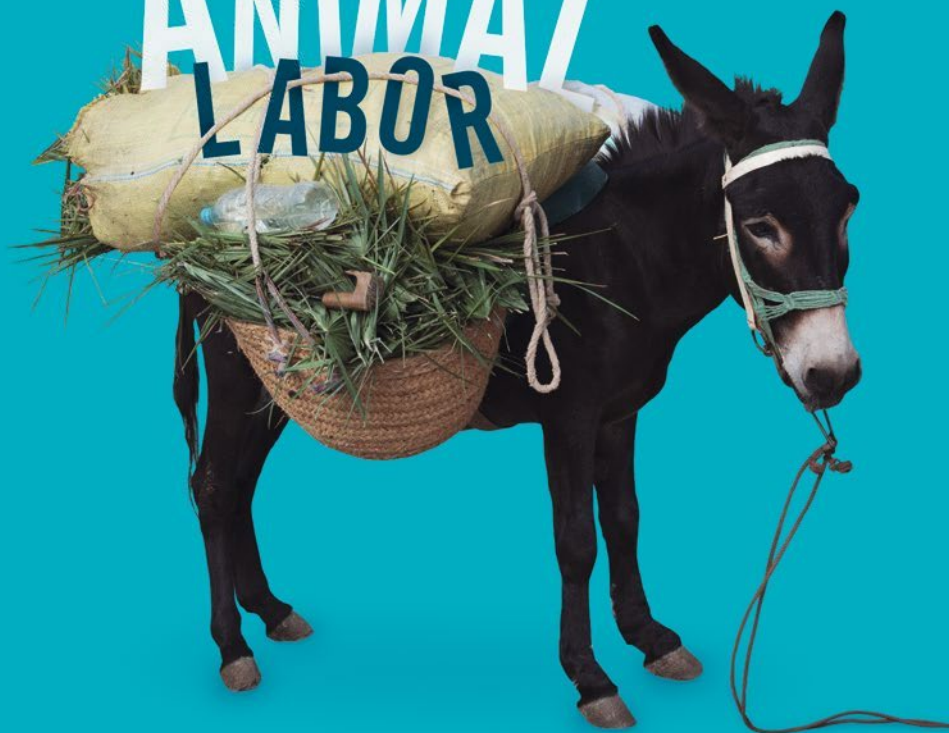


the
ETHICS of
ANIMAL
LABOR



A Collaborative Utopia

JOCELYNE PORCHER



The Ethics of Animal Labor

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PREFACE

When I began to work as a researcher into animal husbandry at the end of the 1990s, I studied animal husbandry, the profession of farming and farm animals in France, as I knew the history of animal husbandry in my country. I knew the environment, the local challenges, the different actors and the power relations. I first studied inter-subjective relations between farmers and animals, in particular the place of affectivity and suffering generated by the suppression of affective ties through the industrialisation of work. I studied the close relations humans have with each other and with animals, in a specific environment and with a specific local history, because relations between dairy farmers and their animals are not really the same in Brittany (in the west of France) as they are in Comté (in the East). The breeds of cow, the farming system and the climate are all different, the living conditions of the animals are not the same, and the marketing of milk is not the same either. This is also true of pig farming and the differences between production systems in Brittany—where more than half the pigs in France are farmed in industrial systems—and regions like the Pays Basque or the Bigorre, where local pig breeds are farmed in very close relations with nature. The differences are strongly rooted in the history of the regions, and in the ties farmers have with their animals and with their land.

However, we cannot study animal husbandry in France without considering the European and international dimension. In terms of economics, it is unarguably necessary, as the decisions that have the greatest impact on farmers are not taken in France but on a European level, and these decisions themselves depend on power relations within international markets.

It is equally necessary to extend research into relations between farmers and animals in other European countries, even in countries outside Europe (although this is more difficult), precisely because of such strong interactions between history, the environment, humans and animals.

