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Commodifying animal welfare

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Abstract

As the profile of farm animal welfare rises within food production chains, in response both to consumer demand and greater ethical engagement with the lives of animals, animal welfare is increasingly being commodified by various foodchain actors. That is to say that, over and above regulatory or assurance scheme compliance, welfare conditions and criteria are being used as a 'value-added' component or distinctive selling point for food products, brands or even particular manufacturers and retailers. We argue in this paper that such a commodification process has major implications both for the way in which farm animal welfare is defined and assessed (with greater emphasis being placed either on those welfare elements that lend themselves to commodification processes or on those that respond to consumer interpretations of what 'good' welfare might be at a particular time) and for the ways in which farm animal welfare is articulated and presented to food consumers as a component of product value or quality.

Keywords: *animal welfare, commodification, consumption, free-range eggs, market, welfare assessment*

Introduction

Animal welfare is increasingly being commodified — that is to say being turned into a commodity that can be sold as a product attribute in the market place. We are interested in how this process of commodification is modifying the manner in which animal welfare is defined and ultimately assessed. We are interested therefore in the politics of knowledge surrounding farm animal welfare: who says what welfare is and why and where, how do they say it and who are they saying it to?

We'd like to start with this quotation from John McInerney's 2004 paper on Economics and Animal Welfare. He writes:

> If resources in livestock production are to be adjusted to have an impact on animal welfare, that will only occur if that welfare change is perceived as an economic benefit […] So it doesn't matter whether we know what animal welfare actually is; we need only to know how to capture the responses to it within the framework of economic behavior (McInerney 2004; p 11).

In this section of his paper, McInerney makes clear how, from a purely economic perspective, human concern for farm animal welfare (in distinction from an animal's own concern for its welfare) is founded in a primary consideration of human interest:

> whether the welfare change is confirmed in a 'scientific' sense as actually beneficial to the animal is neither here nor there (p 11).

There are two key points here: the first is that there can be economic incentives for improving farm animal welfare, particularly when consumer responses to it can be 'captured' and thereby turned into active purchasing behaviour. The second point is that such economic incentives may actually change and alter what is conceived and known as (good) animal welfare. What welfare is depends increasingly on how we can market it, how it is commodified.

Debates in the field of farm animal welfare

Among the various debates going on in the field of farm animal welfare at the moment, two have particular relevance to our argument. The first of these concerns methods of welfare assessment and the balance between output-based measures, where an individual animal's welfare is directly evaluated, and resource or input-based measures which seek to determine the potential for good or bad welfare to result from aspects of system design or husbandry practice (Webster 2005; FAWC 2009; Grandin 2010; Mullan *et al* 2011). The second major debate concerns information and the appropriate response to what are widely claimed as consumer demands for clearer information on welfare conditions at point of purchase (FAWC 2006; FAWF 2010). Although the former debate is most often conceived as a scientific and technical one, linked to critical issues of on-farm observational practice, verification and representativeness, the latter is largely regarded as a social and political one by retailers,

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industry, NGOs and governments, linked to issues of communication, trust and perception.

Our argument is that welfare is not simply defined by 'science' or by some objective economic principles but rather that various social/cultural and technical/material processes and actions work together, at given moments, to create and co-determine supply and demand — and hence the 'market'. However, this is not another plea for some sort of all-encompassing social constructivism. On the contrary, in farm animal welfare, we are dealing with actual bodies, with objects, with lives and deaths, with procedures for measurement and so on. As Swedberg observes, (2008; p 57) "economic life is anchored in materiality". From an economic point of view, what is important is how these animal bodies are generated (selectively bred), qualified (assessed, certified) and mobilised (integrated supply chains, sold through auction, to processor, labelled/unlabelled as welfare-friendly meat) through interactions with both scientific and social practices (Roe 2010).

Clearly, there are benefits in this coming together of social demand and scientific assessment, not least being the considerable raising of the profile of farm animal welfare in contemporary society. However, there are also concerns as the commodification of farm animal welfare as an element of market segmentation actively 'modifies' what is thought to constitute — and thereby what qualifies as — the welfare and life worth living of individual farm animals. To put it in perhaps over-simplistic terms, farm animal welfare was largely conceived, and has certainly grown up, in response to, and as an accompaniment to, the science of animal production. Now, we suggest, the shift is towards a far greater importance and significance being given to the politics of animal consumption.

