaker* frequently emphasized the importance of their equine counterparts, as well as the importance of their physical environment, i.e. carriages, horse tack etc. They often referred to themselves as *Zeugln*, which in the Viennese dialect refers to the horses, carriage, and coachman as a single entity. For horses to maximize their traction force and prevent injuries during work, they must be properly harnessed with various accessories.<sup>21</sup> During one of our carriage rides, Tobias underlined the

<sup>21</sup> The act of harnessing serves as a cue for horses to distinguish between work and rest. It structures the animals' behaviour within temporal and spatial parameters, and becomes an object with certain normativity (see Mouret, 2019: 107).

importance of the whip and tug strap. The latter (*Zugriemen*) serves as a key indicator of which horse is exerting more effort when pulling the carriage, depending on how tight or loose the strap is. The whip is the most important piece of equipment that coachmen use in combination with their voice when driving a horse-drawn carriage. It functions similarly to a rider's legs when mounted, serving as a means of communication rather than punishment. In addition, the coachman's voice – combined with precise gestures – plays a crucial role in guiding the horses. It must remain omnipresent for several reasons, the most important being to reassure the horses and command them with confidence using a low, steady tone. Commands such as changes in pace and direction, alerting the horses to potential tense situations, and offering praise are all conveyed through a coordinated interplay of the whip and vocal cues. The effectiveness of these commands relies on the precise synchronization of gesture and voice. Ultimately, the technical and affective knowledge possessed by both humans and horses is complementary, reinforcing their partnership in the working process.

Harnesses are marked with the horses' names, and each horse is fitted with a custom mouthpiece. An ill-fitting mouthpiece can cause confusion and discomfort, or even significant pain while pulling the carriage. During training, it is crucial to determine the best-fitting mouthpiece for each horse to ensure effectiveness and comfort. *“To achieve an optimal driving experience so that the horse and the coachman are in harmony with each other”*, Tobias explained. Each component of the harness serves a specific function, except for the so-called *Aufsatzhaken* (attachment hook), a remnant of the Baroque period. Originally, this hook was designed to prevent horses from lowering their head, since the aesthetic ideals of the time demanded a constant upright posture. Although the *Aufsatzhaken* remains part of the harness, its function is now obsolete as modern regulations prohibit restricting a horse's movement in such a way.

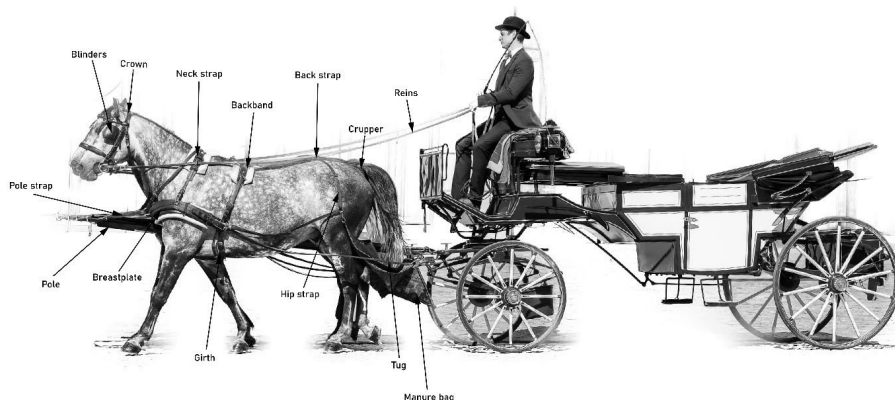


Figure 3: Components of a horse harness. Photo: Gašper Raušl, Vienna, 2023.

While procedures provide important guidelines for both humans and horses, my ethnography has revealed that real labour often contrasts with prescribed procedures. For example, when a groom found a rope too short while harnessing a horse, he left to retrieve another, trusting the horse to remain still – despite protocol requiring someone to stand in front of the horse at all times. In this instance, the groom relied on experience rather than strictly adhering to the rule. Similarly, my observations during carriage rides demonstrate that horses often take initiative beyond procedural expectations. At intersections, they instinctively stop or start at traffic lights without waiting for a direct command from the driver.<sup>22</sup> Testimonies from *Fiaker* also illustrate how their emotional connection with the horses shapes their decisions and sometimes leads them to challenge established rules. For example, they refuse to take routes that are too crowded or narrow, knowing these conditions would stress the horses. In the summer months, they deliberately avoid high speeds on busy roads to prevent overexertion. As Tobias explained: *“If a horse sweats, that’s normal, but I don’t want to force it to do cardio all day.”* This interspecies working relationship is built not only on human and animal expertise but also on trust, intuition, and emotional connection.