Nevertheless, it was through researching specific subjects such as animal slaughter that I came to consider the universal character of relations between farmers and animals. Even though there are differences between farmers, be they French, Italian, Swedish, English or American, they all have in common the same moral ties in work relations with their animals. This is why research subjects such as animal slaughter can be studied and applied across borders. Relations between farmers and animals transcend the limits of nations; indeed, working with animals is a common language which is used everywhere in the world. The problems tied to the industrialization of livestock farming are the same, even if they take different forms in the USA, China or Europe. To understand the meaning of working in animal husbandry in France is to understand its meaning everywhere else too. In order to allow their animals to escape the violence of abattoirs, French, American, Swedish and Mongolian farmers are demanding that they slaughter their animals on their farms, on the basis of the same ethical ties between humans and animals at work.

The research that I reproduce the results of in this book is mainly French, but in the course of my research I also came to know the work of others in this field, including Rhoda Wilkie (2010) and Timothy Pachirat (2013) on abattoirs, Chris Bear and Lewis Holloway (2014) or Lindsay Hamilton and Nick Taylor (2013) on relations between farmers and animals and others such as Linda Kalof (2011). Research publications on relations between humans and animals are growing exponentially in social sciences at an international level, as they are in each country, where researchers also publish in their mother tongue. Such an abundance of work is both good and bad news: it is good news because it bears witness to a new interest in animals amongst social science researchers, but it is bad news because some research forgets that although as humans, “nothing human is foreign to me”, as Terence wrote, this does not apply when animals are considered. We are not cows; neither are we pigs or dogs; and all cows, pigs and dogs are foreign to us. We do not live in the same world and it is one of the riches of animal husbandry that through working with animals, we are able to enter the worlds of cows, pigs and dogs. Work is the space where our worlds overlap. Cows are inserted into the human

world of work and farmers enter into the world of cows, just as is the case with horses in an equestrian centre, elephants in a circus, giraffes in a zoo and guide dogs for the blind. Work creates a shared world for animals and for us.

This irreducible otherness is a challenge for social sciences but it is more of a problem in applied ethology concerning farm animals. Experimentation, particularly in “animal welfare” is very often designed round the idea that pigs or cows do not participate in the process of experimentation. The researcher makes hypotheses that the actions of an animal in stages one, two or three of the experiment depend on the conditions in which the animal is placed and these actions have sense to the researcher in relation to their hypotheses. In this way, the researcher can say that a difference is statistically significant and it is proof that, for example, chickens or pigs prefer one thing or the other, without any reference to ties to the real living conditions of animals at work and above all, without consideration of animal subjectivity, of an animal’s own intelligence in the situation and the inter-subjective relations which inevitably bind it to work. This is why some researchers, conscious of these limitations, have thought of alternatives to experiments in research into “animal welfare” which seek to access what animals feel. This is, for example, the objective of research leading from quantitative behavioural assessment approaches which access animal emotions through how humans view them.

By seeking to understand animal emotions, capacities and will, we can tackle the question of their ties to work seriously. We and domestic animals have not lived together for thousands of years on a whim from which we can easily disentangle ourselves without consequences; we work together. The challenge of work is a major condition of life for animals, just as it is for us. Work is the hyphen (-) which unites the human-animal partnership; it is a tiny symbol, but it carries huge questions.

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INTRODUCTION

Madonna had given birth at the beginning of the night. When I returned to the sheep farm, her lamb, nestling against its mother, looked at me mischievously. “Hello sweetie”, I said to it, and I took its soft, warm little body in my arms. Madonna took advantage of this to get up and shake herself. I was delighted that the lamb was a female. It was the first birth of the season and the girls seemed to rejoice as I did. “Shall we go, my lovelies?” I opened the gate and they came tumbling out, moved as much to play as they were moved by the desire to run, jump and indulge in brief but ostentatious battles. Madonna’s little one fed tranquilly. I asked myself what I should call her. She had a mischievous air that I liked: *Fripoune*¹ maybe? The dog dragged me from my thoughts by looming up in front of me, serious and effective, already fully engaged in his work. “Hey you, where’s the fire?” I exclaimed on seeing his intention, but he was already far away, and the ewes, under his authority, were in an orderly line, *La Vieille Corne*² in front.