The politics of animal consumption

In investigating this issue, we have drawn upon three related areas of recent scholarship: the so called 'consumption turn', retailer power and economic sociology. Social scientists working in the field of agriculture and food have coined the phrase, 'the consumption turn' to indicate the new interest in the place of culture and cultural factors in explaining economic relations (Friedberg 2003a; Jackson *et al* 2009; Jackson 2010). They have challenged the hitherto dominant focus within much social science on production relations and structural as well as economic determinants of social action and organisation. Of course, manufacturers, whether in the area of food or other products, have always had to respond to consumer demand — otherwise they might not sell anything. Technological or biological innovations to develop particular popular food types (for example breast meat in broilers) or attentiveness to consumer concerns over health (for example in milk parlour hygiene) have always been an important factor in food industry development. However, what has attracted the attention of social scientists is the process of actively constructing food messages. Acknowledging that nowadays "most food is sold with a story" (Friedberg 2003a; p 4), the narratives that accompany food and food production are today increasingly designed to promote particular consumer behaviour and attitudes, for example by encouraging engagement with an environmental agenda through the purchase of 'natural' products. It is not just food products that are produced and distributed through supply chains but increasingly their 'meaning' too that is manufactured and manipulated (Jackson *et al* 2009).

A second body of work is the interest currently being paid amongst economists and others to corporate supply chains and, within that, the particular role of retailers (Hughes & Reimer 2004; Burch & Lawrence 2007). The shift in economic power from the manufacturing to the retailing sector has been well described, with Duffy and Fearne reporting in 2004 that the UK meat industry is very much in the hands of the supermarkets. For scholars such as Larry Busch (2010), the retailer has emerged, under the technologies and institutional reconfigurations of neoliberalism, as the dominant agent within these consumption/production relationships. Moreover, that position is reinforced not only by 'supply chain management' but also by what he refers to as the 'tripartite standards regime' of standards, certification and accreditation.

Finally, in this quick review of recent scholarship, we wish to briefly mention a third set of literatures that have recently emerged in the field of economic sociology (eg Callon *et al* 2002). One of the more interesting things to come out of recent economic sociology has been the various attempts to knit together under the process of 'economisation', the human and the material, the social and the scientific, rational thought and practical actions, the determinism of economic systems and the role of human agency. More significantly perhaps for our particular field of interest here is Callon's analysis of the 'commodification of living beings' (Calikstan & Callon 2010). This commodification process includes the negotiated and performed conventions and procedures of qualification (from basic property rights, through health and welfare rules to carcase standards) through which an 'entity' is domesticated, stabilised and enacted before being transformed into a marketable 'thing'. An animal body, or a part of a body, might thereby be seen as a sort of 'market device' in that it "reconfigures what shopping is (and what shoppers are and can do)" (Muniesa *et al* 2007; p 3).

Farm animal welfare as a commodity

But what sort of meaningful 'commodity' is farm animal welfare? Recent research undertaken in part for the EU-funded Welfare Quality® project has looked at how consumers, on the one hand, and retailers and other foodchain actors on the other, construct farm animal welfare stories and meanings; the former in response to their own understanding of farming and ethical position regarding farm animals, the latter in response to perceived (or anticipated) consumer demand and to the potential for product and brand segmentation (Buller 2010). Reviewing that research, we want to make the following points.

The dominant welfare criteria to emerge from retail Corporate Social Responsibility statements, from segmented

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product information and from a cross-European study of retailer practice relating to farm animal welfare are, on the one hand a degree of 'naturality' and, on the other, confinement and density; the first expressed most often in terms of 'free range' as opposed to other 'indoor' systems, the second expressed in terms of lower stocking densities and daylight. A less explicit but nonetheless prevalent theme is that higher welfare is enrolled as part of a broader set of 'quality' parameters that incorporate taste, health, localism and, in many cases, the notion of the independent producer.

Recent years have seen a whole spate of consumer-focused surveys undertaken in an attempt to identify what it is about farm animal welfare that consumers might buy into. That research reveals that the dominant criterion for consumers is their own health. For the bulk of non-specialist consumers (ie those who do not specifically and consistently seek higher welfare products) higher welfare is associated with better animal health and therefore, and critically for purchasing choice, with better human health. As one survey shows: "Although few consumers think about how the welfare standards contribute to a healthier product, they still perceive the benefit" (IGD 2007; p 37). Indeed, human health predominates consumer concern (EC 2007; Kjaernes *et al* 2007).

