

Bringing animal welfare into public debate: lessons and limits of large-scale and local processes.

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Animal welfare has been taken into consideration in the European Union for many years with a growing body of legislation constituted on this issue since the 1970s. Since 1999, the Protocol on Protection and Welfare of Animals of the Amsterdam treaty has set out new fundamental principles concerning European Union action in this area. This normative production is the result of conflictual negotiation and compromise between on one side animal welfare organisations and on the other side the industrial lobbies of agro-food chains (essentially laying hens and pig production).

This paper aims to address the specific manners set up by different systems on different scales to bring farm animal welfare into public debate. From the confrontation of three cases at different levels (European, national and local), we will identify three different paradigms. In their actions, animal welfare organisations intend to unveil what should not exist, while food chain actors try to apply a principle of transparency. But do farmers “only” have *nothing to hide*, or, more than that, do they have something *to show* and make visible? Our idea is that a third paradigm of visibility might be to explore. This paradigm relies on several conditions which are to identify as they appear as necessary to avoid the classical confrontations of animal welfare organisations and food chain actors and to open a space for collective discussion.

Unsurprisingly, a general condition is to avoid the classical separation of knowledge and values (Latour, 1999; Joly et al., 2003)... a condition which is itself becoming classical, though still essential, especially for the concept of animal welfare which is caught between scientific fact, social norms and individual subjectivity (Buller and Morris, 2003). But behind this general condition, lie other conditions which are to involve more directly farmers and consumers and not only their representatives, re-integrate the question of relationships between farmers and animals ignored in most debates about animal welfare, assume the sensitive and affective dimensions of this question, and re-articulate the different knowledge (different disciplines, expert and lay knowledge) it implies.

Animal welfare organisations: unveiling what should not exist

Most public debates about the question of animal welfare are linked to the construction of rules and European regulations. In this context, the organisations defending animal welfare use the media to influence public opinions and politicians (especially at the EU level but also at national levels). We will see that the aim is to unveil and denounce what is hidden and unacceptable, that is the conditions of farm animals. We will show this through two examples of recent animal welfare organisations actions.

Some of these actions consist in maintaining vigilance about the respect of laws and regulations. This is the case with animal transports and markets. In Belgium and in France, two organisations (Gaia and PMAF) made videos showing how animals were treated during transport and on markets, pointing systematically on illegal practices. Such videos unveil not only the suffering of battered animals but also the unacceptable conditions of ill-treated animals: what is in question is not mainly malevolence or even sadism but much more lack of care. These videos make visible what is usually made invisible

and ignored. The effectiveness of such actions can be illustrated by the Belgian case: such a video was broadcasted on public TV and this publicization probably helped animal welfare organisations to win their case in the action brought against animal dealers.

Some other actions intend not only to control the application of existing regulations or denounce the non respect of these, but to have an influence on the construction of such regulations. Previously to the discussions about the European directive 1999/74/EC suppressing “non enriched” battery cages for egg-laying hens, several NGO’s members of Eurogroup for Animal Welfare¹ organised a campaign aiming at bringing public opinion and decision makers to acknowledge animals’ sentience and capacity to suffer. They created affective events such as showing human beings in the conditions of farm animals, that is confined in a cage proportionally similar to battery cages for egg-laying hens. Doing so, they played of course on the concept of anthropomorphism, which is strongly criticised by their opponents, but is actually a universal base of the links between humans and animals (Armengaud, 2001).

These two kinds of actions of animal welfare organisations show us how the latter play on the sensitive and affective dimensions of animal welfare, and reveal the importance to maintain an access to the sensitive and material dimension of the human/animal relationship.

But such actions are not likely to allow an open discussion with the different actors involved in the question, as the position of denunciation and unveiling mainly bring to justifying positions on the production and institutional side.

Production actors and institutions: a paradigm of transparency

Confronted to such actions or attacks, the actors of what is commonly called “animal production” do not remain without reaction. In Belgium, the National Agency for Food Safety proposes visits of production and transformation sites open to consumers’ organisations. The idea is to convince visitors, and through them consumers, that the system (as it is) is satisfying. It is a second way to show the reality of rearing which relates this time to a paradigm of transparency. The traceability imposed at all stages of the food chain also belongs to the same paradigm (Torny, 1998).