What value does my own beautiful and sensual experience with animals have, an experience shared by thousands of other livestock farmers as I have shown in my research with them, at a time when animal husbandry is condemned in the name of the environment and “animal liberation”; when “the livestock industry” brutalizes animals in the name of economic rationale and profit; when, in the name of compassion or of pragmatism, we are inclining towards preferring living death to life?

¹Translator’s note: endearing, feminine term, the equivalent of “scamp”, or “rascal”.

²Translator’s note: “Old Lady”.

Since the nineteenth century, industrial capitalism has seized work relations with animals from animal husbandry, and has made it the concern of the livestock industry. Farmers have been caught in a never-ending race by productivism and the obsessive search for there to be “ever more”: more milk, more piglets, more lambs, ever more quickly, and ever more profitably for investors in the meat, agri-food, pharmaceutical, genetic, building and banking industries. Although at the end of the war, modernizers promised better days for farming, it is now obvious that it was not the best which was coming, but the worst. Modernizers³ promised general well-being thanks to the indefinite growth of production, but these days, the most shared product of the livestock industry is suffering. According to Serge Latouche (2011), the rise in gross domestic product in our societies has gone hand in hand with a degradation in human relations and a net decline in the feeling of being happy; in work with farm animals too, relations with animals have declined dramatically. In unison with the improvement in performance, the pleasure of being with animals has vanished into columns of figures and productivity calculations. However, animal husbandry has nothing to do with the livestock industry. Contrary to the most frequent assertions, there is no logical and irreducible line which, in the march of time and of progress, has advanced from an archaic to a modern relationship with farm animals. Animal husbandry is a work relation with animals which is 10,000 years old, and which continues to exist worldwide, sometimes against all odds, even though the livestock industry has now been with us for 150 years, and represents one of the most greedy and harmful off-shoots of industrial capitalism.

Zootechnics, or the “science of exploiting animal machines”, was born of industrial capitalism. Why, thought the industrialists, leave those sources

³ Rene Dumont, while he was Councillor for the Agricultural Planning Commission, wrote as follows: “we are creating an organization which will provide for expansion: the rapid, progressive and harmonious development of production where man manages the economy with the mentality of a consumer: viewing economic facts from this angle, he will want to increase all production, and reduce production costs. He will ardently defend the collective interest. However, he will enter into conflict with the general interest when he is given the perspective of producer: he will tend to reduce his activity in order to increase his gain: Therefore government must give the preponderant voice to consumer representatives and connectivity. It is here where the superiority of the whole organization of inter-professional, therefore restrictive, producers lies. The peasants will be able to demand an extension of industrial production which would allow them to share in modern methods of work and greater comfort. In return they will be able to provide an abundance of food which will no longer compromise their earnings in a stable price economy, on the contrary.

of immense profit that are nature and animals in the hands of peasants? In appropriating work relations with farm animals, zootechnics radically changed the objectives, content and rules of working with animals. The animals, which had been partners in peasant work, became machines in the same way as blast furnaces, and therefore productivity had to be increased in order to increase profits. The affective and aesthetic relationship peasants had with animals was stigmatised. In his treatise on zootechnics,⁴ Sanson observed that zootechnics “aims for use and not beauty”, because, “it concerns making profits. For zootechnics, the best animal is not the one which would be recognized as the most beautiful in a competition judging aesthetic value, but rather the one that makes the best returns, and therefore is the most profitable to exploit” (Sanson 1907). With this intent, the declared goal of zootechnics was to turn animals into imbeciles, and to make them “automatons that carry out no other orders than those that are demanded of them” (Dechambre 1928).