One thinks back at this point to our opening quotation. Yet, of course, it does matter what animal welfare actually is, particularly for the animals. One might contrast the strictly economic perspective discussed by McInerney with that of animal welfare science:

> We should use the word 'welfare' in a scientific way so that it is useful when considering animal management or when phrasing legislation. Welfare is a characteristic of an animal not something given to it" (Broom 1991; p 4174).

Moreover, it matters that society's understanding and knowledge of animal welfare might be defined increasingly by how we capture consumer responses.

The example of 'free-range' eggs

Although few retailers believe that 'welfare sells' — other than to a very limited niche group of consumers — and reject almost unanimously the notion of a specific and stand-alone 'welfare label', certain animal welfare considerations, such as those discussed above, have nonetheless become necessary, even commonplace, both to legitimise their role as responsible economic actors and distinguish their particular 'brand' as a reputable site of consumption.

In the final section of this paper, we want to look at the story of free-range-egg labelling in light of the previous arguments. We want to think about how placing animal welfare considerations within the market place impacts inevitably upon how welfare is defined, qualified and achieved.

Free-range eggs have been around for a long time yet only relatively recently have they been added to the lexicon of welfare-friendly food. We can identify five stages in the recent history of the commodification of 'free-range' eggs in farm animal welfare terms.

Marketisation

The emergence of a distinct market for 'free-range' eggs in the late 1980s and early 1990s was prompted, first, by producers eager to promote their distinctive production systems, second, by retailers, keen to find a means of segmenting what had traditionally been a heavily standardised egg market under the old British Egg Marketing Board and, finally, by the wider egg industry desperately wanting to revitalise falling shell-egg sales and lay to rest the ghost of the 1980s *Salmonella* scare.

Differentiation

The early proliferation of 'free-range' eggs in supermarkets and elsewhere helped to create a market for 'free range' in general and in doing so raised the visibility of the welfare of battery chickens within Europe. This consolidated the moral concern amongst consumers and NGOs that had been earlier stimulated by developments in animal welfare science (eg Dawkins 1980). Largely unregulated, however, different welfare definitions and standards applied within production systems led to considerable consumer confusion.

Qualification and mandatory labelling

Responding to what they identified as misleading and ambiguous labelling of free-range systems and to their perception of consumer preference for farm system information, the European Commission introduced in 2001 the mandatory labelling system that is in place today, identifying 'free-range', 'barn' and 'caged eggs' as well as certified organic eggs.

Generalised consumer preference

Since the introduction of compulsory system labelling for shell eggs, consumer behaviour has revealed a strong preference for non-caged systems in the UK (Table 1). The UK produces well over 8 billion eggs per annum today. The latest figures from Defra suggest that around 45% of eggs currently sold in the UK are from free-range and organic systems while over 85% of all UK eggs are part of the 'Lion' standard.

Choice editing

Most recently, and responding both to the exhibited consumer preference as well as their own 'ethical' branding, a number of major food retailers have stopped selling cage eggs at all, as Marks & Spencer's did in 2002. Although this largely concerns shell eggs, a few have moved towards the interdiction of cage eggs in their own processed brand items too. Hence, we move from an early situation of 'choice facilitation' to one of 'choice editing' and what is, in effect, a removal of consumer choice within individual stores.

In this manner, the growing use of 'free-range' as a criteria has shifted from being an element of niche segmentation to being increasingly a component of brand responsibility. Moreover, in what is the final chapter of the story, the dramatic growth of 'free-range' and organic egg sales, and their apparent market sustainability, have been instrumental in underwriting the adoption by the EU of the Union-wide ban on intensive battery housing systems, to be implemented at the start of 2012.

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Table 1 Supermarket egg sales 2002 and 2007 (as % of total volume).

	% in volume of non-cage eggs sold in 2002	% in volume of non-cage eggs sold in 2007	% in volume of battery eggs sold in 2002	% in volume of battery eggs sold in 2007
Asda	31	57	69	43
Marks & Spencer	100	100	0	0
Sainsbury's	38	70	62	30
Tesco	55	70	54	30
Co-op	50	71	50	29

Source: Extracted from CIWF (2002, 2007).

