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COMPETING DISCOURSES OF FARM ANIMAL WELFARE AND AGRI-FOOD RESTRUCTURING

Editorial

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In the past twenty years, growing attention has been given to human–animal relationships in the social sciences and in the humanities (Kalof and Fitzgerald 2007). Most of this literature has been concerned with constructing a historical understanding of the ways in which animals have been cared for or mistreated by humans (Franklin 1999; Eder 1996). Recent studies have underlined how attitudes and emotions involving animals range from those of love and compassion (Haraway 2008; Serpell 1986) to inattention and indifference (Fudge 2002a, 2002b) to violence and power (Adams 1990). Erica Fudge (2002a) reminds us that as humans we have placed different animals into different categories, according to notions of species, usefulness, domesticity or wildness. As a result of these varying and often contested orderings, animals are assigned to particular places and spaces.

In this special issue, we turn our attention to the places and spaces inhabited by farm animals and the practices humans engage with them. The contributors of this special issue explore, from different disciplines and perspectives, the complex entanglements of human and non-human animals in practices of animal science research, farming, market governance (through standards for animal products) and in practices of consumption in the specific geography of ‘Northern’ countries, more specifically Europe and the United States.

The papers in this collection assemble the bodies of farm animals and look at how an idea of welfare intervenes in their circulation, as animals or animal products, in discursive as well as practical ways. One could say that the special issue suggests a journey in the *making* and the *un-making* of the farm animal body, from the design in the lab to the brands associated to the animal products on the supermarket shelf.

The first place that we encounter is the scientific laboratory and the space of animal science research. In his article, Richard Twine examines the ‘*geneticization*’ of animal welfare research or, adopting Sarah Franklin’s perspective, what we might call ‘doing ethics by design’ (Franklin in Haraway 2008). Twine looks at the potential impact of genetics and genomics on animal welfare science, arguing that the ambivalence of welfare and production becomes especially salient around the idea of animal ‘health’, which can be taken to signify both welfare and production. Drawing upon interviews with animal scientists, Twine’s paper explores the tensions of this ambivalence in practice and the economic shaping of animal genomics and welfare. Although social and ethical considerations are increasingly on the agenda, it is suggested that they can only gain a limited foothold, due to both the commercial outlook of *agricultural science* and the economic constraints of contemporary global agriculture.

Elizabeth Ransom takes us to the new places of the political and commercial governance of animal welfare and looks at the emergence and development of new food standards.

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She points to the fact that there has been an explosion of agricultural animal welfare standards in recent years. This has coincided with an increase in all types of standards in the agri-food sector (e.g. food safety, food quality, environmental standards). With the increasing importance of standards, however, a shift has occurred from the use of standards as technical tools for market homogeneity (e.g. ISO, Codex Alimentarius), to the use of standards as strategic tools for accessing markets, coordinating systems, enhancing quality and safety assurance, product branding, and creating niche markets (Giovannucci and Reardon 2000; Reardon et al. 2001). This new form of governmentality (Miele et al. 2005) with its emphasis on the use of standards has occurred as the regulation of agri-food systems has shifted: whereas nation-states used to be the primary regulators of agri-food systems, the new agri-food terrain now includes not only nation-states, but also global governance organizations (e.g. World Trade Organization, WTO), multilateral and regional regulatory schemes (e.g. the European Union, EU) and private sector organisations, including transnational corporations (e.g. Cargill, Wal-Mart) (McMichael 2004; Higgins and Lawrence 2005; Scholte 2000).

While much of the existing literature relies on consumer-demand arguments for explaining the rise of animal welfare standards, Ransom's article uses sociological neo-institutionalism, specifically institutional isomorphism, to reveal that agri-food organizations are either forced by large food retailers or by the demands of interacting with other complex organizations (see also Friedberg 2004) to adopt animal welfare standards in an effort to maintain access to markets, political power and legitimacy (e.g. to endorse policies of Corporate Social Responsibility). Further, due to the continuing uncertainty surrounding the definition of agricultural animal welfare and the standards and techniques used to ensure compliance, the evidence supports the theory that organizations will model themselves after similar organizations that they perceive to be more legitimate or successful.