The utilitarian relationship with animals built on the foundations of nineteenth-century zootechnics, paradoxically in the name of modernity and progress, endures today, and it is based on contempt and denial of humans as much as of animals. For the denial of the affectivity and existence of animals and the deleterious conditions of life at work that humans and animals suffer in common is already relatively well known to have a disastrous effect on animals, but it also has a disastrous effect on farmers and on farm workers. The gulf between procedures imposed by the industrial organization of work and the moral values of workers is an area of profound ethical suffering. For many, work in animal production has become death work. The recurrent mass slaughters of animals “destroyed” for reasons of public health and economics is an obvious example. Faced with this lethal change in our relations with animals, some members of the public demand “welfare” for animals, or, more radically, “liberation”. Yet the theoretical question of “animal welfare” which appeared in France in the 1980s, although it seems attractive at first, does not seek to propose other methods of farming, but rather, to make “animal welfare” compatible with productivity, that is to say, to make the livestock industry socially acceptable. This is why, after 30 years of research and consequent implementation of “animal welfare”, the conditions of life at work for farm animals have not improved; rather, they have even become considerably worse. We have effectively passed from visible suffering to invisible

⁴The complete five-volume edition was published in 1888.

suffering hidden behind good intentions and technological innovations. Behind the misery-hiding legislation, the violence and cruelty of the procedures remain. Moreover, for the supporters of “animal liberation”, work relations with animals have been founded on exploitation relations since the start, and cannot be anything else. We must therefore liberate animals from all human subjugation; in other words, effect a rupture between ourselves and animals that is as radical as it is definitive; this rupture must not be limited to farm animals but must include “pet” animals as well, as they too are considered as victims of our domination. This break with animals is also supported by industrialists, who, in consideration of difficulties with the slaughter and processing of animals experienced these days, would prefer to move away from farm animals towards the production of animal matter. This is why an animal protection organization such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) in the USA, following from current thinking on animal ethics, supports biologists who are working on *in vitro* meat production.

Living with animals has become a utopia, an impossible country; it is impossible because of the profoundly unequal balance of power between the big hegemonic industrial groups worldwide and the individual and collective goodwill of millions of farm workers and ordinary people who aspire to have another relationship with animals and with nature, at work and in life, and who declare far and wide that another world is possible.

Running through all the stories gleaned from my adventures with animals and their farmers is a redefinition of our relations with domestic animals that I want to invite the reader to consider. What is animal husbandry? What are the differences between husbandry and the livestock industry? Why kill animals? What is the purpose of “animal welfare”? Should we liberate animals? How can we, in the twenty-first century, overcome the logic of the livestock industry, how can we dispense with the industrialization of the execution of animals while continuing to eat meat, while re-establishing a farming relationship that is consistent with our sensitivities and aspirations, as well as those of the animals? To all these questions, I will try to bring elements of answers and discussions, highlighted by my personal experience and by almost 15 years of research in the field of animal husbandry.

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What Is Animal Husbandry?

I left Paris for the countryside in 1981. I was 25 years old. I was a secretary in a big business and up until then, I had never in my life left Paris for more than a few months, during the summer holidays. I knew nothing of the world of farming, nothing of agriculture and nothing of animal husbandry. I found a job as an accounting secretary in a SME making jeans that was starting up in my area, and at the same time I started to do as my warmly-welcoming elderly peasant neighbours did. Rather than buying vegetables, why not cultivate them in the garden? Rather than buying eggs, why not have hens, or, for that matter, chickens and rabbits for meat? Little by little I installed a vegetable garden, set up a poultry yard and learned to care for, kill, pluck and skin animals, thanks to my

Animal husbandry is one of a number of possible translations of the French word *élevage*: these include “the livestock industry”, “livestock production”, “livestock sector” and very often the term “livestock” which denotes both farm animals (*animals élevage*) and *élevage* itself in its productive relationship with animals. The terms “livestock industry” and “livestock production” suggest what I would call “*production animals*”, or intensive, industrialized farming. Another translation is “breeding”, which emphasizes the reproduction of animals, but it seems to me that “animal husbandry” carries the sense that I give to “*élevage*”, as it puts the relationship with animals, the notion of responsibility, the connotation of care, and its historical character to the forefront. The root “husband” suggests to me the French idea of the “*bon père de famille*” (good family man), that is, of responsible and sustainable management.