Of course, some institutions try to involve more largely the actors concerned by the question of animal welfare in public debates. This is the case of DP21, a project initiating a large debate about the future of animal production in Flanders. This project, taking place in a public program concerning participation and governance in Belgium², was implemented by a group of “experts” federating several organisations involved in rearing and animal production. The objective is to “open up a social debate with all relevant parties”, that is with the agricultural world, food networks actors, interest groups (included animal welfare organisations) and government, and build “common visions for the future”. The project is based on the organisation of meetings with stakeholders and a construction of three scenarios for the future of animal production. The scenarios were based on two main variables : free world trade vs non-trade concerns, and the position of the distribution sector as opportunistic or partner. Finally, the implications of these scenarios were identified (evolution of the agriculture, products’ offer and environment) and discussed in “stakeholders’ days”, organised for each sector:

¹ European organisation which federates the main organisation working on the question of farm animal welfare and coordinate public campaigns at European level.

² « Alimenter le dialogue », program financed by the Foundation Roi Baudouin in 2003-2005.

production, transformation, government, NGO's, social partners, teachers. If such a project proved very enriching for its numerous partners, the link to political decisions was not clearly stated and producers and consumers, although we could consider them as the most concerned by these questions, remained present only through their representatives.

The absence of farmers, consumers and animals in the debate

While animal welfare organisations try to unveil what is hidden and play on the emotion, institutions try to be transparent and to reach the rationality. The first paradigm enhances the sensitive and affective dimensions of animal welfare, which are ignored in most debates.

But in their differences, all the actions described above share the absence of several points which appear to be crucial in the interviews lead with farmers and consumers: the question of relationships between farmers and animals (and behind it, the time spent with animals), and the knowledge of farmers about their animals (and behind it, the learning processes of animal care). In all debates and even in the discourses of animal friendly organisations, animal welfare is evaluated through scientific criteria with a striking absence of lay knowledge. As these points are central in actors' discourses, we can wonder whether it is possible to build debates procedures able to maintain an access to sensitive and affective dimensions of animal welfare, relationships between farmers and animals and farmers' knowledge.

Moreover, farmers, consumers, and animals, are surprisingly absent, even though they are the most concerned actors. As say one of the farmers interviewed and associated in our project: *“generally decisions are taken by people who have never reared and don't realise, who don't know animals' needs. And who is in a better place than us? If animals could talk they would be in a better place but they can't, so those who rear them are in the best place. But they are generally not consulted”*. Behind this assertion lies the central question of who can talk about animal welfare and who can be animals' better spokesman. Actually, farmers are only present in the debates through their producers' organisations whose discourse is mainly economic and leaves out the question of day-to-day work and relationships between farmers and their animals.

Besides farmers and their animals, consumers are also present only indirectly. In their case, it is through surveys organised by animal welfare organisations to reinforce their campaigns and enhance the “social demand” for animal welfare, or through the study of buying behaviours, used to show how this question actually plays a minor part in consumers' choices.

If most debates about animal welfare do not involve farmers and consumers, they concern three main groups of actors: production's actors, animal welfare organisations, and scientists. The latter are in charge of the objectivation of animal welfare criteria and conditions so as to help elaborating regulations. But despite the construction of zootechnical, physiological and ethological criteria, scientists can not give objective definitions and measures of animal welfare, as such a separation between facts (how to describe a state of well-being) and values (what rearing we want in the future) can not be separated so easily. Moreover, in specialised works, animals are more and more seen as the fragmented objects of specialised sciences and less and less as whole animals (Tovey, 2003). Finally we can add that lay knowledge of animals is lost in the orientation to expert knowledge adopted by public decision-makers but also animal friendly NGOs.

Towards a paradigm of visibility

Is it possible to build a debate which would involve more directly farmers and consumers, re-integrate the question of relationships between farmers and animals and the sensitive and affective dimensions of the question, and re-articulate the different knowledge (different disciplines, expert and lay knowledge) implied by the question of animal welfare?