Henry Buller and Christine Cesar's article looks at how the welfare of farm animals is presented in the market place and, looking at a case of retailer strategies for animal products in France, they suggest that, although the welfare of farm animals is increasingly incorporated into notions of quality within the food chain, this is rarely an explicit component. Rather, claims about the quality of life of animals are bundled with a number of related environmental, health and territorial 'goods' to create a composite construction of product quality that differentially conceals and makes visible the animal's life and its setting. Buller and Cesar's paper examines the manner in which these bundled 'goods' are assembled during the commercialization process of animal products and considers the place of animal welfare within the bundling. As a strategy of market segmentation, the differential concealment and valorization of animal lives within the process of commercialization reveals, they argue, food chain actors' perceptions of an enduring tension in contemporary social attitudes towards farm animals and their transformation into meat products. This demonstrates not only ethical pluralism but also a necessary distancing that issues of welfare are having to confront. As such, the paper identifies the shifting discourses of 'quality' that are assembled around the product and the intended meanings as communicated to consumers.

The bundling of animal welfare claims with other quality characteristics as well as the distancing of the products from the animals, promoted by the supply-chain actors described by Buller and Cesar, suggest a growing ambivalence of European citizens towards purchasing animal products (Eurobarometer 2005, 2006; Kjaernes et al. 2007). Consumers' ambivalence about consumption of animal foods is also addressed in the article by Mayfield, Bennet, Tranter and Woolridge. They argue that the utilitarian

principle has informed a large part of the ethical debate, both in the past and in the present, concerning the interrelationships between humans and other animals, the use of non-human animals, and the obligations that we may have towards them (e.g. Singer 1975, 1989). In the social sciences, neoclassical economists have proposed a simplified model of consumer behaviour based on the utilitarian principle where consumers can be thought of as trying to maximize their utility from consumption. Within this model, Bennet (1995) has argued that animal welfare can be interpreted as an unsought 'externality' of the production and consumption of animal products. However, there are multiple perceptions of this 'externality': for some, the suffering of animals provides a reason for avoiding partially or completely the consumption of animal products and for becoming vegetarian or vegan; for others, it reduces the satisfaction (net-utility) that they obtain from the consumption of animal foods. These authors present the results of a recently conducted survey of European consumers (see also, Kjaernes et al. 2007) and they analyse how consumers in the UK, Sweden and Italy think differently about animal welfare and respond variably to the new marketing practices that offer animal *friendliness* by way of product labelling, welfare grading systems and food assurance marks. They point to the presence of a remarkable number of consumers that do not think about the animals when they shop for food. However, they also found some evidence of a growing number of consumers experiencing *cognitive dissonance* (from thinking about the suffering of animals for producing foods) and indications of the presence of high *transaction costs* for sourcing animal-friendly products (e.g. difficulties in identifying animal-friendly products on the market and limited availability or range of products).

Mayfield et al. argue that the utilitarian argument brings into question the merits of providing greater information to consumers about animal production methods, a policy suggested by many policy-makers within the EU as a means of generating 'demand pull' to improve the welfare of animals. Consumers may be blissfully unaware (or '*actively ignorant*', as Evans and Miele (forthcoming) put it) of the suffering of animals associated with the products they consume and derive high levels of utility from their consumption. Information on production methods may reduce consumers' utility and thus their overall welfare. From a *human utilitarian* position, this is not desirable, at least in the short term. In the longer run, the argument is that with appropriate information on animal welfare, consumers can demand the products with the animal welfare attributes that they want and so better satisfy their preferences and improve their welfare. In addition, if *animal utility* also becomes part of the equation (either in its own right or as a function of human utility), it will further strengthen the argument for improved consumer information on animal welfare and improved consumer choice.