Implications for welfare assessment and definition

The immediacy, simplicity and inclusivity of labelling production systems under the simple banners of indoor/outdoor is attractive to those bodies seeking to develop more effective mechanisms for informing consumer choice (FAWF 2010). Consumers, it would appear, clearly do not like the 'idea' of birds in cages and respond positively to the notion of 'free-range' with its implication of the outdoors, with liberty and with natural behaviour (ranging).

Interestingly, this concern has not been anything like as manifest for the chickens that are eaten as meat. As the recent CIWF survey points out, intensively reared broiler chickens occupy a growing sector of the meat market even amongst those retailers who have largely pioneered free-range egg sales (CIWF 2007). Significantly here, the response of the retailers and their suppliers has been to resist the widescale promotion of free-range in a significant low cost meat product sector in preference to modifications within intensive production systems (such as lower stocking densities and slower growth breeds).

For consumers, eggs coming from live birds are distinctive from the breast meat, legs and wings that come from those having been slaughtered and in this distinction, between eggs and flesh, lies — we would argue — a significant *impasse*. While consumers have shown themselves ready to take on some of the responsibility of the lives of living animals through free-range egg purchases, research suggests that they are far less likely to accept responsibility for the lives of animals to be slaughtered in their name, prefering to cede that responsibility to foodchain actors.

More problematic, perhaps, are the welfare implications of using 'free-range' as a *de facto* appelation for higher welfare systems. Many in current welfare science identify the genuine difficulties in identifying real welfare gains in individual animals from free-range systems. The recent FAWC Opinion on osteoporosis in egg-laying hens (FAWC 2010), for example, cites evidence showing that fractures, mainly of the birds' keel bones, were more common in hens from free-range and barn systems than from those from caged systems (Scottish Agricultural College 2006). For some, there are major inconsistencies in what is currently accepted under free-range rules, particularly relating to the nature of the free-range surface, to the period actually spent 'outdoors', to the facility of bird access and the activities and cover that is available to the birds when outside (Soil Association undated).

Moreover, as recently reported in the press (for example, British Egg Industry Council 2011; Harvey 2011), it is widely feared that the EU-wide ban on conventional caged systems for egg-laying hens and the shift, within the UK, to enriched and non-cage systems will not meet current egg demands for the UK food sector. As a result, imported eggs, from non-EU-compliant systems are likely to grow significantly in proportion.

A further consideration is that the focus of attention on these particular, consumer-friendly, aspects of farm animal welfare, risk obfuscating at the consumption end, what many welfare scientists and others regard as more pressing welfare issues within animal farming such as, for example, lameness in sheep and dairy herds, tail biting in pigs or welfare at slaughter.

Finally, we come back to where we started and the debate within welfare science over the relative weight given to input- and animal-based assessment methods for farm animal welfare. Growing reference to, and advocacy of, system-based labelling schemes such as are used for shell eggs throws the shoe back on the foot of input-based welfare assessment, leaving a questionable place for the new range of output-based measures currently being trialled in a number of different situations. We feel that there is a danger that an opportunity may be missed. The recent report from the Farm Animal Welfare Forum (2010) on *Labelling Food from Farm Animals* while promoting the principle of production-system labelling, makes the clear point that outcome measures should be introduced "to provide assurance that the welfare potential of the various production systems proposed for labeling is being realised in practice" (2010; p 18). This, we regard as essential.

For social scientists interested in foodchains and the materials that flow through them, meaning has always been

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important. This is no less true when we talk about the 'meaning' of welfare for it means — and has meant — different things to different people, in different places and at different times. Caged systems, after all, were originally introduced, at least in part, as a mechanism of improving the welfare — or at least the health (and thereby the cost to the farmer) — of egg-laying hens. Social scientists talk a lot about fetishism. Marx introduced the idea of 'commodity fetishism' by which he meant that if one focuses too much on the saleable commodity, one tends to forget or obscure the social relations (be they exclusively human or more than human) that lie behind its production. Suzanne Friedberg (2003b) has applied the idea of commodity fetishism to ethical trade, arguing that ethical standards can themselves become fetishised, reflecting:

> corporate capital's growing power to regulate not merely the quality of products but also the conditions of the production process (p 40).

Production-system labelling, and particularly the use of the outdoor and 'free-range' cues must guard against generating its own particular welfare fetishes in the name of keeping the customer satisfied.

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