



'Letting them go' – Agricultural retirement and human–livestock relations

Mark Riley

Department of Geography, University of Portsmouth, Buckingham Building, Lion Terrace, Portsmouth PO13HE, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Through a focus on agricultural retirement, this paper extends on the recent work considering human–livestock relations. Drawing on research conducted in Hampshire and West Sussex (UK), the paper utilises farmers' narratives of farm work and retirement to explore the themes of [dis]connection between farmers and their dairy cattle. The paper attempts to add complexity and nuance to assumptions about the nature and extent of animal objectification with commercial dairy farming, and consider the intricate moral geographies [re]created within the individual farm. The discursive and material 'placings' of animals are considered alongside an exploration of how the intricate temporality and spatiality of these are disturbed and disrupted by the move to retirement. In discussing these relations the paper examines how animals are central to the everyday lives and identities of farmers and how separation from them alters farmers' attachment to particular practices, places and social networks.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a profusion of responses to the call to 'bring animals back in' within geography (Wolch and Emel, 1995, p. 632). Particularly important within this corpus of work has been that considering how animals are 'quintessential hybrids' (Buller and Morris, 2003, p. 217) which are enrolled in networks and "might have subjectivities, agencies and practices through which they might create lifeworlds that impact on human ideas and communities" (Johnston, 2008, p. 633). Agriculture would appear to be fertile ground for exploring the geographies of animal–human relations, with recent political attention paid to the importance of farmers being seen as 'good stewards of both land and livestock' (The Curry Report, 2002, p. 24) alongside more popularised discourses of the treatment of animals within 'modern' industrialised agricultural practices, reminding us how distanced we have become from our food.¹ Whilst Morris and Evans (2004) observed a greater initial research interest on 'wild' and 'domestic' animal–human relations than on farm livestock, there is now a developing body of work opening up in this latter area.² Notable recent studies have explored, for example, the centrality of livestock to locality, politics and identity (Evans and

Yarwood, 2000), and contrasting views on farm animals being both reduced to 'meat machines' (Stassart and Whatmore, 2003, p. 456) and also sentient beings performing individual subjectivities (Holloway, 2007).

While behaviour and welfare scientists (e.g. Hemsworth, 2003) have explored animal–human interactions in experimental conditions to better understand issues of productivity and animal welfare, social scientists have made progress in exploring the socio-affective relations between humans and livestock. Several qualitative studies have begun to unpick the complexities and contradictions within these relations. Holloway's (2001) study of hobby-farms, for example, is enlightening in exploring the ethical ambiguity of these relations and how socially-constructed categories of 'livestock' and 'pet' are blurred within what may be seen as more 'marginal' forms of production. Recent studies by Convery et al. (2005, 2008) and Wilkie (2005) have used qualitative methodologies to get 'behind the scenes' of larger-scale commercial farming to illustrate that despite these long being synonymous in popular discourse with 'factory farming' of the 'animal machine' (Harrison, 1966), they too host ambiguous moral relations in which livestock are often viewed by farmers as more than simply commodities.

Both Convery et al. (2005) and Wilkie (2005) investigate the critical importance of context in exploring these animal–human relations, with *attachment* and *detachment* acting as critical framing concepts. Wilkie (2005) explores the emotional attachment to animals of different actors in the agricultural industry and observes how individual animal subjectivity can lead to them becoming more than 'just an animal' – what may be termed the decommodification of the animal – but that ultimately they remain something that can be quickly recommodified. Convery et al.

E-mail address: mark.riley@port.ac.uk

¹ For example celebrity chefs Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Jamie Oliver have recently explored the ethics of intensive chicken farming in their respective UK Channel 4 series *Hugh's Chicken Run* (2008) and *Jamie's Fowl Dinners* (2008).

² It is recognised that 'livestock' is a problematic and value-laden term suggesting implicit power relations between humans and animals. The term is used here as the central concern of the paper is the specific constellation of actors relating to agriculture.

(2005) explore detachment in a much more literal sense by considering the ambiguities of the ‘breach in relationships between animals and humans’ in light of the 2001 UK foot and mouth epidemic. They illustrate both the contradictory attitudes farmers have to the same animal, whilst articulating how this loss transcended the material and became a loss of the meanings associated with the *lifescape* of which humans, animals and landscape form part.