Properly managing their animals is their top priority, not only because of the emotional attachment they develop, but also due to the economic benefits the horses bring to the company. Elena explained that horses must be compensated for their work, stating: *“If a horse works 25 years for my company, earned money for me, it deserves to be taken care of.”* This principle becomes especially evident when carriage horses reach an age where they can no longer physically endure the workload. In such cases, carriage companies in Vienna retire their working horses to farms in Lower Austria. Throughout my fieldwork, the care and retirement of these horses were often presented to me as a fair exchange for the years of labour they provided.<sup>23</sup> Elena further emphasized this perspective, describing work as a reciprocal relationship between a horse and its handler:

*But I always say it’s not a one-way relationship. I work with my horses, I live off my horses, we work together and most of the money we earn together goes back to the horses. The driver gets the money and the horse gets the veterinary treatment, food to eat, shelter; they get their breaks outside on the countryside. I give it something and it gives me something. It goes both ways. It’s not like they are my slaves and I only control them. [Elena 2023]*

<sup>22</sup> Experienced horses know that red means ‘stop’ and green means ‘go’.

<sup>23</sup> Since these horses are used to a certain work routine which some of them have carried out for over twenty years, decreasing their activity must be gradual. When a carriage horse retires, the coachman reduces its workload day by day to prepare it for pension. They do this to prevent the horse from going into shock if it suddenly stops working overnight.

Coachmen's recognition and appreciation of their horses' labour is primarily conveyed through attentive care and carefully managed feeding. Each workhorse is provided with a diet calibrated to its workload and level of physical activity, with veterinarians tailoring nutritional plans to meet individual needs. As part of the legally mandated care, these horses must also undergo compulsory vaccination. This regulation prohibits their entry into the food chain, meaning they cannot be sent to slaughter or consumed once they are no longer able to work. Despite their status as working animals, coachmen express deep appreciation for their horses, even after retirement from work. Reflecting on the appearance and demeanour of *Fiaker*, a veterinarian at the university clinic remarked: "*Not your typical horse ladies who like glitter and pink stuff, so to say. They are more like farmers, you know.*" She went on to share a story about a horse that had once been in their care:

*We had one old Fiaker horse here at the clinic that was really sick, it almost didn't make sense to treat it. And they [the owners] said that even though this horse can't drive anymore, they wanted it to survive, and so they put a lot of money towards that. It was even more expensive than the surgery, because we needed to get the horse infusion and very expensive medicine, the horse went home after more than a month. The owner said this horse worked diligently, they felt like they owed this horse. And they got the money no matter what, so the horse got better, and we didn't euthanize it. [Veterinarian 3 2022]*

While attachment is an important element in human-horse relationships, excessive attachment can be problematic. As Tobias explains: "*I don't have a favourite, that's a bad thing to pick a favourite [...] because then you treat them differently and that's not good.*" Jocelyne Porcher (2017: 312) notes that being too emotionally attached exposes one to suffering. The relationship between humans and horses must be carefully managed, not only to maintain professional boundaries but also due to the potential risks posed by the horse's size and strength.

Because this work is carried out by both humans and animals, the working relationship is inherently interspecies. Cooperation requires not only adhering to established rules, but also the capacity to flexibly respond to situational demands within those normative frameworks. When one horse in a usual pair is unavailable, the first step is to determine which horse will take its place. This decision must consider the coachman's preferences as well as the horses' compatibility. A successful reorganization of work therefore depends on teamwork among humans, between humans and horses, and among the horses themselves.

### Some concluding notes and considerations

This paper's ethnographic insights and theoretical reflections contribute to ongoing debates within the anthropology of human–animal relations, particularly in the context of farm animals. Despite the relative scarcity of contemporary anthropological engagement with this topic (see Baskar, 2023), close attention to interspecies encounters with farm animals, such as those between humans and domestic horses in Vienna, reveals a domain of profound analytical complexity and theoretical significance.