The Vanhonacker, Verbeke, Van Poucke and Tuytens article addresses consumer concerns about farm animal welfare and, through a case study of Belgian consumers, it explores which type of citizen-consumer is more likely to translate their concerns into shopping behaviour. They identify shortcomings in the current marketing literature about animal welfare, which addresses separately citizens concerns for animal welfare and consumers' behaviour towards the acquisition of animal foods. Vanhonacker et al. maintain that, at present, there is a lack of studies that combine citizen and consumer perspectives on farm animal welfare, i.e. studies that consider both variations in citizen attitudes toward animal welfare on the one hand, and variations in the impact of animal welfare as a product attribute on consumers' food-choice decisions on the other. Such studies are relevant because the market for high-welfare products is rapidly evolving. In their case study, Vanhonacker et al. identify four groups of consumers who differ in their concern and interest in animal welfare as citizens and their readiness to engage as

consumers: two groups are clearly identified as high versus low concern and concomitant high and low readiness to engage as consumers. The other group is less consistent in its attitude and behaviour with moderate-to-low interest and moderate-to-low readiness to engage. Analysing the composition of the group more closely, the authors underline how the level of concern and engagement may be linked to residence (urban/rural), age, gender, family size, education and food habits. To summarize, the authors suggest that current and future consumers of animal-friendly foods are most likely to be found among the young, well-educated, urban, female population, living as single or in small households, and those who had experienced or are familiar with vegetarianism. They are concerned most with the welfare of farm animals and are most ready to translate their concern as citizens into consumption behaviour.

Similarly to Mayfield et al., the paper by Vanhonacker et al. aims to identify a tool (i.e. a strategy for market segmentation) in order to understand how to make welfare-friendly produced foods relevant to different consumers and how to position these products in a competitive marketing environment. Moreover, they suggest that the identification of different segments based on these two dimensions can help to better understand different viewpoints within society (the citizen–consumer duality), yielding a valuable basis to improve the societal (public and market-related) debate about the issue.

The next two articles consider the issue of animal welfare from the perspective of farmers and they both look at how the concern for the welfare of farm animals is enacted in farming practices.

The majority of the animal rights and animal welfare literature is highly critical of modern farming systems (Fraser 2001; Porcher 2006). This literature's mention of animal suffering in modern farming practices and 'factory farming' is a derogatory term used to denounce the cruelty of treating animals as mere means of production (Johnson 1991; Singer and Mason 2006). Animal rights movements more likely target farmers than other supply-chain actors for unethical behaviour towards animals and tend to define livestock farming as a cruel practice (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). Hence, it is not surprising that animal welfare is a highly contested issue among farmers; they feel misunderstood, wrongly accused and unacknowledged in 'naturally' caring for and about animals as part of their expertise and knowledge. At the same time, they admit that they are under pressure to produce as cheaply and efficiently as possible, which limits the room for animal friendliness (Bock and Van Huik 2007). So far, little is known about the experiences of farmers, their construction of animal welfare and the differences among them.¹

Of the two articles about animal welfare as seen through the eyes of farmers included in this special issue, the first compares the attitudes towards animal welfare of Norwegian farmers and Norwegian consumers. The second paper tries to understand how the perception of animal welfare is embedded in farmers' relationships with animals, and it looks at farmers' attitudes to different species (cattle, pigs and chickens) in three different countries: France, Sweden and the Netherlands.

Skarstad, Terragni and Torjusen compare the definitions of animal welfare of Norwegian farmers and consumers as well as their evaluation of animal welfare regulations and product labelling. Their study suggests that farmers and consumers tend to share the idea that, all in all, farm animals in Norway have a better life than farm animals raised in other countries because of the more small-scale, less-industrialized, less profit-oriented and,

¹ For a recently conducted study, see the special issue on pig production in Europe of the *British Food Journal*, vol. 109, no. 11, 2007.

hence, more *caring* character of Norwegian agriculture. Both farmers and consumers frame ‘animal welfare’ in a similar way and their definition of a good life for farm animals means attending animals with *care* and achieving a balance between the respect for the animal’s freedom and the farm economy. However, Skarstad et al. also found that the interpretation of what constitutes ‘good care’ for animals and an animal’s freedom varies between the two groups. A further difference emerges in the evaluation of the economic performance of the farm: whereas Norwegian farmers largely define animal welfare within the limits of their current level of production and their current farming practices, consumers do not prioritize farm profitability.