The research-intervention project in which we participate, several tools and stages allow to fulfil these conditions:

- in-depth interviews of representative organisations, but also individual farmers and consumers allow revealing and describing the sensitive and affective dimensions of the question and identify how consumers link their choices to the characteristics of the agro-system which feeds them;
- interdisciplinary discussions among scientists (zootechnicians, agronomists, veterinaries, philosophers, sociologists) in a durable working group allow re-articulating the different disciplines' knowledge against the fragmentation tendency;
- local debates between farmers and consumers allow involving directly farmers and consumers (even though a small number of them is concerned), re-articulating expert and lay knowledge, and give access to the sensitive and affective dimensions of rearing, as these debates take place in farms.

Even though these experiences are very limited, they show that on local scale it might be possible to initiate interactions between producers and consumers and therefore help the farmers to translate public criticism about their activity into collective debatable questions. Our idea is that farmers, far from having “only” *nothing to hide*, rather have *something to show* and make visible. The future of agriculture, if strongly determined by negotiations at international and European level, also depends on what farmers make of public criticism (Lemery, 2003).

Conclusions

Definitions of animal welfare are divided alongside a knowledge/value separation line. According to the spokesmen of the food chain, we can establish “objective” criteria for the animal welfare, but according to the animal welfare organisations, the issue is a philosophical issue, “subjective” by definition. Actually, this question is first of all a political question in its wide meaning, which means a question that has to re-articulate norms and a variety of knowledge.

Abstract

This paper aims to address the specific manners set up by different systems at different scales to bring farm animal welfare into public debate. From the description of three cases at different levels (European, national and local), we will try to define some conditions which appear as necessary to avoid the classical confrontations mainly of farmers and environmental organisations and open a space for collective discussion.

Drawing on primary empirical data and a review of existing literature, we will describe a campaign organised by a NGO member of Eurogroup for animal welfare, a project initiating a large debate about the future of animal production and a third project associating interdisciplinary discussions among scientists with local debates between farmers and consumers. These two last cases both take place in a common public program concerning participation and governance in Belgium.

The three experiences have a common starting point which is to question what kind of farming systems we want in the future and what are the implications. This is the principle for the construction of scenarios for the future of animal production in the second case. This leads to a first condition which is to avoid the classical separation of knowledge and values (Latour, 1999 ; Joly, 2003)... a condition which is itself becoming classical, though still essential, especially for the concept of animal welfare which is caught between scientific fact, social norms and individual subjectivity (Buller, Morris, 2003).

While institutional debates deal more and more with the adaptation of animals to intensive farming systems (Porcher, 2003), the projects initiated by NGO's try to bring public opinion and decision makers to acknowledge animals' sentience and capacity to suffer. They create affective events such as showing human beings in the conditions of farm animals (for example confined in a cage proportionally similar to battery cages for egg-laying hens). Even though the anthropomorphism of such manners can be criticised and is not likely to allow an open discussion with the different actors involved in the question, it brings us to a second condition which is to maintain a permanent access to the sensitive and material dimension of the human/animal relationship.

But if the European organisations defending animal welfare succeed in using media and political pressure to influence public opinions and politicians (especially at the EC level), they do not intend to involve both farmers and consumers. Our third case will show that on local scales it might be possible to initiate interactions between producers and consumers and therefore help the farmers to translate public criticism about their activity into collective debatable questions. The future of agriculture, if strongly determined by negotiations at international and European level, also depends on what farmers make of public criticism. We have described in former works how different forms of concern and criticism can be collectively addressed in some alternative systems.

In such experiences, the condition of success is not only proximity but also deals with the nature of knowledge shared by participants. The animals are less and less seen by humans as whole animals and more and more as the fragmented objects of specialised sciences (Tovey, 2003), which leads to a necessity of interdisciplinarity. But we can add that lay knowledges of animals are lost in the orientation to expert knowledges adopted not only by public decision-makers but also environmental and animal friendly NGOs, and therefore should be introduced again into the debates.

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