At the heart of these encounters lies a shared world structured around labour. Living with these horses, above all, means working with them. This labour-based relationship in an urban setting not only shapes interspecies bonds but also brings together a diverse range of human actors – policy makers, veterinary officials, politicians, subaltern workers, animal rights activists, tourists – each guided by competing ideas of tradition, modernity, and nature. However, the horses themselves also participate actively in this dynamic assemblage.

These entanglements spark broader debates, often rooted in persistent dualisms: tradition versus modernity, rurality versus urbanity, nature versus culture. The discussions further intersect with evolving perceptions of horses as working animals, as opposed to pets or companions. My ethnographic findings suggest that animal labour has given rise to complex and ambivalent relationships that are simultaneously intimate and political.

Ethnographic accounts of daily interactions between humans and horses reveal that these relationships are forged not only through mutual affection, care, and trust – elements essential for successful interspecies labour collaboration in urban settings – but also within the structural forces and evolving societal norms that shape them. Likewise, human and animal labour is deeply relational, requiring adaptive collaboration and situated judgment from both participants.

By closely examining these dynamics, I aimed to challenge simplistic narratives of exploitation and human dominance associated with domestication, which are still frequently considered as sufficient explanations for animals' involvement in labour and their apparent willingness to participate (Porcher, 2017: 306). Ethnographic accounts of living and working with animals revealed the importance of horses' subjective engagement in work and highlighted the intersubjective relationships formed between humans and horses in the workplace. Yet this delicate collaboration is under increasing pressure.

As social norms continue to shift, the role of animal labour in Western societies is being progressively questioned.<sup>24</sup> In Vienna, too, the workhorse may soon lose its relevance and active role that it still holds today. Whether tourism, culture, and tradition

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<sup>24</sup> This trend is not unprecedented, particularly in Africa, which has the world's largest population of working equids (see Starkey, 2011).

can sustain its presence remains to be seen. What can, however, already be observed is that their cohabitation in an urban environment is possible only when humans and trained domestic horses work together.

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### Research data statement

The author states that the article is based on ethnographic research materials that are not classified as research data. All additional information concerning the ethnographic research materials are available on reasonable request with the author.

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### Dinamika odnosov v sodelovanju ljudi in konjev na Dunaju

Odnosi med ljudmi in konji v dunajski fijakarski tradiciji predstavljajo eno izmed osrednjih tem prispevka, ki obravnava to dolgo prisotno, a v zadnjem času vse bolj problematizirano prakso v mestnem okolju. Raziskava na podlagi etnografije, ki je združila opazovanje z udeležbo, pogovore in intervjuje s fijakarji, delavci na kmetiji, veterinarji, občinskimi uradniki, aktivisti ter številnimi drugimi udeleženci, pokaže, da konji niso zgolj orodja in prevozno sredstvo, temveč delovni partnerji, ki s svojo inteligenco, čustveno odzivnostjo in sposobnostjo prilagajanja dejavno prispevajo k opravljanju dela. Etnografija je pokazala, da je pri delu bistvena tvornost konj, saj brez njihovega sodelovanja medvrstna delovna skupina ne bi mogla delovati.

V prispevku so analizirani različni vidiki medvrstnih odnosov: od usposabljanja konj za delo in vsakodnevne rutine do regulacij, ki jih oblikuje politika, ter simbolnega pomena, ki ga imajo konji v dunajskem turizmu in kulturni dediščini. Dunajski fijakarji so postali simbol in promocija avstrijske prestolnice, hkrati pa so predmet razprav o dobrobiti živali, etiki in vlogi tradicije v sodobni urbani družbi. Konji v tej praksi zavzemajo ambivalenten položaj, saj so na eni strani predstavljeni kot kulturne ikone, na drugi pa kot delovne živali, kar razkriva preplet tradicije in modernosti ter raznolike poglede stroke, javnosti in politike.

Članek predstavi, da medvrstno delo ni zgolj utilitarna praksa, temveč predvsem intimna in politična izkušnja, ki oblikuje odnose, skrb in sodelovanje med ljudmi in konji. Tovrstne interakcije dokazujejo, da so ljudje in konji soudeleženi v delovnem procesu, v katerem soustvarjajo delovno okolje. Prispevek odpira širša vprašanja o prihodnosti delovnih živali ter opozarja, da mestna okolja niso *a priori* neprimerna za konje.