Both farmers and consumers in Norway were hesitant about the prospect of further regulation and about proposals to address the welfare of farm animals by means of product labelling. Instead of improving the welfare of farm animals, more regulations could force Norwegian farmers to modernize and, hence, ‘industrialize’ production. Skarstad et al. suggest that animal welfare regulations and food labelling may even change producers’ and consumers’ definitions of animal welfare, and it may lead to moving away from a common understanding of welfare as ‘well-treated farm animals’ to a more abstract and standardized notion, where animals are reshaped into ‘well-produced food commodities’. Paradoxically, animal welfare regulations may contribute thus to redefining the boundaries between animal and food: making the animals become more ‘food’ rather than fundamentally ‘animals’. ‘The regulated animal’, if thought of as food all along, may then contrast with what has emerged as a main aspect of good animal welfare: farm animals are animals that farmers need to relate to and care for, and not just means for producing food.

Issues of care for, empathy towards and knowledge about farm animals are also addressed in the article by Bock, Van Huik, Prutzer, Kling and Eveillard. These authors analyse how cattle, pig and poultry farmers in France, Sweden and the Netherlands describe their relationships with their animals, and they explore the factors that influence the levels of attachment to animals. The analysis draws upon Willkie’s (2005) framework of farmer–animal relationships, which distinguishes between different levels of attachment and detachment. This framework proved to be very useful for explaining why farmers develop different levels of attachment to animals, with the species, farm sector and housing system all playing important roles. While almost all farmers perceived taking good care of animals and avoidance of suffering as core elements of their profession and caring about animals as central to their definition of a ‘good farmer’, different groups of farmers showed clear differences in levels of attachment to their animals. The differences between countries were small and generally related to the prevalence of certain sectors and production methods. Across countries, farmers tended to become more attached to cows than to pigs or chickens and felt more connection towards breeding, as opposed to fattening, animals. However, the organization of production at the farm mattered too, as it defined the frequency, intensity and intimacy of the farmer’s contact with individual animals. As such, it influenced the visibility of the animal as a sentient being instead of a (living) tool of production. The authors conclude that ‘getting close to the animal’ is important as it nurtures the relationship between farmer and animal and it encourages farmers to recognize the ‘*animalian*’ nature of their animals (Buller 2004), which motivates farmers to attend to their wellbeing.

Conclusions

In following the making and un-making of farm animal bodies from the scientific labs for improving animal welfare by ‘geneticization’ to the supermarket shelves, where

ubiquitous claims of animal friendliness are associated to animal products, the papers in this special issue have ruminated around two issues: the growing *ambivalence* of humans to use animals for food production (Miele et al. 2005) and the great *malleability* of the concept of animal welfare. Whereas animal welfare is associated with genetic robustness in a lab, in the market it is linked to high quality; for consumers it is associated with ethical choice, better taste and healthier products; for farmers it is the care for their animals and it is part of their vocation; for animal rights movements it is the respect for natural animality, traditional small-scale production and so forth. One implication of this malleability of the concept of animal welfare is that it might be used to address very different things, some fictional, others more material: looking at animal products in the market, animal welfare is more a humanistic narrative about animals' lives (consisting of happiness, freedom and natural living); on the farm it deals with the corporeality of animals and the farmer's *closeness* matters for how they are kept. It is in these latter places that the quality of life of specific animals is decided: it may or may not be considered important because of the animal's species, breed, and use in certain housing systems or for specific production purposes, and how close farmers can and want to come to their animals, when taking care of them.

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