The current paper wishes to contribute to this growing discussion of human–livestock relations and further explore the themes of attachment/detachment between animals and humans within commercial farming. The paper takes as its focus agricultural retirement – a further, but hitherto under-explored, moment which breaches the relationship between farmer and livestock, and which arguably provides a fruitful context for exploring human–animal relations. Although there has been some academic attention paid to agricultural retirement, this has tended to focus most predominantly on themes of farm transfer and succession (e.g. Potter and Lobley, 1996), with little attention on the retirement experiences of farmers and what these may tell us about human–livestock relations. Discussing animals post-separation (cf. Convery et al., 2005), gives a nexus at which farmers can reflect clearly on the nature of their previous relationship to animals, their feelings post-separation, as well as articulating the nature of this attachment. In doing this the paper wishes to explore and further develop several themes. First it examines the nature of the subjectification/objectification boundary (after Holloway, 2001) and in doing so attempts to further challenge the assumption that commercial farming is *de facto* more objectifying in relation to animals than smaller-scale farming. Second, the paper will explore the moral ambiguity faced by these farmers and how it is managed when they are forced to sell (or re-commodify) their animals as they retire. Third, and related, the paper will discuss how individual animal subjectivity is not, and indeed cannot, be disregarded on these farms. Fourth, in exploring farmers’ narratives, the paper wishes to take up the suggestion that a fruitful avenue for discussing the ‘relational geographies of ageing’ (after Hopkins and Pain, 2007), may be to explore the co-constitution of “moments and geographies between human and non-human actants” (Horton and Kraftl, 2008, p. 286). Specifically, the paper will explore the way that animals may figure in the challenges retirement poses those farmers studied.

2. Background: farmers, livestock and identity

2.1. Livestock and human relations

Recent work has attempted to probe and challenge the ontological divides, inherent within modernist thinking, within which there is a dichotomous separation of human and non-human animals. Social scientists, and geographers in particular, have sought to pay fuller attention to the ways in which humans and animals are “increasingly intertwined into new configurations of similitude, difference, relational materiality, shared spaces [and] ethical responsibility (Buller and Morris, 2007, p. 474).³ It is such a relational approach – recognising the shared material and emotional spaces of human and livestock – that helps conceptually frame this paper. The paper draws on the notion of the ‘lifescape’ as advanced by Convery et al. (2005, 2008). Originating from work in developing countries, *lifescape* has been used as a method of explaining the ways in which families utilise the resources in their locality to secure a living, and more widely as a framework to understand the economic,

social and cultural interactions between people across the landscape (see Howorth, 1999). Convery et al. (2005, pp. 99–100) apply the concept to articulate the “complexity of the spatial, emotional and ethical dimensions of the relationship between landscape, livestock, farming and rural communities”. The value of their approach is perhaps best understood in relation to the treatment of farmers’ reactions to the slaughter of their cattle in the Foot and Mouth epidemic of 2001. They see depictions of farmers weeping at the slaughter of their cattle not as ‘simply hypocritical’ (Smith, 2002, p. 53), but reframe this display of distress as reflecting a “severe and often poorly understood disruption to a complex lifescape” (Convery et al., 2005, p. 99). In this context, they recognise that the loss of livestock is not just a material or economic loss, but a conceptual loss – that is, that meanings associated with the lifescape are changed or lost.

The lifescape approach allows an appreciation of the dynamic and socially-constructed nature of livestock–farming relations, whilst understanding that these form “lifescapes of ‘taken for granted’ social, cultural and economic interactions between humans, livestock and landscape” (Convery et al., 2005, p. 100). This echoes Gray’s (1996) notion of ‘consubstantiation’ which refers to the ways in which assemblages of farmers, livestock and places form interconnected and internally-reinforcing local farming networks. Lifescapes, in this context, are “thus shaped by livestock–farmer practices, which in turn shape ways of being in the world” (Convery et al., 2005, p. 100). As Gray observes, through repeated, iterative, practices co-constitutive relationships develop between land, livestock and people, and such consubstantive relationships grow together over time, becoming united in a common substance (Gray, 1998). The farming environment, under Gray (1998) and Convery et al.’s (2005, p. 101) conceptualisation, may be seen as a ‘work in progress’, an embodiment of past activity that is continually ‘in the making’. The emotional geographies of livestock farming, it is suggested, are enmeshed with human and non-human identities which are performed and [re]constructed in different contexts, times and places. Boundaries between farmers, livestock and farm, they suggest, are osmotic.

In exploring these similar themes of the consubstantiation of humans, animals and place, Yarwood and Evans (2006) employ Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of the habitus as a ‘theoretical middle ground’ to both acknowledge that farmers keep livestock for economic reasons, while at the same time leaving space to realise that these animals may be much more than economic assets. The habitus offers a “system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, function at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks” (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992, p. 18). This allows a consideration of the ways in which local actions are not simply a direct response of structural forces but “are best seen as a resulting from ‘rules’ that are embodied and carried by the individual farmer but at the same time produce a shared understanding of what farming in the...area historically is about” (Setten, 2004, p. 395). Yarwood and Evans (2006) draw out the different forms of capital central to Bourdieu’s thinking: social capital (coming from, and reaffirmed by, social contacts and networks); cultural capital (gained by education and socialisation) and symbolic capital (the form that “various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognised as legitimate” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 17)). These forms of capital, it is suggested, intersect with the habitus, as actors negotiate their position within a field – as Gray (1996, p. 45) observed for the case of farmers, localised practices may act like a prism “refracting exogenous forces manifest in the agricultural policies of the EC [sic] according to its endogenous social dynamics”.

Taking these frameworks together allows animals to be seen as essential, co-constitutive, actors in farm–animal–farmer

³ There is also a growing body of work beyond the social sciences that is exploring these and analogous themes – for a useful synthesis see Buller and Morris (2007).

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